WRITERS MOSAIC

Ingrid Persaud

In Conversation with Colin Grant

Colin Grant (CG): I'm very delighted to be in the company of Ingrid Persaud, via this technology called Clean Feed, which is an online technology that gets around the COVID situation in which we find ourselves. I'm in Brighton on the South Coast of England and Ingrid is in west London.

Ingrid Persaud is a late bloomer to the world of literature. She began her adult life as a lawyer, having studied Law at the London School of Economics.

She also yearned for an artistic life, which led her to study Fine Art at colleges in London, Goldsmiths College and Central Saint Martins. So, up until her forties, Ingrid Persaud taught Law at King's College London, and she's also worked as a visual artist, before undergoing this remarkable transformation into a writer.
Ingrid Persaud's work is mostly set in Trinidad (but she'll correct me if I've got that wrong), where she was born and grew up, before spending quite a few years in the UK. So, welcome, Ingrid to *WritersMosaic*.

Ingrid Persaud (IP): Thank you for having me, Colin.

CG: A friend of mine (I hope she doesn't mind me calling her a friend of mine) a writer called Olive Senior, says that she resides in Toronto, but lives, really lives in Jamaica. Does that sentiment resonate with you?

IP: No. I think I try to be in the now and, wherever I am, I'm absorbing the influences around me. But my heart does live in Trinidad and, to that extent, I agree with Olive.

CG: When you say your heart lives in Trinidad, what do you mean?

IP: I spent my formative years in Trinidad. I lived there until I was 18 and everything I am, I think comes from that time. I'm always yearning and thinking about the place… a lot of nostalgia.

CG: When you were growing up in Trinidad, were you aware of the ascendancy of writers like VS Naipaul, and Shiva Naipaul, and Sam Selvon? And if so, what was your take on that kind of writing?

IP: So, I was very aware of the Naipauls, and Sam Selvon, and I loved their writing. I can still remember the room in the school where we discussed *A House for Mr Biswas*. It's that clear a memory.

CG: This is VS Naipaul's great—I would say autobiographical novel, although the names are different, but it's very much his story, isn't it? And why is it such a vivid memory for you?

IP: So, the first book I ever read by a West Indian, that I can remember, is Michael Anthony's *The Year In San Fernando*. The second was *A House for Mr Biswas* by VS Naipaul; and I was utterly mesmerised by this book; the saga of it, how much it reflected my own knowledge of society around me. Yeah, it made a huge impact on me.

CG: Did you come from a family of readers? Were there books in the house?

IP: So, I was brought up by a single mother, who is—she remains, an incredible reader. She will, you know, she munches through books. And so, our house was always filled with books; and I'm also an only child. So, the combination of a mother who was such a passionate reader and not having siblings, you know, to sort of distract you, I spent my childhood years reading. It was my pleasure and my passion, and it's remained that way.

CG: I wonder why you chose law, or was law chosen for you? And what you learned from law that might have helped in your writing.

IP: So, you know, I grew up in a very ordinary household in Trinidad and there were three choices: doctor, lawyer, or failure! And as an arts student, I couldn't do the doctor route, so I did law. So, in that sense, I didn't really feel I had too much of a choice. It was kind of the expected thing, if you were bright enough. And, so off I went to LSE to read law and here really quickly discovered that a life as a practising barrister or solicitor was never going to work for me. I was much happier sort of just

hanging out at university. And so, becoming an academic turned out to be what I could do.

What has it added to my life? You know, I have no regrets about doing law because it kind of focused notions of logic and argument. But I'm glad that after law, I went and studied fine art. That taught me something very, very different. So, in art school, I stumbled on the notion of play and the magic of play, which was such an anathema to my life. And so, I got logic from law, and I got play from, you know, my fine arts; and I brought those two things into the writing. I hope at least that both are in the writing.

CG: Thank you. I wonder whether this quote that I'm just about to give resonates at all with you, or whether you could see some intelligence behind it and understand it? It's a quote from the visual artist who's a great figurative oil painter; she's called Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and she's also a poet and novelist. And she says, 'What I can't paint, I write. And what I can't write, I paint.' Does that resonate with you at all?

IP: She's far more talented an artist than I could ever hope to be. I do have my easel set up next to my desk and I do doodle a lot; but I found that, to be a writer, I needed to be very focused and single-minded. So, for me, I have to struggle with the words. So, I don't substitute, I don't go back and forth, I do stick to the words. And when I need, just to get away from myself, I will go back to the drawing board.

CG: What would you say Ingrid, is the Caribbean 'voice' when it comes to literature?

IP: What is wonderful about the Caribbean, is that we cannot be put into a box of one voice;. I think the literature that's coming out of the Caribbean right now is so diverse: we have the magic realism of someone like Leone Ross; we have Karen Lord's sci-fi; we have Marlon James', kind of, brutal works; we have Kai Miller's poetry.

So, what is the Caribbean 'voice'? It can no longer be boxed and diminished into one type of writing. It's just way too expansive, diverse, and pushing out of the region, as well as looking in.

CG: So, does that suggest then that it has been reduced and boxed in the past?

IP: I think so. I think that no one was looking at the writers coming up. They were just focusing on the same names for decades. So, VS and Shiva Naipaul, Sam Selvon, you know, a non-fiction CLR James; largely male voices and ones that had been historical successes and, it's been a while, but we are having a Caribbean 'moment'. We are absolutely reaching out and having our voice heard in so many different genres of literature now.

CG: Can we drill down a little bit into Trinidad because you write with a Trinidad voice or a Trinidadian voice? You said it in your essay that you rewrote Anansi in Trini-English and that you don't explain or translate when you used Trini or Trinidadian English in your writing. Why not? Why not explain, or translate? Can you drill down a bit more into what is a Trinidadian voice, as opposed to any other Caribbean voice?

IP: The English that we, in the Caribbean and worldwide, measure ourselves by is the English of a very tiny minority and there is no reason to continue that. Why? I'm writing a book set in Trinidad. My characters must be authentic, and to be authentic, they must sound like a Trini does. Why is what we say any less of an English? Why would we call what we see and how we speak a dialect? It is our English. So, if it is our English, I'm going to write in our English and I'm going to trust that the integrity of the language will be something that everyone else can understand. The same way we don't translate when DH Lawrence writes with a very Northern sensibility.

You know, my book's been quite successful—*Love After Love*—and no one's complaining, no one's saying, 'I can't understand that.' They may say it takes a little while to get into the rhythm of the book, and the way it's set out on the page might take a little getting used to, but I really haven't heard anyone say they couldn't understand the book.

CG: I'm glad to hear that, Ingrid. I wonder whether there's been any resistance though in the world of publishing? I mean, I've had some resistance myself when I wrote one of my books set in Jamaica and I talked about the 'bush', the Jamaican 'bush' and the English editors didn't understand; they said, 'What do you mean—countryside?' And I said, 'No, no, it's bush. Bush is bush.'

I wondered the degree to which your editors have been sympathetic and understanding of your particular Trini-English and not wanting to mess around with it.

IP: I think that things have moved on. There were seven publishing houses trying to buy *Love After Love*. None of them in their pitch took exception to the language of the book. I went with Faber, and they never once suggested that there should be translations or explanations. They absolutely loved the language, took it on board and, you know, wanted me to run with it. So, I've had the opposite experience of not, just a lack of resistance, but actually a welcoming of something fresh and different and challenging.

CG: I'm really heartened to hear that, Ingrid, and I'm really pleased to hear that and I do delight in the language of your book, *Love After Love*, which has won the Costa First Novel award. You've also won prizes and awards for the BBC National Short Story award and Commonwealth Short Story prize in 2017.

I wonder how you manage to transition from short story writing to the novel? What's been the challenges and how have you met them?

IP: So, you know, I started with these short stories, but the novel holds such a privileged place in literature that it was a natural inclination to want to write a novel. Whether I could or couldn't, I didn't know, but I felt it was what I had to aspire to. So, you know, I tried.

What I found interesting is that short stories are far more difficult to write, at least for me. They require such precision. There's little room for error. Every word has to earn its place. With a novel, there's far more leeway and forgiveness; and I love both forms and I've always got one or two short stories, kind of, bubbling away on my

laptop, while I'm working on a longer piece. And, I sort of move back and forth between them, depending on what I think I need to be sharpening or thinking about.

CG: Now, *Love After Love* revolves around a trio of characters, set in Trinidad: there's Betty Ramdin, who's recently widowed and her son, Solo, and they take in a lodger, Mr Chetan. I understand, Ingrid, that it was originally part of a discarded manuscript. What was that discarded manuscript? And, well done, for holding onto these characters and weaving them into the new novel. How tricky was that?

IP: So, I wrote this really terrible novel, and the characters were all in there, but they were doing different things; and Mr Chetan, for example, was dead for the entire novel, and the people were talking to his corpse, and so it was a very different book. It just, you know, it was really difficult to discard 100,000 words, but it was crap and it had to go! So, I was desperate to, you know, sort of get something from this 100,000 words that I was giving up. And so, I started by, you know, cutting and pasting seams and trying to work around them. And then, it just became obvious that, actually, *No, no, clean sheet! Start again, but you can use these characters because you know them.*

CG: I understand that in this new novel, in a way, began with the character, Solo, and there's various references to his, how shall we say, sexual and emotional awakening.

IP: So, I don't know where that came from, but it was the first scene I wrote for *Love After Love* and, for a long time, it had the pressure of being the first chapter of the

book; and it's a scene where Solo goes to a prostitute and he's going really to exchange emotional for physical pain and sexual pleasure. And it was, you know, it was a really hard-hitting kind of weird scene. And I finished it and I thought, *Okay, how does someone get to that point in their life? What's happened? What is the trauma that they're dealing with?* And in asking those questions, I found I could bring in Betty, and then I could bring in Mr Chetan and, gradually, the book formed around that; but it formed going back and forth from this particular scene. And in the final manuscript, of course, that scene is buried three-quarters of the way into the book. But, for a long time, I held on to it because it was the first thing I had written, and it was my touchstone.

CG: And the book is divided into very many chapters, but each chapter is devoted to one of the three characters. So, there are three narrators, in a way. Why did you decide or settle on that structure?

IP: Writing in the first person seemed to be the only way for me to get really into the thoughts of each character, and what seemed to flow and what seemed, kind of, most authentic to me, was just to get right in their head with a first-person voice. And so, there are three narrators. They take turns to narrate the chapters and there's some overlap, but basically each tells the story from their own perspective.

CG: One of the things I really enjoyed about *Love After Love* was you're writing about sex and writing sometimes about the, kind of, comedy of sex. And, without spoiling it for the reader, there are passages where two people come together who are unexpected, and they realise that they can't fully consummate. But there's a lot

of tenderness and love even in those moments, which I found very real and very reassuring.

IP: So, I wrote [Laughs], I wrote that particular scene that you're referring to, kind of, with my hands in front of my eyes going, *Oh, no! Oh, no… my mother's going to read this*, you know, and being terribly embarrassed about writing about sex. Terribly embarrassed but also determined, like you said, to not just, you know, talk about what goes where, but actually about what we, as human beings, are like in those moments, when we are so exposed.

I wrote some scenes, and I gave it to Luke Neima, who's the deputy editor at Granta now. He's a great friend and he's my first reader often. And I said to Luke, you know, 'I'm so embarrassed to give you this, but would you mind having a look?' And he said to me, 'You should be embarrassed.' He said, 'You should be anxious. You should be feeling all kinds of difficult emotions. Because, if you're not, then you haven't put yourself on the line when you've written this.' And it was an incredible thing to say, because what it did was it gave me permission to write. And after that, those difficult feelings were okay.

CG: Like you, I've been very fortunate to work with Luke Neima over at Granta. In the acknowledgements to your book, you talk about collaboration with Luke in a way and about finding your voice. And I'm going to quote you, quote from your acknowledgements here about Luke Neima. You say, 'The work feels as much his as it does mine, but not enough to split the royalties.'

IP: [Laughs] It is because he has been so closely involved and incredibly generous in reading my work and commenting, and giving me confidence, and pushing me to be a better writer. To this day, he continues to be, you know, when I'm anxious about something I've written, some little thing, I'll send it over to him and I'll say, you know, 'Any time you have a moment,' and, invariably, he finds time for me, and everybody deserves to have a Luke in their life, but he's mine!

CG: Well, I'd like to argue that I share him with you because I've benefited from his input over the years. He's a very fine editor, in my mind, because he's very brave and encourages you to take your choices very bravely as well. And you've taken a number of choices; one of the choices that I was really impressed by was Mr Chetan, who—I found him a lovely character and it's not spoiling anything by saying he's a gay man, or queer man, and in a way, he's a queer man in a time when homophobia is still rife in Trinidad culture, as it is in the Caribbean generally. And there's this tension isn't there, about how he can reveal himself truly in society which would hold him in low regard? And that's a tension throughout the book, isn't it?

IP: Yes, and, you know, I've had a little bit of criticism from people who say, you know, 'You shouldn't suggest that the Caribbean is like that.' Well actually, that, unfortunately, is an experience and the statistics bear that up; there are still far too many crimes that have a hate element to them based on homophobia. And so, I felt that this character would—given his background, given his ethnicity, given the small town he's living in—all of those things would make it difficult for a quiet man like him to live openly and to accept his sexuality easily.

CG: Do you think that the success and the skill of writers like Marlon James and Kai Miller are helping to change the conversation around homophobia in the Caribbean?

IP: I hope so but, you know, I'm not sure, because we're willing to accept certain behaviours in certain sectors. So, an artist, a writer, a creative who is, you know, queer and writing queer stories, we can accept that far more than we can accept that the guy next door, the bloke who's a construction worker is in love with, you know, another ordinary man just down the road. It's a very different conversation then. So, I'm hoping it's changing the conversation. But I'm not sure to what extent it's feeding down.

CG: One of the things I loved about your writing was the way that you infuse food into the writing; Trini food in particular. And as I mentioned in the short story, *Sweet Sop*, it's not only about the relationship between the dying father and his estranged son, it's also about the importance of chocolate, Nutella chocolate, in particular. And in *Love After Love*, food also has a special place in the novel. There's a very fine scene about the importance of the fish cascadura. And you've mentioned this also in your essay about the fact that if you eat cascadoo, you'll never leave Trinidad. What's the importance to you of food, and why would you want to insert food into your writing?

IP: You know, when Trini people meet, food is always part of it. So, we don't just talk about going to the beach for a lime; we say, 'You cooking a pot of pilau? Well then, we should go to the beach'. So then, it's like whether the beach comes before the pilau, or the pilau comes before the beach; it's never quite clear.

And so, my sensibility, as a Trinidadian, is to be really fine-tuned to the giving, making, receiving of food, and where food belongs. It just seemed natural that I should include lots of food in the book and cascadoo is this nasty looking fish that, when curried, is so sweet. For a long time, cascadoo was in the title of—a kind of place holder for the novel as I was writing, because it was something about the, you know, going and the returning, both to oneself and to place.

CG: And, and why did you ultimately decide that *Love After Love* was a stronger title than Cascadoo?

IP: You know, I feel that if you're going to thief, you should thief from the best; the poem, *Love After Love*, by Derek Walcott, I think just speaks to the journey that each of the three main characters undertakes: a journey to self; an understanding that self-love is a whore of all other types of love. So, I was like, *Yeah. That's my title!* So, um, I stole it. [Laughs]

CG: [Laughs] Now, it's been very successful for you. I wonder whether I could get some reflections from you on the value and importance of awards and being shortlisted for awards?

I mean, I've been shortlisted for a couple of awards in the past and they're rather, sort of, vexing occasions, especially when you don't win the award; in fact, I've told my publisher I don't want to be submitted for any award other than 'The Best Book

Written by Colin Grant Award.' Can I ask you about your feeling about awards and how they will benefit you, or are benefitting you, as you've won so many of them?

IP: [Laughs] Oh, I love your award and I'm going to ask my publisher for one of those as well: 'The Best Book Written by Ingrid Persaud.'

So, I've, you know, I've been incredibly lucky. We all know that prizes are hugely subjective. They depend on, you know, the particular composition of the judges. And I have won the literary lottery, because by winning the BBC Short Story Prize, I was able to access a range of potential agents, literary agents that I would never otherwise been able to access. So, that got me a great agent.

You know, winning the Costa First Novel Award is another bit of, you know, literary lottery, but it's meant that a lot of opportunities that I would have otherwise had to maybe fight harder for, are coming to me, rather than me having to go to find those opportunities.

Yeah, I've just been incredibly lucky. And, in a world, where so many books are published, these prizes just help your work to, you know, kind of sit just above the rest and get some more time and, you know, kind of critical space.

CG: Thank you, and good. I wonder whether I can be a little bit cheeky, but please don't answer if it's too cheeky. But I think readers and listeners would love to know, even if only in the general, what you might be working towards next, after this great critical success of *Love After Love*.

IP: Okay, so in Trinidad, we have an expression: 'Don't put goat mout on my ting.' And what that means is, I don't want you to know my business and then put your bad thoughts on it and get it undone. So, I'm not telling you nothing.

CG: [Laughs]

IP: Okay, just know I'm working every day, I sitting down by my desk and I writing. When I have something to show you, I will show you. Right? [Laughs]

CG: Well, I shall very much look forward to reading the thing that you're prepared to show in the near future. I'm sure it's going to be great, and, in Colin Grant, you have a great admirer in your camp.

IP: Augh…

CG: So, Ingrid Persaud, thank you for sharing your thoughts, and your writing, and your time with us on *WritersMosaic*.

IP: Thank you so much for having me.

Ingrid Persaud was in conversation with Colin Grant

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

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