

WRITERSMOSAIC

Guy Gunaratne

In Conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

'Silence about one's story is also an act of being in the world, an insistence of being many things.'

— Guy Gunaratne

[Music]

Colin Grant: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Guy Gunaratne talks to Gabriel Gbadamosi about the use of silence in his novels and about writing from the margins to the centre.

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Gabriel Gbadamosi: Guy Gunaratne, you were brought up in Neasden, a very mixed area of North London, and it seems to me that that's heavily reflected in your two novels so far: *In Our Mad and Furious City* and in *Mister, Mister*. Its enormous cultural breadth takes you everywhere from North London to Northern Ireland to Pakistan to the globe, Syria, everywhere. And it's really very impressive. And in a way, it reflects the multiplicities of cultures and situations in London, but also it reflects the multiplicities in the world. But in both of the novels, there seems to be a centre of violence. I understand that *In Our Mad and Furious City* was shortened by your publishers to *Mad*. A riot occurs, killings happen. But also, around the rise of ISIS and violent Islamism, that seems to be a core—and the violent responses to that seems to be a core of *Mister, Mister*. Do you feel that somehow you're generating your fiction around a fire?

Guy Gunaratne: I don't know. I don't know. I think that, particularly with the first novel, I had always felt the experience of growing up in that part of London. It's probably true—the rest of London or any global city is that the close proximity to each other, it's almost—it necessitates or it generates a sense of clashing that sometimes does feel violent, and it's reflected in how we speak to each other. And this is the thing I think with what was creatively interesting to me in the first novel, is to somehow render that feeling of tense, electric, perhaps violent interplay of people of different experience, background, makeup in the same place, having to

speak to each other with differences as part of our way of relating. It feels discomfoting in a way, I guess. And I wanted a way of expressing that in language. And this is why the use of dialect was so key. But in terms of the violence itself or the violence that is explicit in both books, I think I was just more interested in how that expresses itself in how we tell stories about each other to each other.

Gabriel: Both of your books contain modern variants of English arising from what we call MLE, Multicultural London English. You say that you grew up with a playground language.

Guy: When you have that experience of growing up in the kinds of schools I went to, because I really loved my state school in Hendon, I remember being intentionally very attentive to my relationships with my friends, the system within which we were going to. I was just very aware of things. And one of those things was how we expressed how we felt about each other in terms of our—that strange masculine sheen [laughs] that young boys are having to go through, through football and sport and that kind of thing. That's in the first book. But the language to me always felt incredibly transgressive. And there's something about transgression which is inherently quite violent because you're asking—what you're doing, whether it be through language or material borders, is you're crossing and breaking something. You're breaking a border. And there is something quite ecstatic about that act of

crossing a border, whether it be Arabic words that feel so at home on your tongue when your background is [inaudible] Sri Lankan Buddhist, or dapping your friend in a way that feels ancient to him, but nonetheless, feels like entirely your own also. There is transgression and ecstasy in almost violating something.

I mean, questions about how hybridity is formed, especially amongst artists, it's always fraught because even to speak into formulations of multiplicity or multiculturalism plays into notions of what a national conscious is that I'm just not that comfortable with. When I speak about my own sense of hybridity, I suppose it is in the context of what it means to be a citizen of a country, but even that given if you're someone with immigrant heritage, it's always complicated. The first book, *In Our Mad and Furious City*, was translated both in French and in Swedish and in Turkish. It was more interesting to see how they were—how certain idiomatic plays or moves in the book were translated and localized in a Parisian context or in Stockholm, because in Stockholm you have a different history of migration, which is what is readable in dialects. You can see histories of different waves of immigration in London in MLE. That's what was interesting to me.

Gabriel: You, for example, use a they/them set of pronouns. And I love that, that challenge to the patriarchy, to the gender fixity, the refusal of all the errors of identitarianism. But nevertheless, your work seems still to be addressing many of

those identitarian issues. How do you deal with that, that on the one hand, as a writer of color, you're expected to, and yet as a writer, you don't want to?

Guy: I go back to something the writer Margo Jefferson wrote a while ago, something in her most recent book, which I only found out later that she took from Richard Wright, when I interviewed about her. This one line about—she was talking about creating a sense of identity or place in a culture that doesn't acknowledge or see you. Margo Jefferson was reading American culture from the '50s as a young black woman growing up, seeing Bing Crosby and loving Bing Crosby and trying to find a way to make Bing Crosby hers, sort of a beautiful challenge. She was also speaking about how representations of black American life were—and many times monstrous or clownish. And she has this line in her last book, 'If American hatred attempts to create you, you stand your ground and create right back', by which I interpret as saying you take what is made of you in the culture and use them almost as bricks to create new forms and formulations.

Gabriel: And you yourself speak about the job of writing as working emotionally in the world. What for you is that job?

Guy: I wonder whether I'm most drawn towards relating to the most discomforting parts of what the world narrates about itself. What I mean by that, I guess, is, for

example, in the second novel, *Mister, Mister*, it takes the form of a Life and Times story, which we're all very familiar with, with Dickens and the like. But for me, what was the most interesting move in that very loose form of individual progress or coherence, I suppose, as a leading thing, a young man, usually an orphan or something, grows up, learns how to be a gentleman in the world. His individuation coheres in a sense that, towards the end of the book, their presence or they have a space or they've occupied a space. Usually they come into some kind of fortune. In my novel though, what made a more interesting move was to undo or unravel. So as Yahya Bas in the novel grows up—

Gabriel: The lead character

Guy: —he begins to dodge or avoid any imposed identity on him. So he tries, in many ways, to use identity as a mechanism or masking, picks up names, new faces, new appearances, and over the course of it, towards the end, you're not quite sure he's even there. He's not sure he's even there.

Gabriel: I wondered very much at the ethics and aesthetics of representing disability, which the central character has, which was okay perhaps for Dickens, his exaggerated stereotypes, but I wonder what kind of wise and holy fool is this character. What are you doing with this? Could you talk to me about that?

Guy: Now, he addresses this towards the end because what he's doing, I mean, Mister Mister—he's addressing an interlocutor called Mister, who very early on Yahya acknowledges as a hostile presence. And he also understands what a villain is to this other person, what representation of a villain is most obvious to this Mister. One of those representations is a grotesque.

Gabriel: There's a line from the book, 'Disabled bodies drawn as villains.'

Guy: Yeah, he's describing his reading of those writers, Dickens, 'Hooks for hands.' He himself was born breached, so he has a disability. He understands that his disability is now going to be rejected by Mister into this story of a narrative of a villain becoming. He plays into those caricatures in a way that I hope is, again, liberatory. It's finding monstrous, chimeric, ugly representations that are necessary for a person like Mister to cohere themselves. Because if the villain doesn't exist, the fair-haired heroes can't either. And so hopefully the pointed confrontation of these representations is understood. Where all these ideas of different levels of disappearance come from, for me, is reading writers like Glissant, reading—

Gabriel: Édouard Glissant, the French-Caribbean theorist and writer.

Guy: —and his idea of rhizomatic senses of what constitutes a self or a non-self and think about it in terms of relations. I was really almost very much completely infatuated with this idea of what can be termed as essences, although I think in translation it's difficult to think about what an essence is in English in terms of what Glissant was writing about, but the essence being contained in a mystery that needs to be protected as a mystery. There is parts of all of us that aren't for other people, and in the Western concept of an individual, and the concept of knowledge in particular, is this idea of understanding entirely, which is a dominating move. It's an idea of seizing part of you for themselves, to understand entirely what this other person is, who this other person is, because that's the only way I can understand who I am. And Yahya's move to refuse all of those things, all of those things and all of those levels, felt, for me, liberating also. The act of refusal, to the extent where you cut out the tongue. On all these levels, I feel it was a necessary provocation to people. It says, well, silence about one's story is also an act of being in the world, an insistence of being many things. Unexplained and unapologetic about that, I think, is perhaps a contribution.

Gabriel: You began your career as, it says, a journalist, but you look a bit closer, you're a film journalist, making documentaries and making documentaries about characters in very difficult, traumatic circumstances, abducted child soldiers from Uganda, whatever the circumstance is. And as I thought about that, I thought, *well,*

here you are, almost the camera, pointing it at horror. And you say at some point that it's in facing our monsters that in some sense we get to see ourselves. What about our better angels?

Guy: I mean, I do hope that with the first of these two novels that there is a sense of where I suppose I would locate those angels, which is in our relations in the past between us, ourselves. I think that in the first novel, for instance, the beauty and feeling of those young boys, for example, the care that might not be entirely articulated in a way that is recognizable for people in terms of love or touch or intimacies in that sense, but there is a sense that is coded in there, that possibility and care can come even within horror. I mean, those experiences as a journalist, particularly in Uganda, we have—I was asked to record testimony of the most unconscionable horrors that I've ever heard and asking people to account them for themselves. But also registering that, in their account, there is a sense of love and survival and strength, immense strength, that can't be discounted, which I remember seeing as, again, located in making sure that forgiveness of oneself and other perpetrators of violence and abuse is wrapped up in that. I hope that's present in these two novels. I think there is a sense of Yahya, for example, however dissenting his voice, also contains particularly a sense of self-forgiveness and a yearning to reach out and connect with Mister despite his hostility. The sense of asking and requesting Mister to see himself as well, finding some relation. I mean

he does say, which is an idea I got from the French philosopher, [inaudible], who talks about this notion of Western guilt as a confession that those who have been violated and those who violate do in fact share the world because there is the admission of guilt, and that in itself confirms that we do live in the same world. The fact that you know things have been done in your name that are unforgivable means that there is a path by which we both can acknowledge horror and go forward.

Gabriel: You as a writer are doing something performatively new within UK literature in this scene. And of course, your books have relevance in Turkey, Sweden, France, and elsewhere, presumably in America, which is a very different society. But you're performatively describing acts of hybridity, of coming into being, certainly Yahya Bas as a figure. You are engaged in reshaping British culture. Where do you think we are here in the 21st century, and what do you hope to achieve in this dire situation?

Guy: Well, I think that I am very much concerned with that. I also don't think that it's—should be or really could be down to any individual writer or artist to plot a path. I do think that the answer to those questions needs to be addressed, offered in formulations, in novels, in plays. There does need to be a surge of writing done now, not just to perhaps offer new narratives but also just to narrativise what's just

happened. I mean, with Brexit, but also we are living in a current transition. There will be a new Labour government. There will be new ways to talk about ourselves that does feel quite paralysed. It has felt quite paralysed in the last couple of years with the Tory government, slowly slouching into oblivion. For me, there—it's necessary suddenly for writers who are working now and the kind of writer that is enlivened and excited, perhaps perversely, by chaos, to write into this moment. I know—for me, where we are for me is excitingly ill-defined because it means that writers get to articulate and perhaps invent new words. I think now's the time for that.

I think there is an emergence of a certain consciousness, which could perhaps resuscitate that dialogue again. I don't even—that doesn't come from a hopeful place, it comes from a place of, I think this is—no, I actually think there are really interesting writers now that are speaking to this in imaginative ways. But it's also interesting, when I went to Sri Lanka recently, where it's only really when you go to places in the Global South that you see and you hear amongst working people a disassociated narrative that speaks to China and Africa and Brazil as new centres that I don't think is even close to being articulated in the West or the Global North, particularly in places like London. That's exciting to me because you begin to hear there are new narratives emerging that perhaps aren't [music]—they're outside,

that we would consider the periphery. But to bring those voices in and also begin to articulate our own new positions in a multi-polarity, that's really exciting to me.

[Music]

Gabriel: Guy Gunaratne, thank you very much for speaking. Thank you.

[Music]

Colin: Guy Gunaratne was talking to Gabriel Gbadamosi. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

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

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