

## Oonya KEMPADOO

### Why I Write What I Write, and How I Write It

The thing is, I am still trying to come to terms with why I write. Much less what it is that I write, and how. Each book turns out to be its own journey and different from what I intended. The story calls for its own style, and characters dictate their voices and therefore the language. I took on writing as a “project” when my work in graphic arts was slow and thought that I had three stories to share - if I don’t get published by the end of the third one, that’s it. It was a project, so I researched the industry of it and was happily rewarded with the international publication and good response to my first novel *Buxton Spice*. But I was surprised and baffled then and still am confused by the juxtaposition between the process of writing and the market - how what one creates is sold, read and analyzed.

So *talking* about writing adds another layer of discomfort. One critic guessed that I maybe don’t know how I wrote my first two books, suggesting that it was an accident that happened while I was unconscious or something. He was right! (In some ways.) It is only with my third manuscript that I worried about structure, language, etc, and it took forever. It only came together when I threw all of that away and tucked myself back on the rocks, by the sea, and listened carefully to what the characters had to say. Then I forget why. And can write. And what comes out is a mixture of English and Creolese (Creole English) which is an oral language, and that gives me a freedom in how I can put down the words, even in spelling. The only thing I want to respect then is how to keep rhythm. A *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Oxford University Press, 1996) was the “first attempt in over four hundred years to provide an authentic record of current English from twenty-two territories in the Caribbean archipelago.” But even that didn’t have many of the rude words that I grew up hearing. New words and phrases come in and out of fashion, together with music and dance moves (e.g. passapassa), and the irrepressible nature of this environment and “new world” society affects what I write about and how. (Most islands are only thirty to forty-five years independent.)

When you transcribe thoughts and transform visuals, oral and body language, to silent, written language, a lot is lost (like in translation), but for me what is gained seems to be contributing to pushing the boundaries of writing in English. When my agent asks “Can you make it a little more understandable?” I know he means - to the rest of the world. Then I have to look at how much I could betray my characters voices and clarify the setting in order to expose them to readers beyond the Caribbean, and to challenge traditions set by acclaimed Caribbean writers like Naipaul and Walcott who have mastered the ex-master’s (colonial) language. My writing has been referred to as “*violence to the language!*” That was encouraging. And I will continue slashing, burning, doing whatever it takes to tell contemporary stories that I feel compelled to share, and will do so in the form,

shape and language they dictate *and* however I can, to reach a global population. This is contradictory in itself, I know, but I am not interested in writing for the sake of producing fine pieces of art only, but writing in ways that connect us across cultures and that deal with issues that affect us all. Communication – this is what it is. And the interconnection with other mediums and disciplines helps me find balance. And hopefully helps others value interconnectivity, too.

I write from deep memory and observation and top it off with long daydreams. It is like cooking or baking. The hypnotic seawater and sun literally scorching my brain helps to crystallize thoughts and form sentences. Some call it poetic or poetry, some parts stream-of-consciousness (SOC), non-fiction narrative, who the hell knows? But I find these terms and descriptions after I write, and I learn much that way, too. So my first novel was “semi-autobiographical” – scenes based on vivid memories and even more vivid invention. My second was driven by the desire to write in a male voice, and I have adapted this for film because it would never be read by the people who inspired it, and because it came with its own soundtrack and powerful visuals. And then now, look at this one – it beats me – “sci-fi” or “speculative fiction,” with a whole mixed-media way of writing and sharing. This one near buss me head an’ drowned me! But I will fix ‘e tail (write it) and learn to swim again. It jus’ come and jump up, in the middle of me last manuscript, and butt me up in de sea. I go show you a few slides I prepared to start to make sense of it and begin a collaborative process: