

Koffler Centre of the Arts

Books & Ideas: Shani Mootoo & Jane Urquhart

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Hello. You're listening to Koffler Digital Audio, a stream that encompasses all of our downloadable audio content including audio walks, radio plays, podcasts, and artist interviews.

I shall now introduce Shani and Jane. Shani was born in Ireland, grew up in Trinidad, and now lives in Prince Edward County. She holds an MA in English from the University of Guelph, writes fiction and poetry, and is a visual artist whose work has been exhibited locally and internationally. Mootoo's critically acclaimed novels include *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, *Valmiki's Daughter*, *He Drowns She in the Sea*, and *Cereus Blooms at Night*. She is a recipient of the K.M. Hunter Artist Award, a Chalmers Arts Fellowship, and the James Duggins Mid-Career Novelist Award from the Lambda Literary Awards. Her work has been long- and short listed for the Scotiabank Giller Prize four times, the International Dublin Literary Award, as well as the Booker Prize. I'd also like to mention that Shani was one of our jurors for this year's Vine Awards for Canadian Jewish literature.

Jane is the author of eight internationally-acclaimed novels, three volumes of poetry, and one collection of short fiction. Her first novel, *The Whirlpool*, won France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger and she has been nominated for the Orange Prize, the Giller Prize, and the Booker Prize. A holder of honorary doctorates from several Canadian universities, she is the recipient of Canada's Governor General's Award and Trillium Prize. She is also the editor of the most recent *Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* and is an officer of the Order of Canada.

Shani, Jane, I'm pleased to pass the screen over to you. Thanks, everyone.

Jane Urquhart: Thank you so much. So good evening. I have the honour of saying a few words about Shani before we launch into our conversation. I was absolutely honoured to be asked to be here tonight for Shani's event and also honoured, of course, to be able to have a conversation with her about her extraordinary new book, but I am just going to say a few words first. Shani Mootoo is a gifted, gifted creator of both visual and literary work. She has one of the most interesting collections of citizenships as well. She was born in Dublin to Trinidadian parents and grew up in Trinidad, and came to Canada when she was 19. She has shown her very interesting visual art internationally and, by the way, this visual art (I should make a point to say) includes video art, so she is also a film maker of sorts within the visual art world. But tonight we are here to celebrate quite belatedly, the launch of her exquisite thought-provoking novel, *Polar Vortex*. I say "belatedly" because of course the book was already launched months ago and it has been clear sailing ever since. Like many of her previous works, it has been short listed for the Giller Prize and has garnered considerable praise. So what I would like to do now is, I would like to toast Shani on the launch now, and this of course is an excuse for me to

have a drink of wine, on her wonderful, wonderful book and I wish it all the best.

Shani Mootoo: Thank you, Jane. I shouldn't be drinking when you're toasting me, but I will. Thank you so much.

Jane Urquhart: And you're drinking Writers' Tears from Ireland, which is a fantastic thing to drink. Okay, Shani's literary work has been celebrated and taught in Canada, the UK, the USA, and Trinidad. Her voice is precise, yet lyrical and it's compelling and I think there is a stunning marriage in your work, Shani, between toughness and poetry. And she asks the necessary questions, important questions such as in her narratives concerning the development of relationships across gender, race, and identity lines as well in a complete spectrum of many, many different ways. Do we ever really essentially know the other? But most importantly, I think you ask this question, Shani, do we ever really know ourselves? Have we ever become fully conscious? So in *Polar Vortex*, we are presented with four main players, Priya, Alex, Prakash, and Skye. More than a narrative examination of a love triangle/quartet, which is one of the things I noticed that people were saying this was a love triangle and I'm going, "Wait a minute! Hold it! Aren't there four people in there?" Nevertheless, it's much more than that, but it's also very compelling in that way, and so that's only one layer of the book. The book works on so many different levels. I eventually decided, really that this is a major work of philosophy. I think this is a philosophical book. It's a meditation on the nature of love and letting go. Is there an academic subject called the philosophy of love? Because if there is, this definitely fits into that category. I think of Stendhal's *On Love*. This is my question, however. The majority of the book is presented from Priya's point of view. Alex is an academic, however, studying forgeries. Now, that is a fabulous metaphor, kind of a central metaphor for the book. Did you intend it to be? Or was it one of those lucky echoes that sometimes happens?

Shani Mootoo: Jean, I'll answer your question, but first of all, I just want to say thank you so much to the Koffler Centre and Diaspora Dialogues for continuing to be interested in hosting this launch so many months after my book has been out in the world. And it's sort of funny that we're having this launch now, but the reason that I really wanted to is because there's something very, very important in a launch that didn't get to happen and I'd like to do that right now, which is to say thank you to certain people who were very, very important in me writing this book and getting the book out into the world. I want to say thank you to the people who supported me in writing the book. For afar, that would be my father and my siblings. They're always there behind me and that's really, really special given some of the subjects that I write about. They know what I write about and they're 100% there. My friends, Shelagh Hurley-Mathers, Jane Howard, and Pam Joliffe were very important in being around. And there are a number of other friends, but the three of them definitely, in terms of writing. Deborah Root, my partner. You know, we have an amazing,

creative life here at home where we support each other and it's pretty special. I want to say thank you to Samantha Haywood for taking on the book as my agent and then giving it to Book Hub to Hazel and Jay. They understood the book so well, it was a dream come true, really. And then they hired Meg Storey to edit it and Ingrid Poulson to do the cover. It just came together so really very nicely for me. So I want to say thanks to Koffler and to Diaspora Dialogues and I'm so happy to be doing this with you, Jane.

Jane Urquhart: It's a real pleasure.

Shani Mootoo: This chance to have the two of us being of Irish something.

Jane Urquhart: Yes, exactly, and I wasn't born there.

Shani Mootoo: And living in this neck of the woods.

Jane Urquhart: And being here in Canada, yeah, and in this particular part of Canada which is such an interesting setting for your book because the United Empire loyalists settled this part of the world and they themselves were kind of migrants. They were a whole different kind of migrant, but nevertheless, they were leaving behind a situation that they couldn't really tolerate and coming up through Prince Edward County where you now live, and settling the land in various ways. And so it's a fascinating part of the world to be in.

Shani Mootoo: So to answer your question, you partially included this in a possible answer that this is one of these things that happens, one of these serendipitous things that happens when you're writing. You know, because the world that you're creating, it really is a little universe that does develop a logic of its own and without you realizing, if you really kind of sort of follow the creation of this world, there are things that will happen in it that you don't even realize until the book is all sealed up and it got its nice cover and stuff like that. And then you realize, oh, wow, yeah. So Alex is an academic and she is writing about forgeries and a few other things that happened that I sort of realized afterwards, like smell of the mouse, for instance.

Jane Urquhart: Um hm. I wondered about that as well. I wondered if that had come naturally to you or whether you had made a decision concerning the idea of something that is decaying. I think we should point out that Alex and Priya are partners and they live together in a house in Prince Edward County, more or less, at least that's where it was in my mind.

Shani Mootoo: Yes.

Jane Urquhart: And in the country. And they both were previously city people and that these things are happening around them, so for example the smell, the ominous smell of decay in the kitchen and having to move refrigerators or try to find, somehow, where this smell is coming from, and we've all had that experience

in the country.

Shani Mootoo: Yes, precisely. So when I was writing the book in fact, there was a smell that was driving me crazy in the kitchen and I'd been working in the kitchen because my desk, which is in the barn, is not really accessible in the wintertime and the cold months and so on, and so that change is coming soon, but I've been in the kitchen writing, here's this smell. And of course, by the time you get to the end of writing the book and you begin to work on it, you realize these things like the forgeries....

Jane Urquhart: Well, they're gifts, I think, in a way. They're gifts. And also, I've always felt that a book is successful only when it has taught me something; in other words, when I have discovered something as a result of writing this book that I didn't know before I sat down to write it, and I didn't know even in the process of writing it. It finally reveals itself to me in some way or another. So this was fascinating to me because the character of Prakash, I thought, was very complicated, I would think difficult to create as a character when you're working on the book. I think the female characters are always much easier for me than the male characters. In fact, in one book I had to write from the point of view of a man in order to be able to get inside his head because I felt so comfortable with the female character. But he is really the stranger who comes in from the outside and brings with him, Priya's past. He is himself an immigrant to Canada, part of the Ugandan immigrants who came at the time of the regime of Idi Amin and under terrible circumstances, and were brought into a country that wasn't as multicultural as it is now. And so it was a very difficult migration for him. Could you say a little bit about him and where he came from and also how he manifested himself as a fictional character in your mind?

Shani Mootoo: Well, there's sort of a simple story to that, in that I do have a friend who is Ugandan and he's a very, very good friend, and the way the novel...you know a novel can have several starts and usually where it really takes off has nothing to do with the previous starts. So he had asked me, in fact, he was telling me this really very lovely story and he had asked to please write it. He's not a writer himself, though these days he's writing poetry, but he's not really a writer himself. He said, "Please, write this story. It means a lot to me." I began to write the story because I had not embarked on anything after *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* and very quickly, the voice of the woman who I was creating in the story began to contradict everything he wanted told in the story.

Jane Urquhart: Interesting.

Shani Mootoo: I began to follow her. She's the one I began to follow. There was never meant to be an Alex in the book, there was never meant to be a Prakash, or Skye. But I was very interested in this person who is a bit afraid that something is going to come out if she tells a particular story.

Jane Urquhart: The story that your friend told, was it similar to the story that Prakash tells in the kitchen, which is the story of his migration, essentially?

Shani Mootoo: Okay, the story in the book of Prakash, that has nothing to do with that migration story. It's not real. The story of the migration itself, I've embellished it but there are bits of things that I've heard from him and the reading Tasneem Jamal's book, that picture was flushed out for me, as it were, and other stories like that, that I could then bring into the picture that I saw.

Jane Urquhart: Also, it gave you an opportunity to explore, I think, in narrative in a fictional way, the nuances of identity in the sense that that particular migration was part of the Indian diaspora in the sense that we always think, okay, people of Indian descent must have come directly from India when they come to this country, but of course the diaspora is huge in the same way that the Irish diaspora is huge, in the same way that the Jewish diaspora is huge. I found that aspect of the book to be very moving and very telling, and also very respectful of individual stories in a way that perhaps the kind of discussions that go on, not all the time, but occasionally in our current society, seem to want to pigeonhole people and say, well this is how the black community thinks or this is how the Indian community, this is how the Muslim community thinks when in fact these communities are made up of individuals who have not only their particular personalities and their wonderful, wonderful differences amongst themselves, but also have come via many different routes into our country.

Shani Mootoo: I was particularly interested in the refugee experience in that moment, and the reason, Jane, is because you know the book was not plot-driven and as you see, I was so pleased to hear you say that you want to learn something when you're writing, you want to discover something new, because that is precisely in fact how I write. I don't know where the story is going to go. I don't know if this fully your way of writing, but I don't know where my story is going to go.

Jane Urquhart: No, I don't either.

Shani Mootoo: So when I took Priya on the road in the car and first of all, she is taking Skye down the road and I'm actually imaging this road that does exist and detailing it because I want to write. You know, I think about people like you and Alice Munro and Carol Shields and when you all write these places, it is written out of a particular understanding of these areas. And for me, I don't see many people like myself who are living here full time or read stories written by people like myself, so I wanted to try to put this landscape into a kind of an Indian Trinidadian Canadianized way of seeing it.

Jane Urquhart: Yes, yes.

Shani Mootoo: So what I was doing, was going down the road, trying to write this particular road.

Jane Urquhart: Which is kind of video art, isn't it in a way? I have to say, the book is intensely visual. It is so visual that it was like watching a film for me and I couldn't quite figure out how you had managed to achieve that, but I was on that road with you, for example, and I know you drive by the house that includes Syrian refugees.

Shani Mootoo: That's exactly what I was going to say. So when I drove by that house and then it occurred to me, wait a minute, my character can really be from Uganda, it can play a part in the story. And at that point, I got him to tell his story to Alex and so Alex is now seeing these two Indian people in a house, so it becomes very complex when Alex comes into it.

Jane Urquhart: It would make, also, I think, a terrific play. I think it would make an amazing play.

Shani Mootoo: You want to write it?

Jane Urquhart: No, no thank you. Dialogue is not my strength, let's put it that way, but I found the dialogue in this to be terrific. I also loved the sort of segues into sometimes even cynical points of view; for example, and quite honestly I can't remember whether it was Alex or Priya who while Prakash was telling his story, remembered someone who had been through some kind of similar terrible migration who had been able to seduce women (it was Alex, that's right), who had been able to seduce women by just sort of showing his battle scars or telling the story. So, I mean, that also humanized the center of the kitchen. You know, it made it more human and it also made it less political. It made it less preachy, in a way, I suppose.

Shani Mootoo: Well, you know, it's interesting that you say that because one of my tasks once I introduced Alex was to create a relationship that did not have the stereotypical expected fights between a white person and a brown person; but also, was realistic in the sense that they both come with preconceived; Alex and Priya both come with preconceived ideas of the other.

Jane Urquhart: Everybody does in this book. Yes. And in life, actually. That's why it's so convincing.

Shani Mootoo: Yeah, so the relationships between them and between the outside world, I really, really wanted to show what was possible in a potentially loving relationship where they really wanted to love each other, and what broke them down was not race as it's always expected to be, but actually very private, personal things.

Jane Urquhart: Exactly, yes. And that was communicated extremely well in the book, I thought. Because it never once fell into what I expected was going to happen and I think that that tells a lot about a book in that it surprises us and the book

was constantly surprising, I thought. I mean, all of the withholds were withheld extremely well but I also felt that Priya, for want of a better way of expressing this, I would say kind of represented the masculine principle in the book not because she was particularly masculine herself, although she does refer to herself occasionally as “boyish” but just because she was often unable to communicate and often unable to allow what Alex in, for example. She often withheld her emotions.

Shani Mootoo: Yeah, it's a conversation that I would like to have more deeply and writing a character like Priya, I do wonder if our gender affects how we write about, like you said about writing a male character; but also writing...I find it very difficult to write a straight woman. It's easier for me to write a man than to write a straight woman and I'm thinking about this right now because I'm trying to write a straight couple and I find I can get into the head of the man very easily. Now, is it because as a lesbian, men are fascinating and I watch them more, you know what I mean?

Jane Urquhart: Yeah, I think they're pretty fascinating.

Shani Mootoo: Or is this some way that someplace that we kind of remove ourselves from straightness and so, I don't know. I think there's something to unpack there.

Jane Urquhart: Yes, I think so too, but I also believe that men are more mysterious in some ways. They're less open to discussing their feelings or their proclivities or more likely to be hidden. Women are more open. And so, in a sense, they become fascinating creatures in that way, I suppose.

Shani Mootoo: Yes.

Jane Urquhart: But when I think about masculine principle, I meant I guess a sort of forward momentum and sort of description of, for want of a better word, the masculine principle rather than the feminine principle.

Shani Mootoo: Yes, I know. It's been on my mind, though, so that's why I went in that direction.

Jane Urquhart: So I wanted to ask you about the title too, which is fascinating and I also wanted to tell you that I at one point thought I might write a book with a title *Polar Vortex* and I remember when I first heard the term I thought, what a fabulous title!

Shani Mootoo: Well, you've got quite an amazing ice and snow scene set on, what would it have been, Wolf Island?

Jane Urquhart: Yes, yes. And I was born in the far, far north so snow was sort of my middle name for the five or six years of my life, and then we migrated down to the southern part of Ontario. So the *Polar Vortex*, I think is obviously

metaphorically interesting because of the unsettledness of the weather and the fact that the weather is a bit of a surprise, an anomaly, and also it's a finite thing, it's there when it's there and then when it's gone, it's gone. So had you been thinking about all of that when you were writing the book?

Shani Mootoo: So there is a section of the story where Alex and Priya drive along the waterfront after an ice storm and they see the big sort of boulders, they're really waves that have frozen one on top of the other.

Jane Urquhart: And they also see birds that are frozen into the...I found those scenes (that happened twice in the book, I think).

Shani Mootoo: Yes, that's right.

Jane Urquhart: I found that very disturbing.

Shani Mootoo: So that comes out of a piece of nonfiction that I was actually writing where Deborah and I did take a drive and saw this, so this was written before the novel was conceived, but as I began to write about the area and Priya, I thought I have to find that piece of writing, and I've got to work it into the novel because it is what is happening in their relationship. This is it. And the real incident happened during what everyone was calling, the first time I ever heard the term, polar vortex. So that was like about four or five years ago, maybe.

Jane Urquhart: Yes, I think it was.

Shani Mootoo: That to me became a really, even though it happens in maybe three or four pages of the novel, that was the tone of the whole novel.

Jane Urquhart: There is, I believe, only really one reference to it in the novel. I mean perhaps I'm wrong about that, but I can remember thinking, ah...there it is!

Shani Mootoo: It's just two sections separated by a couple of pages, so it happens only once but to my mind it is the feeling of the cold and sort of like terror that is possible in a relationship.

Jane Urquhart: Yes, and there's a fascinating shift of point of view in this book, told mostly from the point of view of Priya. Suddenly, about maybe four-fifths of the way through the book, we get Alex's point of view and that is a very risky and very brave thing to do and you pulled it off with amazing grace, and it was also completely convincing and fascinating. So what made you decide to do that?

Shani Mootoo: Well, tell me if you could have stood three more pages at that point of Priya's inconsistencies. You know, her constant rethinking and replaying of what happened and there did come a point where I felt, not only I had to be kinder to the reader, but even writing it myself, I began to feel like Priya. I began to question all my motives. Every time I thought to do something, I'd think yes,

but what does it mean that I'm doing that? What if I did this instead? It would send a different meaning. So even as a respite for myself as a writer, I thought, I had to become someone else for a minute. But there was some resistance from a few readers of the manuscript, but I knew, I absolutely knew that I had to make it work because you couldn't go on. You see, initially I thought this was going to be a story from the point of view of Priya and what I wanted to do was to have this person think about their actions and life and so on. I really wanted them to think about what the meaning of relationships, almost the meaning of life. How we communicate with each other and so on, you know? That's what I wanted to do and I thought it was going to be about a 95 page novella or tract or something. When I saw where it was going, I realized to finish this, I had to take a break and bring Priya back, and that's where I got Alex to speak. The other thing is, once I began to do it, I realized that Alex supported me, the writer, in how Priya was being portrayed.

Jane Urquhart: That's very true. Yes, that's a good point. I think that readers would be amused to learn how often we become exasperated with the characters we ourselves have created. I've certainly had that experience myself. I'm sometimes going, "Oh, give me a break!" or "Stop being so self-involved."

Shani Mootoo: Do you become your character ever?

Jane Urquhart: No. Hopefully not.

Shani Mootoo: I do when I'm writing. I find the writing process really, really difficult from that point of view, you know coming out of it can be a relief and it can take a while to come out of it.

Jane Urquhart: I do find that it takes a while to come out of it and that I have separation anxiety in a way, toward the end of a book and after I've finished it, I sometimes miss my characters, in fact. But I always have been able to keep a distance between myself and my characters.

Shani Mootoo: How do you do that?

Jane Urquhart: I think it's because I'm an escape writer rather than escape reader. I remove myself from the dailyness of my life by going into this other world that I have created and that way, I just don't turn into the characters because they have nothing to do, really, with my daily life and you know, that's maybe not quite so much the case with the book that I'm writing now and I could say that there was maybe one exception among my books where it came a little closer and really some of the characters exhibited some of my traits, and I also absorbed some of theirs. But mostly I like the idea of creating another whole world and then visiting it and then leaving it at the end of the day.

Shani Mootoo: I think one of the difficult things for me is how deeply I become the story when I'm writing it and then after the book is finished, I do have this sense that I

can't do that again, I can't do that again. You know?

Jane Urquhart: Do you feel as though you're spent by the time you've finished writing the book. Are you exhausted by it? And emotionally spent?

Shani Mootoo: Yes. But it doesn't take very long before I'm ready to try to explore some other idea.

Jane Urquhart: I think there's a difference, too. I think this is something that readers might be interested in. I believe that there are two sides to a writer's life. There's the career side on the one hand which is the Giller Prize and all of that, and there's the vocation side which is what draws us right into the writing process and is really the art side. It's vocation in the sense that often the material chooses you, you don't choose it. And it sounds a little precious in a way, but I feel that especially with this particular book, I felt as if you must have been called to write it because it's such an important book and it shows us so much, really it shows us what is happening essentially, in our country right now. It is absolutely important from that point of view. You know, how Canada needs to be the place of refuge and needs to be a place where people from various backgrounds can enter into relationship with one another, and I think the book was really important from that point of view.

Shani Mootoo: Thank you so much for saying this.

Jane Urquhart: But I also felt that you had come to it naturally, that it was organic in that sense. It was something that had grown within your consciousness and as a result partly of who you are and what you have seen and, I mean, nobody has your memories and your particular combination of memory and imagination, and partly from observation, which is why I was so interested in hearing you say that you wanted to examine this world that some of us have been in, we're settlers who've been here for many generations. But you wanted to examine it with the eyes of someone who has come more recently. We're none of us, except for First Nations indigenous people...this is not our landscape. It's a new landscape for really, all of us, but it's less new for those of us who've been here for several generations, and of course the landscape has been completely altered by our presence. So I find that very fascinating. Do you think it's partly the visual artist in you that wants to hang on to that observation?

Shani Mootoo: Well, you know, as you were talking I was thinking that this has something to do with...it's not just the writing. What the writing does...I love language, I wish in some ways I'd done linguistics and so on at some point because I'm interested in how language, word usage, grammar, and so on makes us think the way we think. It's not as if we're thinking and then we put words to it, but I feel that the words themselves encourage us to think in certain ways. But, something that I do in between the books, I do a lot of photography or I paint and so on. So today I was out at the sunken forest (there's another name for

it, I don't remember what it is) and I was using a camera that was just loaned to me, a medium format camera, and it requires such...you can't just point and snap a picture. It requires long, intense observation, decision making, and at that point I was thinking, this is where I want words to leave me and I want to see with some other part of me that's not verbal.

Jane Urquhart: Yes, I understand.

Shani Mootoo: I don't want to understand it. And then what I find is that when I come back to writing, what I'm doing is trying to translate what I know of the world into words. And then there are also these times when I have this complex set of pop philosophical ideas and I'm trying to make sense of them, and I don't have the language. I can see it all, I can see it all, I don't have the language and I struggle to put it into words, these ideas.

Jane Urquhart: I've found that being in a partnership with Tony for all these years (my husband is a visual artist, as you know), really taught me how to see in a way that I wouldn't have known about had I not been in the company of a visual artist.

Shani Mootoo: Right, right.

Jane Urquhart: And so, as I said, your focus was extremely visual for me. I can still see that kitchen. I can see the road. I can see...and yet you weren't being overtly visual, so it somehow was entering your work through osmosis, I think. That's observation, for sure.

Shani Mootoo: What I was thinking when I was in the forest today is how this kind of observation, the way it translates best of all is simply description. But I don't want to just have description in my work. But that's what it's good for, it's good for telling me what the environment is like.

Jane Urquhart: It's also kind of an echo of what's inside too. I think that often a character, for instance you think of the Brontes and the fact that Emily would have created a character called Heathcliff, which is a combination of the heath and the cliff, and really the landscape in Wuthering Heights is one of the characters in many ways, and not just because of Heathcliff and then it turned out that somebody counted the number of lines of description that Emily Bronte wrote about the landscape, and it was some infinitesimal, a couple of dozen or something, and meanwhile we are all carrying the moors around in our heads. So whatever the marriage is between the visual and the verbal, it's mysterious and it needn't be huge, either, for it to materialize.

Shani Mootoo: Right.

Jane Urquhart: So I wondered what you thought about this combination of toughness and poetry that I find in your work and I noted that you had written a collection of

poems.

Shani Mootoo: Right, and I'm working on one now for Book*hug. But what do you mean by toughness?

Jane Urquhart: I mean non-sentimental, lacking in sentimentality and yet toughness just means that you're not going to fall into cliches, you're not going to become sentimental, you're not going to follow the path that so many other writers may have followed; you're going to pull us up short and make us look at the world in a way that we haven't before, and in a way that isn't always pretty.

Shani Mootoo: Yeah. I think that the poetry that I write does actually question and try to not get to the pretty so much. I mean, there are those, but I actually don't like pretty poetry. I don't mean to write poetry in my novels.

Jane Urquhart: It has a certain cadence, however, your voice has cadence which is one of the big proponents, that's the carrier of poetry.

Shani Mootoo: I wonder if that is not the Trinidadian manner...

Jane Urquhart: That's interesting. I never thought of that.

Shani Mootoo: ...and the British schooling that we had, you know, that very, very strict and long time ago.

Jane Urquhart: The *Book of Common Prayer*, probably with the Anglican Church.

Shani Mootoo: I went to a Catholic convent but you know, many Irish nuns actually. Actually, very funny. The principal of the school, the head nun, she was the first person at my mother's bedside when I was born. Isn't that weird? She is now in Trinidad, the principal of the school that I sent to.

Jane Urquhart: So she was in Dublin and she was now in Trinidad.

Shani Mootoo: Well, not anymore. She's gone now. But she was.

Jane Urquhart: But she moved to Trinidad. So did she seek you out, or

Shani Mootoo: No, I went to the school that she was the principal of, but that is the kind of education that we had, right, with all of these foreign people, you know the British and the Irish nuns and so on. But then we have this Trinidadian style of speaking that's constantly in flux and I wonder if navigating all of those kinds of things, because there are so many people writing out of Trinidad who do really, really well as writers; surely, there is something good that we all have in common, you know?

Jane Urquhart: Well, there's something, there's music for sure in your prose, I mean you

know, just is that sense of something there that the only word I can think of is cadenced.

Shani Mootoo: Jane, a funny thing! I'm having such a good time in this conversation with you. I forgot we were supposed to read. I was supposed to read.

Jane Urquhart: Oh, gosh, that's right. And so did I. And you know, why don't you read now? I think that would be a good idea.

Shani Mootoo: But the time is up!

Jane Urquhart: Well, not entirely. We could do another five minutes without I think, without coming to any grief of any kind.

Shani Mootoo: I'm enjoying this speaking with you.

Jane Urquhart: Well, we will continue this later. Anyway, read a passage to us before we go.

Shani Mootoo: Okay, why don't I do that? I will read two pages.

Jane Urquhart: Okay.

Shani Mootoo: So this is Priya and she's still waiting for Prakash to arrive. He's coming to visit. Alex didn't know about Prakash and now that she knows he's coming to visit, she's not so keen on that. Because she doesn't really understand why Prakash's presence in Priya's life was kept a secret. So this is from the point of view of Priya.

I'm certain it wouldn't have been wise to have told Alex during these last days that, yes, he had at one time, but only briefly, been interested. She knows little about the years that immediately followed my emigration to Canada once my university tenure had been completed. There's just never been any reason to get into the details with her of those early days in this country. I'd found lodging in city-subsidized housing in Toronto. Prakash and I had not lost touch, but we weren't as close as before. I had embarked on a practice of art making as diligently as anyone pursuing any other kind of career, but was of course making no money at it, always running out of paint and canvas and often couldn't pay the bills. My kitchen cupboards tended to be empty save for cans of ravioli and packages of ramen. Prakash arrived at my apartment one day unannounced just after I'd hung up from a phone call with a family member back home, who responded to my appeals for financial help, perhaps one too many, advising that I get an ordinary job like normal people or return at once and marry a man who could take care of me while I pursued my hobby, as he called it. Seeing the state I was in, Prakash held my face in his hands and whispered earnestly, "Your greatness as an artist is being heralded in this very moment. Others can't see it but I can! Do you trust me? Let me help you. We can do this together." I was curious and my protests were weak

and he easily brushed them away as he carried on with his mission. He tore a sheet of paper from the drawing pad on my dining table, pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, and handing it to me, directed me to itemize the sums of my rent, utilities, groceries, paints, canvas and everything else I needed to see me through a month's living. Then he asked me to write down my income. I drew an egg and while I shaded it in, crosshatching with his blue ink pen, he went to one of the several stacks of paintings leaning against a wall and flipped through it. He pulled out a small canvas board on which I'd made a study in oil of two green glass bottles and a clear one on a tabletop in front of the window, through which skies topped an emerald green field. He didn't ask, but announced he was taking it in exchange for the sum of that month's needs, which he said would one day, probably after I'd died he added laughing, be seen to have been a bargain. That was the first painting I ever sold and I made it through that month. After that, I sort of fell little by little into him for comfort and support. Yes, there were moments over the course of our continuing friendship, he acted as if I were his girlfriend and although I didn't exactly push him away, I did not cave either. If I'd long ago told Alex any of this, surely she would have understood the predicament I had often found myself in as an artist trying to make a go of it, on so many fronts and all on my own. Surely she'd have sympathized and seen that I couldn't, after all, have made it in this country entirely alone. Or perhaps she'd have seen something more sinister? The point is, I hadn't let her in on any of this, and to do so now would be nothing short of foolish.

So I read.

Jane Urquhart: Thank you, Shani. Thank you so much. And here's to your marvelous book.

Shani Mootoo: Thank you.

Jane Urquhart: And I know it's already launched and we're on your team for the month coming up.

Shani Mootoo: Thanks so much, Jane. This is lovely. I really enjoyed this!

Jane Urquhart: Me too, and let's see each other soon. Bye bye.

Shani Mootoo: Goodbye. Thank you.

52:36

NOTES:

1. In context of discussion, Diaspora Dialogues appears to be the series name, please verify.
2. All mentioned names verified online in relationship with Ms. Mootoo.
3. Canadian spellings used since this is a totally Canadian presentation (not that many differences with words involved in this discussion, however).

