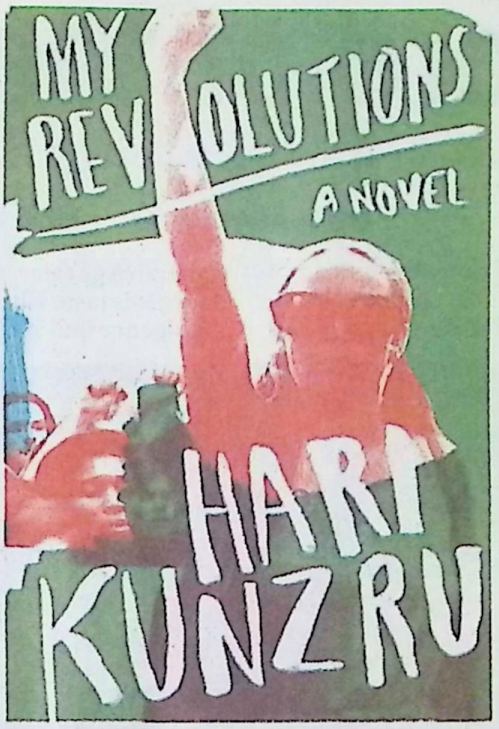
outcome of romantic relationships for their personal security and happiness.

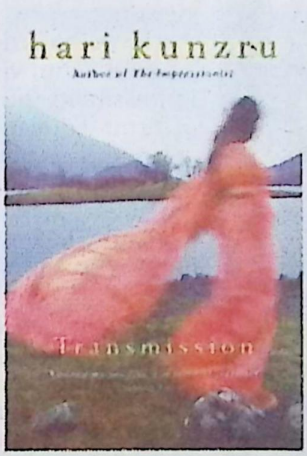
How important is it for you to know your audience/reader?

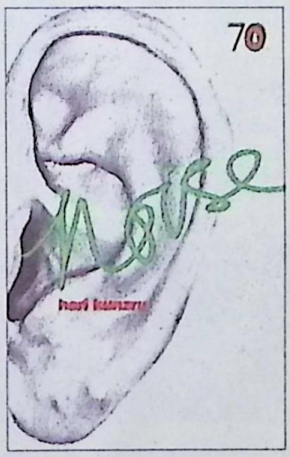
I think you make your audience, or perhaps find it. The most important thing for a writer is to try to tell the truth about the world as you see it. If you're successful at that, an audience will emerge.

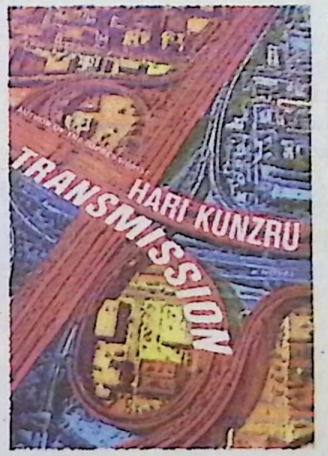
Do you think the way in which diasporic writers interpret South Asian reality differs from the way non-diasporic authors do?

I think for those of us who don't live there, South Asia exists as much as an idea, a horizon or a point of reference, than a daily reality. I can imagine many things. I may even have a perspective that gives me greater insight into South Asian life than my Polish or Jamaican or English neighbours in London. But it's not the same as living it every day. That's a job only non-diasporic writers can truly do.









In Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons, JM Coetzee's protagonist says the following about novelists in Africa writing in English, which may as well be true for South Asia: "Whether they like it or not they have accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to their reader. Yet how can you explore a world in all its depth if at the same time if you are having to explain it to outsiders? It is like a scientist trying to give full, creative attention to its investigations while at the same time explaining what he is doing to a class of ignorant students..." How do you view this issue?

I think there are serious political questions underlying Coetzee's comment, and some of them are true for South Asia, but not all. African reality has, because of foreign igorance and condescension, been all but invisible internationally, so bridging the interpretative gap is difficult. South Asians are more accepted as writers and thinkers, and because of the popularity of South Asian writing, there's a growing level of knowledge and understanding which makes our situation easier. I think one has to ask the question of any South Asian novelist-who are you writing for? If you're merely retailing South Asian exotica for a foreign audience, that is a purely interpretative role, and leads to some uncomfortable conclusions about the writer's allegiances. If you choose just to speak for your 'own' people, that's something else, perhaps equally limited. I don't think it's impossible for a good South Asian writer to speak accurately and with nuance to all readers it's a difficult job, but not impossible.

How secular do you think modern India is?

Not secular enough, in its politics. In order to function successfully, Indian people have to accept the existence of a firebreak between their faith and the functioning of their institutions and this is true of Pakistan and Bangladesh also. Religion has a place in public life, by providing an ethical horizon for political decisions, but the attempt to impose a religious vision on those who don't share your faith will always lead to terrible suffering and violence. Religious believers will sometimes say they have a duty to bring others to the truth as they see it. I see no problem with argument and persuasion in furtherance of that end, but the use of force and political coercion in such questions is a form of arrogance the belief that your view of the world gives you the right to hurt or kill is the worst kind of self-righteousness. ■