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*The Criterion*



# *The Criterion*

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## An Interview with Shamlal Puri

Neelam Chandra

Shamlal Puri's widely acclaimed novels include Dubai Dreams: The Rough Road to Riches; That's Life: Michael Matatu at Large; Triangle of Terror; Dubai on Wheels - Speeding Headlong on a Dangerous, Slippery Road; Axis Of Evil; The Dame of the Twilight.

His books have been reviewed in more than 600 magazines, newspapers, online sites, radio and TV. They have also appeared in major Indian newspapers and magazines including The Hindu, Hindustan Times, Business Standard, New Indian Express, The Tribune, Caravan and Economic Times. He also has a strong presence internationally and his books have been reviewed around the world in publications including Daily Nation of Kenya, The Voice of Canada, Pravasi Indian, The Indian Hong Kong, Fiji Times, Oman Daily Observer, Al Khaleej UAE and many UK newspapers; on the web Yahoo, Google, the BBC and hundreds of sites.

He established Newslink Africa, a pioneering news agency for this continent in London. His work has been published in more than 250 magazines, newspapers, journals around the world. He started his career in India and moved to East Africa working for top media for 24 years.

He has interviewed celebrities, politicians, kings and queens, presidents, prime ministers for global media. He has have been to the Buckingham Palace several times and photographed the Queen and her husband Prince Philip and the Royal Family, including the late Princess Diana and Prince Charles. He met and photographed several British Prime Ministers from Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron.

He moved to London in 1975 and started to work with London newspapers and broadcast on BBC World Service, BBC TV, Channel Four in Britain and networks in Australia and Africa. He has been a consultant for UNESCO; the International Press Institute, Switzerland and Article 19 of London. He has authored several books and reports on press freedom for UNESCO which were instrumental for the birth of independent newspapers in Africa.

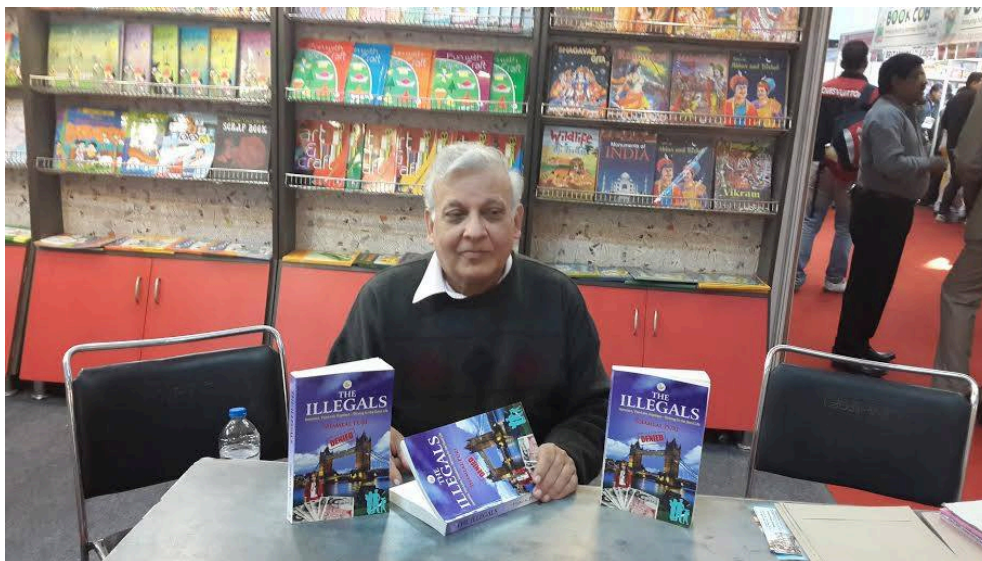
Currently, he is an editor of The International Indian Magazine in the Middle East; the London Correspondent and Columnist of The Standard newspaper in Nairobi, East Africa's oldest newspaper and is a regular writer for several UK magazines.

In his lengthy career, ShamlalPuri has reported from war fronts, famine-hit areas and witnessed the genocide in Rwanda, Africa in which 800,000 people lost their lives. He was nominated for the prestigious Journalist of the Year Award in London.

For more than 40 years, he has written for The Indian magazine, the voice of Overseas Indians, published in Hong Kong and also in several magazines for NRIs published around the world. On the web, he contributes regularly to American and European internet-based sites, and, his work is re-published in several hundred publications and on internet sites globally.

As a professional photographer, he has compiled a picture library of more than 250,000 images. His photographs have been widely published globally, including the British national press. He has visited most countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, the Far East and the Americas.

Shamlal Puri's career is a grand saga of news scoops, hair-rising adventures in far-off lands and hilarious episodes while news gathering. In itself, a great read when he writes it.



**1. Journalist, photographer and editor – the combo seems so different! What is common between the three professions?**

Creativity.

As a journalist you have to write a factual report but in an interesting style. You cannot just print a boring Parliamentary report verbatim but have to make it easy and interesting for your readers without straying away from the facts.

In photography you have to ensure that your pictures have creativity and an effort that will make your picture stand out in print. That is why we just don't take one shot but many from which our Picture Editor selects the best.

The Editor cannot just bung in gormless and lifeless news stories into his newspaper without injecting life into them. An editor is the ultimate gateway between the writer and the reader. He or she needs to be alive to the growing trends in journalism and add creativity otherwise he will have a dreadful daily paper in his hands.

**2. You have also interviewed quite a few famous and amazing personalities. How has been the experience? Any interesting incident you can remember? And any hilarious incident...**

Journalism is an amazing profession. It gives you an opportunity to rub shoulders with the movers and shakers, decision-makers and people who shape the world's politics, economics and society. I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience and made many friends among the presidents, prime ministers and the royalty.

I have many interesting incidents but an interview I had with Field Marshal President Idi Amin, the dictator of Uganda in the 1970s comes to mind. He was the man who had expelled 72,000 Indians from his country in 1972. I challenged him over his popularity, knowing fully well if I annoyed him I would be fed to crocodiles. But he accepted the challenge and personally drove me to the local market to prove his popularity. He was surrounded by loads of people and I noticed half of the 50 people around him were his security men! I wrote that in my interview after returning to UK.

Hilarious incidents?

In Nigeria, after interviewing the country's President, I wanted to ring my editor in London from my five star hotel room and gave the operator the phone number. She asked me if I wanted the call "in the system" or "out of the system". I thought it was best to be in the system as otherwise I may never be put through. Three hours later my call never came through. When I complained, the operator told me I should have booked the call out of the system – which I did and was promptly put through in a couple of minutes. Half an hour later, the operator's minion knocked on my door demanding money for the call – which did not go into the hotel's books but into the operator's pocket!

Once I was waiting to interview the President of a developing country. I was ushered into his waiting room at the Presidential Palace where I saw an ordinary man in tattered clothes waiting to see the President. He was first in the queue. I could hear a lot of noisy and excited chickens in a basket by his side and was curious to know how the chickens had passed through the security net when I had been frisked thoroughly before entering the Palace. The man said he was a village farmer. And, the chickens? They were a gift for the President. I love writing headlines, which I do to this day, and conjured one while waiting to meet the President. When the interview appeared in my magazine I headlined it: THE PRESIDENT AND THE CHICKENS.

**3. What was your childhood like? Would you write even as a child or the shade came to your personality later?**



I had a very loving and protected childhood. My parents gave me all the opportunities. They taught me that I should respect everyone whether young or old. I was always interested in writing and my first article was published in a Kenyan magazine called 'Arrow' when I was 13. When he saw my Indian name, the editor sent me three crisp one Rupee Indian currency notes – which half a century later are still well-preserved with me!

That encouraged me and by the time I was in my teens I wanted to be a journalist.

**4. How often do you travel to various countries? Are your novels reality based or are they figments of pure fiction?**

I travel abroad when assignments come up. There is no hard fast time table. There was a time when I used to be out of Britain for a total of nine months in a year travelling abroad. Once I travelled through eight countries in a three week stint.

My novels are factio - fiction based on facts. For instance, my latest factio, *The Illegals: Homeless, Visa-Less, Hopeless – Striving for the Good Life* is based on true stories, interviews I have had with these unfortunate illegal Indian immigrants looking for a new life in the West. All the incidents in the novel are true to the last detail but to protect the identity of those big-hearted men who agreed to share their painful experiences with me, I turned them into fictitious characters. If I had named them, it would have brought shame to their families and consequently ostracised by the society. I added oomph to some lifeless stories and made them interesting for the reader.

**5. You witnessed the Rwanda genocide. What are your opinions regarding the same?**

The tribal genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was an ugly part of global history which I witnessed first-hand. Some 800,000 people were killed as events exploded. I saw young children being hacked to death and with some brave journalists stopped crazed killers from butchering women and children. The job of a journalist is not just to stand, stare and photograph but also intervene when events call for intervention. When we cover such events death also stalks journalists.

Covering death and destruction are all part and parcel of journalism. I witnessed the 1984 famine in Ethiopia and saw people dying from hunger and dropping dead like flies.

**6. How is your Indian connected? Do you identify yourself as an African, an Indian or an European?**

I am a pukka Punjabi and my roots go back to that part of India. I have lived in Africa for decades before my family moved to Europe in the mid-1970s. I have been in Britain for some 40 years. I speak Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati very fluently and a smattering of Urdu and Marathi and I enjoy Bollywood, Indian cuisines and music – so that makes for my Indian connection, not to mention a whole array of relatives in India and two decades of covering live Bollywood concerts here in UK in the 1970s and 80s including interviews with film stars, classical dancers and playback singers such as Asha Bhosle, Lata Mangeshkar, the late Mohamed Rafi and Kishore Kumar among others.

My connections with Africa are through my residence there and my specialisation in African affairs journalism for more than 25 years. Besides I have a Degree in Kiswahili, and am

currently writing a full length novel in this African language. In 1970s I launched a pioneering news service Newslink Africa in Fleet Street, the heart of London's newspaper industry, specialising in African affairs. I was its Managing Editor for around quarter of a century.

Well, my being a European? The only claim I can make is London is my home and I am to live here for the rest of my life. I get a feel of being global – I enjoy Indian, African and Western cultures here.

But having spent a few years living and working in the Middle East did not make me an Arab!

Some may say, I could be a confused Desi! I can safely say I am rolled into one!

### **7. Please tell a little about the novels you have written. Which is your favourite one?**

My first book was *The Dame of the Twilight* published in 1976 – that was when I entered the world book of writing. After being in active journalism for four decades, writing books is a natural progression as when journalists come to the peak of their career in active reporting, they either become political pundits or progress to writing books including their memoirs.

I have also been a co-author of the annual encyclopaedia *Africa South of the Sahara* published in London and written extensively on press freedom in the developing countries. I have written books and reports for Unesco, International Press Institute and Article 19 and addressed the University of San Diego on these subjects. In between I wrote novels and now find a great joy in writing these. In novels, the writer gets the joy of having a licence to indulge in fantasies or fictionalisation whereas in factual books one cannot stray away from the facts.

My favourite? Never thought of it! A parent should treat all his children equally!

### **8. Which is the recent novel you have written? Where is it based?**

My latest offering is *The Illegals: Homeless, Visa-Less, Hopeless – Striving for the Good Life*. It is about the travails of paperless Indians troubled with lack of opportunities in India seeking a new life in the West. The 310 page novel is based on true stories and interviews with these unfortunate illegal Indian immigrants who defied all the odds to travel by land or the 'donkey route' through several countries before reaching Britain. The men I spoke to retraced their journeys, the sufferings and the pain that they wished to forget. I joined a local charity to help them and in the process gained their confidence,

This is a book with hair-raising tales of the struggle for survival and coming face to face with death.

Their troubles are not over once they arrive in Britain they end up on the streets, hungry and penniless. I have seen them surviving by eating left-overs from tins of dog foods which local Britons have binned after feeding their pet dogs. The Land of Milk and Honey they saw from afar does not exist. They are humiliated, abused, exploited, ironically by their own compatriots – the NRIs who derisively call them "Faujhis".

The book is based in several countries including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Poland, Germany, Belgium, France and Britain.

### **9. What prompted you to write on this subject?**

Before writing this book I reported for many years on people-trafficking after I came across many illegal foreigners, including Indians during my travels in various parts of Asia, Eastern and Western Europe. This gave me opportunities to talk to them and to trace the route they were taking. I got to know an Indian immigration agent well and was able to study his psyche on why he was involved in people smuggling. Truly, Rupees and Dollars ruled his heart and he had no other compunctions.

I felt that those going on the 'donkey route' are also the children of parents who have placed high hopes on them for their security in old age. I asked myself: which parent would like to be confronted with the heart-wringing task of carrying his child's coffin on his shoulder – the child who had taken the risk of going abroad illegally? As journalists and writers we have a social duty to give a wake-up call on the risks these youngsters take and the consequences their parents face when things go fatally wrong.

### **10. Any plans to get the novel translated into other languages?**

My publishers are looking at the possibility of translating *The Illegals* into Punjabi and Hindi. There are invitations to translate this into Scandinavian and Russian languages.

The need for a Punjabi edition arises from the fact that most of those who take risks to travel abroad illegally are young frustrated Punjabis, who given the sad state of life in today's Punjab want to leave India. Young Punjabis fall prey to top-notch politicians in their ivory towers who deliberately push these hapless, jobless and uneducated youngsters into consuming and peddling drugs to other youngsters and raking in huge profits to line up their pockets or to pay for their participation in elections. It is these gormless politicians who keep the drugs trade alive.

### **11. What is your message to your readers?**

My works are based on burning social issues. I am not into romantic writing as I would like to leave that genre to young romantics. When I wrote *The Dame of the Twilight* I dealt with tribalism, casteism, the evil of dowry and wars.

In *Dubai Dreams: The Rough Road to Riches* I tackled the issue of the exploitation of blue collar workers, mainly Indians in the Middle East.

In *Triangle of Terror*, I covered the issue of poaching of Africa's elephants for ivory and how its proceeds are being used to fight wars in the Middle East.

### **12. Who are your favourite Indian writers?**

I have always admired Munshi Prem Chand and children's writer Ruskin Bond both of whose works I have read in my student days. In my teens, I remember Ruskin Bond coming to address my boarding school in Mussoorie (where he lived).

The late Khushwant Singh is also among my favourite authors. I was one of his writers when he was the editor of The Illustrated Weekly of India magazine and was privileged to meet him several times and exchange correspondence. He always encouraged me to write for his magazine. Somewhere along the line, he has been an inspiration.

Obviously, we are in a new era of writing and many exciting names are coming to the fore in Indian writing.

There is a whole crop of a new breed of young writers, many of them really talented whose works I have read and reviewed. I continue to read them as we, from the so-called “old school”, also learn something from new young writers.

### **13. Any message to the Indian writers?**

Well, India is a land of story-tellers. Perhaps, I have got training from my roots. Writing is for entertainment and for putting a sane point of view across to readers. It should not be done to incite or convey a message of hatred that can ignite the society. So, responsible writing comes to mind. As a journalist I have always exercised responsible writing because once your work leaves the desk, there is the wide world out there reading it. A writer must entertain and educate the masses, not incite them into a frenzy that can damage the fabric of our society.

### **14. What are your future plans?**

Obviously, to write, write and write. I have known no job other than this. I have been in the media for 40 years and this has kept me out of mischief! My journalistic life has been full of hair-raising scoops and hilarious episodes and one day I would like to write about them.