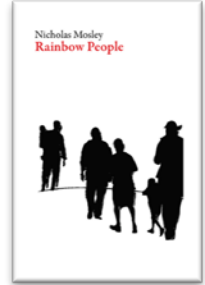


# **Saving Humanity, or How to Enter a Partnership with God**

Postscript to *Rainbow People* by Nicholas Mosley

(Dalkey Archive Press, 2018)



**Shiva Rahbaran**

*‘I would believe only in a god that knows how to dance’*

*‘Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss . .  
. a bridge and not a goal’*

Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*Thus Spake Zarathustra*

I met Nicholas Mosley for the first time in London in 1994. I was an English literature student who had come all the way from Germany in search of firsthand material for a thesis on the novels of Nicholas Mosley. I had come across his work through the recommendation of my former literature teacher at school and felt I had never read anything quite like *Hopeful Monsters* (which won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 1990). Set in England and Germany in the interwar years – the 1920s – it carries the reader through the troubled history of Europe and the entire world, into the 20th century and the New World Order.

I was struck by the love story. It made me feel liberated in the sense that it enabled me to see the bigger picture. Of course, I’d already heard and read a lot about love being a liberating and empowering force. Most love stories I’d read till then, however – when they didn’t end in tragedy – offered unconvincing and cliché happy endings. And even if the happy ending was convincing, the reader couldn’t imagine what the couple would go on to do once their passion had been sated. In Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth’s free spirit and independence were liberating. But what do you do with yourself as Mrs Darcy? Where was the bigger picture? Where was the higher plane to which her love was supposed to carry her? In contrast, in *Hopeful Monsters*, the love and life of Eleanor Anders, the young German-Jewish scientist

whose relationship with the Englishman Max Ackerman spans six decades, was liberating to read. Through her enduring – but unorthodox – love for Max, she not only led a fulfilling life as a woman and a scientist, travelling half the world, but could also envision a new type of human being that could save the world and humanity from extinction.

My fascination with *Hopeful Monsters* quickly gave way to surprise when I found out that very little had been published in academic research on Mosley and his writings. I needed secondary sources in order to embark on my thesis, so I wrote a letter to Mosley's publisher Secker and Warburg, explaining what I was looking for and was pleasantly surprised (I thought my letter would end up in a bin or under a huge pile of unanswered letters) when Nicholas Mosley wrote back to me himself, and gave me a date and a time at which I could visit him at his large Victorian house on a quiet, leafy crescent just a stone's throw from the buzz of Camden Town.

Once I was in front of him – a very charming, very tall, very English man with large hands and lively eyes looking at me from behind black-framed glasses – he warned me about his stammer (which varied in intensity) and then sank into an old armchair in the reception room of his basement flat. He joked about his study, which was in the basement, as the seat of the subconscious: his wife, a psychotherapist, had the rest of the four floors of the large house all to herself. He seemed quite pleased that I wasn't there because of his father, Oswald Mosley, who had founded the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s (the English fascist movement of the 1930s isn't deemed important in Germany, where I'd spent most of my youth), but only because I was interested in his novels of ideas. He had just finished his autobiography *Efforts at Truth*, and he informed me that the autobiography was to be the seal to his artistic career. He was mistaken. The following twenty years proved to be one of the most productive phases of his life: he published around a dozen books and various articles in that period.

Love was what we mainly talked about for the next twenty-five years. For Mosley, love is a framework or a safety net, where lovers can experiment with ways and possibilities of being in partnership with a greater force – history, evolution, God, an all-encompassing consciousness. Within this framework, they can influence the course of humanity and save it from 'a dangerous across, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous

looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and stopping.’<sup>1</sup>. For the lovers in *Hopeful Monsters*, the threat of humanity’s extinction becomes reality when the atomic bomb – in whose development Max the physicist actually takes part, only to protest against its use in the anti-nuclear Aldermaston protests – is tested by the Americans in Japan, killing hundreds of thousands.

So, what experiments can save humanity? Can humans learn from their mistakes, and evolve into higher beings that can ‘become a rope over the Abyss [. . .] a bridge and not a goal’ and thus save themselves from extinction? This question has been at the heart of Nicholas Mosley’s literary experiment for the past twenty-five years.

In the introduction to his last novel, *Rainbow People*, Mosley refers to one of his favourite (apart from Nietzsche) German philosophers, Karl Jaspers. Jaspers noted a major shift in human consciousness, beginning nearly three millennia ago. At this time, when religions emerged, Jaspers remarked, human beings stopped being led wholly by their instincts. Once religions emerged, gods started speaking to humans through prophets, or rather poet-prophets, and showing them the way. All humans had to do was obey. This worked well until the Greeks entered the scene. The Greek dramatists, philosophers, scientists and mathematicians showed that humans were not limited to obeying an instinct or the words of gods in order to survive: they could survive by doing the job of gods; in other words, by developing a will to face their predicaments. So Jasper sees the age of the Greeks – around 500 BCE – as the age when human beings learned to be conscious of their animal instincts. Their awareness of this ability made them feel like supernatural beings that had come from heaven! At the same time, the Greek philosophers, scientists and dramatists showed that humans had the talent to express this consciousness in their own way, by means of art, drama, music and mathematics. Whereas the Old Testament God spoke from the heavens to more or less will-less humans, the Greeks seemed to be saying that humans could work out their dilemmas through their own effort, by registering what they observed and enacting it on stage or in poetry or in mathematical formulae or in music. In all these ways, humans could understand what it was that the gods wanted from them.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (London: Random House, 1995), p. 14.

In Mosley's understanding of Jaspers, the next stage in the evolution of human consciousness begins at the beginning of the third millennium – around 2000 CE. That was the dawn of the era when humans discovered that they not only have a talent to understand what God means, but may one day have the talent to represent that meaning. For Mosley, this is where love comes in. Love is a framework – or space – where man and God can negotiate as equals and thus become partners in creation. Dance, for Mosley, is the most fitting metaphor for this partnership. When two people are dancing, they must trust each other in order to be able to follow each other's steps and weave a pattern, a choreography. If they don't, they'll end up stepping on each other's feet and dancing will become impossible. In order to trust God, people must realise that their role is not one of obedience or disobedience, but that of one half of a partnership where harmony and art and beauty can evolve. Great scientists, mathematicians and philosophers, from Plato and Pythagoras to Galileo and Leibniz, saw the direct relationship between art (i.e. beauty) and science. It was seeing this correlation that allowed humankind to participate in creation – in the dance of creation – and become God's partner in saving humanity.

In *Hopeful Monsters*, Mosley investigates this idea from a historical point of view. *Hopeful Monsters* is at once a historical novel and a novel of ideas about two young scientists, Eleanor and Max, growing up in the turbulent Twenties and Thirties in Europe, where old orders and old systems of thought, society and science were cracking up. In his portrait of the love of the two protagonists, Mosley looks at the condition of humankind in the twentieth century and the evolution of a 'new human type' in what Nietzsche called 'the great hundred-act play reserved for the next two centuries in Europe; the most terrible, the most questionable, the most hopeful of all plays'.<sup>2</sup>

The phrase 'hopeful monsters' is itself borrowed from the German-American biologist Goldschmidt, who used it to describe the appearance of new species through mutations in a relatively short period of time. Goldschmidt's theory of evolution, as opposed to Darwinian gradualism, postulated an evolutionary process that took place in

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 119.

big jumps.<sup>3</sup> Mosley appropriated this idea in order to define his protagonists as ‘mutants’ – as the new, hopefully viable strand who represent a future possibility for the evolution of their old and threatened species.

After meeting the Austrian Lamarckian biologist, Dr Kammerer, the young Max embarks on an experiment with salamanders in hope of discovering an alternative to Darwinian biology. (The Lamarckians believed that it was possible for acquired characteristics that have proved advantageous for the parent generation to be genetically passed on to their offspring.) Max tries to prove this theory by changing the environment of a pair of lowland salamanders, whose offspring are usually born in water, and getting them to reproduce in the manner of the alpine salamanders; that is, by giving birth not to larvae but to fully formed offspring. He wants to see whether an organism’s ability to observe itself in a given situation and *learn* to do away with patterns that were once useful, but in a new environment prove deleterious, can help it ‘pull out’ the ‘right’ mutation from the multitude of mutations to which it has access, in order to adapt itself to its new environment. The fact that he calls his salamanders ‘hopeful monsters’ is all too appropriate.

In this experiment, Max does not ‘isolate’ certain mutations to propagate them, but prepares the ground that will allow the seeds of specific mutations to grow. The seeds – or mutations – are there. They float or fly and fall and settle when they have reached the right environment. Hopeful monsters create an environment in which the right seeds may fall and grow.

For Mosley, as for the Greeks, creation is beauty. And beauty is only possible where there is love. Max lovingly creates beautiful surroundings for his ‘hopeful monsters’ so that they can have their offspring. The survival of the salamander’s offspring can be read as a harbinger of the emergence of a new type of human being that might save humanity from annihilating itself. The survival of this new creature is the main topic of the novel *Rainbow People*, the third and last book in the thought-experiment that became Mosley’s *Metamorphosis Trilogy*. The title *Rainbow People* alludes to the term ‘rainbow children’, which, as Mosley explains in the introduction, is

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<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Goldschmidt, *The Material Basis of Evolution*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 390.

used by educationalists to refer to the emergence of children ‘different enough to make them distinct from normality by virtue of the intensity of their curiosity for how things worked [...] combined with a gentleness and even sweetness of disposition to others’.<sup>4</sup> In this novel, Mosley depicts the current refugee crisis as a possible catalyst for the evolution of rainbow people – the saviours of humanity. In his eyes, a rainbow is something that not only aesthetically resembles a bridge between two worlds, but is also the aesthetic embodiment of a scientific process involving two different forms of existence: energy (i.e. sunlight) and matter (i.e. drops of water). The rainbow is the aesthetic embodiment of a collision. It symbolizes an opportunity to turn things into beauty, to bridge and cross frontiers – God willing.

This is the crux of Mosley’s novel. God can only will something if humankind enters into partnership with Him and becomes His equal, like Nietzsche’s dancers. The refugee child at the end of the novel does this through a little dance. When I asked why the child at the end of the novel must dance around the frontier guard in order to get to the other side, Mosley winked: ‘Silly fool! You can’t put your feet on a rainbow bridge! You could only cross a bridge made of sunlight and raindrops without falling if you danced on it!’ The frontier guard would only lift the barrier if there was some partnership between him and the refugee child. A dance is a perfect way to express this trust.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Introduction to *Rainbow People*, (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> For more on Mosley and his oeuvre see my book *The Paradox of Freedom: A Study of the Life and Writings of Nicholas Mosley* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007).