

air like the telling vacancy of weather that follows a spectacular storm, never letting you forget that it occurred. My childhood was filled with accounts of India's struggle for Independence, its complex histories of cultures – British, Hindu, Muslim – caught in that deadly embrace of imperial power and domination that never fails to produce its uncomfortable residues of enmity and amity, love and hate. In a small way, my own life was caught on the crossroads that marked the end of empire, with its push towards the new horizons of a Third World of free nations, and, in the opposite direction, a pull from the past, a power exerted by the art and literature of Europe, that was so much a part of the anglicised world of the post-colonial Indian bourgeoisie. During my young adulthood in Bombay I never imagined that I would live elsewhere; like my relatives who went abroad for their further education, I was sure that I would return home to live, to fall back into a pattern of habits and relationships that I greatly valued. A quarter of a century later, as I begin to write this essay, my life divided between Britain and America, I cannot imagine returning to live permanently in India. But what is even more surprising is that I cannot imagine what it would be like to live without that unresolved tension between cultures and countries that has become the narrative of my life, and the defining characteristic of my work.

All this was brought home to me in a graphic way when I took part in a BBC Radio programme devoted to India's 50th Anniversary of Independence. The scene in the studio resembled a stage set for the problem of cultural displacement that I have just described. Five South Asians of Indian or Pakistani descent, in different stages of expatriation, trying to wrest control of those divine and demoniac twins, India and Pakistan, born together from a cleft womb, still as restless as the day they emerged into the harsh light of nationhood. We were a gathering of stragglers seemingly adept at making exits and entrances, but not without our enduring passions and interests: two Pakistani academics, involved in writing the history of their nation, living and working in Cambridge and New York; a writer of vivid

Indian historical fictions splitting her life between New York, London and Delhi; a film maker, equally at home in New York, Bombay and London, whose elegant recreations of English and American literary classics have helped a generation of viewers to inhabit their literary heritage with the ease of visiting a listed house or touring a great, ornamental park. And then there was me, a literary critic teaching at an American university, moving between Chicago and London, and returning annually to my family home in Bombay to replenish those hungers, and revisit those doubts, that haunt the place of childhood. What gives us the authority to speak? Caught between worlds that collide as often as they collude, are we representative of anything but ourselves?

I have asked myself these questions at different times throughout my life. They are neither intrusive nor indulgent, nor are they peculiar to the experience of migration. Such self-probing reflects my experience of belonging to the Parsi middle classes, the most Western and bourgeois of Indian minorities – doctors, lawyers, architects, industrialists, entrepreneurs, a few academics. Being a Parsi, without any originary link to the major Hindu or Muslim traditions was, for some people, a betrayal in itself: a hybrid, a half-breed, a foot in each camp and groundless for all that. Such questions and doubts recurred when I set out from Bombay, in the seventies, to study English at Oxford. My coming to England was, in many ways, the culmination of a middle-class trajectory where formal education and 'high' culture consisted largely in emulating the canons of English taste and conforming to its civilisational customs and comforts. However, my everyday life was lived in that rich cultural mix of languages and lifestyles that most cosmopolitan Indian cities celebrate and perpetuate – 'Bombay' Hindustani, 'Parsi' Gujarati, mongrel Marathi – all held in a suspension of Welsh-missionary accented, sing-song English peppered with an anglo-Indian *patois* that was, at times, cast aside for American slang picked up from the movies or popular music. The English Language, at times, had the archaic feel of throwing open an antique

carved almirah to find yourself engulfed in the faded smell of mothballs and beautiful brittle linens; at other times it had the mix-and-match quality of a movable feast, like Bombay street-food, spicy, cheap, available in all kinds of quantities and combinations, delicious as much for its flavours as its dangers – unhygienic, probably infectious, quite insanitary. I went to Oxford to embellish the antique charms of the almirah; I ended up realising how much I desired street-food.

My sense of 'Englishness' resembled a chest that preserved the foreignness of somebody's past, but was now forced to accommodate the messy but vital bric-à-brac of a quite 'other' present. Soon, I was to encounter this 'cupboard' feeling for real. My college bedroom, at Oxford, was the size of a closet, dominated by a handsome old chest whose loosely hinged doors had to be held back before you could make your way in, or firmly closed before you could let yourself out. Only now do I realise that this ambivalent sense of enclosure and exclusion was symbolic of my anxious entry into British cultural life. I felt constrained by college rules, isolated by the predictable town and gown divide, bereft of a conversation in many languages, the smell of ground spices, *masalas*, roasting at mealtimes, the sunset hour when the heat is sucked up by the lifting sea breeze as the tide comes in. I was living out a dream that many middle-class Indians would aspire to, and yet, in the middle of it all, I was both engrossed and unsurprised.

There is a great subtlety in this old England of ours: shades of meaning and degrees of cultural distinction seem to flow into each other like a range of old hills disappearing, fold upon fold, into the unseeable distance. You stumble upon a social landscape where the merest tremor of a tone, a vowel flattened or faltering, reveals a whole geography of belonging – class, region, family, education. For an apprentice literary critic from Bombay, who once had to imagine an entire cultural landscape in which to locate the 'Englishness' of literature, there was suddenly a new-found freedom. Jane Austen's ironies came alive, and the ellipses in Virginia Woolf's prose started to speak. I was fascinated but

unmoved. Why was I intellectually unfulfilled when I found myself in the very midst of the literary culture that I had chosen to follow?

Fumbling towards an answer to that question brings me closer to the most important lesson that I was to learn in my early years in England. It was this: what one expects to find at the very *centre* of life or literature may only be the dream of the deprived and the powerless; the centre may be most interesting in its elusiveness, as the enigma of authority. What was missing from the world of English literary study was a rich and provocative encounter with the pertinence of what lay in an *oblique* relation to the forces of centering. This is not, in any sense, to sanctify the marginal, but to realise – to make graphic – what it means to survive, to produce, to labour, create one's own imaginative world within a world system whose major impulses and investments are pointed in a direction away from you. There is a lesson in that neglect that takes you, at times, beyond and *behind* the great narratives of centre and periphery. Remember the awful realisation endured by Rahul Singh, V. S. Naipaul's mimic man, when it began to dawn on him that the great stone walls of London didn't contain a unique weight and resonance; *they* were like stones elsewhere and everywhere, other stones were not pale shadows of them.

My need to have my transitional, extraterritorial existence acknowledged would not have been fulfilled by a critical tradition 'owning up' to its imperial 'past', like a fact held in the aspic of the archive. I was searching for an active understanding of the living relationship, the unceasing movement, *in between* colony and metropole, recognised in its most awkward and awesome juxtapositions. John Stuart Mill, for instance, who worked for the India Office realised that one of the major conundrums of his theory of liberty consisted in the fact that he was a democrat in his country and a despot in another's land. For the canons of British literary culture to take responsibility for such a double or forked ancestry requires a revisionary estimate of liberalism as an ideology of conquest, or an instru-

ment in the cultural of assimilation. What has to be acknowledged – as Mill *almost* did – is that the self-contradictoriness of liberalism is an unwinnable war raging in its heart between ‘universalism’ as a principle of cultural comparison, and ethnocentrism as a condition of judgement. It is this working contradiction between the epistemological and the ethical, between description and judgement, that produces a strategy of ‘liberal’ containment in situations of cultural conflict. It can also be an inner war that is unsustainable.

Such, I believe, is E. M. Forster’s insight into the colonial career of the liberal idea which has a marked relevance for our times too. In *A Passage to India* he explores the flailing of liberalism’s great mission of tolerance and accommodation when, in the anxious politics of empire, racial difference and sexual desire raise their heads and all around them lose theirs. The great lesson that Forster’s book teaches is that it is the closeness or proximity of ‘cultural’ differences, not the vast gaps between nations and peoples, that is the most critical and crisis-laden area of communication. Aziz and Adela were trying to create a new medium of understanding that would make it irrelevant for them to retreat to the certitudes of their own cultural foundations, and it is for this reason that Forster leads them into the darkness of the Marabar Caves. There, prior assumptions and prejudices are flung into the void and, for a spare moment, the colonial mehmshahib and the educated native confront each other through a glass darkly . . . not seeking their own reflections, but the possibility of a proximate existence.

Coming from India where foreigners are warmly invited into the fold, even fetishised for their ‘foreignness’, the ethic of proximity remains for me an essential quality of communality. It was a shock to be aggressively asked by a number of hideous men with red faces and bad teeth, ‘When d’ya row yourself ashore?’. Landladies had mysteriously found tenants in the few minutes between a telephone inquiry and one’s turning up on the doorstep. But these were minor inconveniences when compared to those whose homes were fire-bombed, whose children maimed,

who stood for half a lifetime in dole queues or waited almost as long for entry visas to allow migrant families to be united in the UK. When I hear the familiar complaint ‘they’re taking our jobs’ or ‘the government’s soft on these foreign scroungers’, I never quite believe that it is adequate to deplore the sentiment, and then proceed to ‘understand’ the racist reaction as a form of White working-class protest against the dismantling of the Welfare State. Every time I hear, ‘Paki go home!’ I sense deep fear and resentment on the part of the racist – whether he is White or Black – at the spectacle of the *survival* of migrants and minorities; their ability to lead lives that are part of a recognisable and shared sense of civic virtue while maintaining their cultural differences, their language, food, festivals, religious customs.

It is this double life of British minorities that makes them ‘vernacular cosmopolitans’, translating between cultures, renegotiating traditions from a position where ‘locality’ insists on its own terms, while entering into larger national and societal conversations. This is not a cosmopolitanism of the elite variety inspired by universalist patterns of humanistic thought that run gloriously across cultures, establishing an enlightened unity. Vernacular cosmopolitans are compelled to make a tryst with cultural translation as an act of survival. Their specific and local histories, often threatened and repressed, are inserted ‘between the lines’ of dominant cultural practices.

To occupy such an ‘in-between’ space is often the result of oppression and inequality. Those who occupy marginal or minority positions within cultures and societies often have no option but to occupy such interstitial spaces. Yet, there is a lesson to be learned from such cramped conditions of cultural creativity. From the perspective of the ‘in-between’, claims to cultural authenticity and sovereignty – supremacy, autonomy, hierarchy – are less significant ‘values’ than an awareness of the hybrid conditions of inter-cultural exchange. Aesthetic and ethical values are derived from those boundaries *between* languages, territories and communities that belong, strictly speaking, to no

one culture; these are values produced in the on-going practices and performances of 'crossing over', and become meaningful as cultures to the extent to which they are intricately and intimately interleaved with one another.

My own working life as a literary critic has entailed a similar process of finding my voice in-between the lines of other people's texts, in a form of translation analogous to the process I have just described. My search for a subject of my own did not emerge directly from the English authors that I avidly read, nor from the Indian writers with whom I deeply identified; it was the Indo-Caribbean world of V. S. Naipaul, which I neither knew nor particularly cared about, that was to become the diversionary, exilic route that led me to the historical themes and theoretical questions that were to form the core of my thinking. For reasons still obscure to me, it was the detour through Naipaul's *milieu* that brought back the world of post-colonial India to me, even as Naipaul himself took a more direct route from Trinidad back to his ancestral home in India, in order to seek out a deeper understanding of the 'shipwrecked' lives of the Hindu indentured community to which he belonged. *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mimic Men*, *In a Free State*, these novels have been celebrated for achieving a cast of characters whose unpromising lives were turned, by Naipaul, into the most memorable portraits of individuals striving for their independence, establishing their autonomy, against all the odds. My identification with Naipaul's writing was less concerned with the triumph of the human spirit. I was more intrigued by the ability of his characters to make their way in the world acknowledging its fragmented structure, its split imperatives, its sense of an absence of authority. In Naipaul's view, of course, this was nothing more than the 'wretched' condition of the Caribbean, and his unrelenting irony and despair about the islands lead him to conservative conclusions. My own view was different: the ability of his characters to forebear their despair, to work through their anxieties and alienations towards a life that is radically incomplete and yet intricately communitarian, busy

with activity, noisy with stories, garrulous with grotesquerie, gossip, humour, aspirations, fantasies – these are signs of a culture of survival that emerges from the other side of the colonial enterprise, the darker side. Naipaul's people are less remarkable for their portrayal of literary 'character' than for the possibilities of personhood they symbolise – a way of being in the world that resists the tragical view, held by many, that the colonised are peoples without a history. Armed with a comedic spirit of persistence, Naipaul's characters reveal, in the midst of loss, poverty and defeat, the chances for creativity, humour and the virtues of a common life enshrined in the everyday experience of social marginality – a common life that is not in the least commonplace.

Naipaul's people exceed the traditions within which they find themselves constrained, transgress the languages of conformity that they inherit, unsettle the colonial and post-colonial preconceptions of their precarious lives. They too are vernacular cosmopolitans – although often obsessed by their provinciality – moving in-between cultural traditions and revealing hybrid forms of life and art that do not have a prior existence within the discrete world of any single culture or language. Cultural translation is not simply appropriation or adaptation; it is a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems of reference, norms and values, by departing from their habitual or 'inbred' rules of transformation. Ambivalence and antagonism accompanies any act of cultural translation, because negotiating with the 'difference of the other' reveals the radical insufficiency of sedimented, settled systems of meaning and signification; it demonstrates, as well, the inadequacy of those 'structures of feeling' (as Raymond Williams would have put it), through which we experience our cultural authenticity and authority as being somehow 'natural' to us and part of a national landscape.

From the mid-eighties onwards, I sensed a change in the cultural scene. As the Tories marched triumphant and the Labour Party recoiled from the horror of its own increasing

irrelevance, left and right seemed to meet in an unholy alliance. There was a sense of drift and directionlessness, and in that unpromising moment the arts of Britain's 'Black' communities developed a marked resonance and relevance. The landscape with which I opened – subtle social shifts and folds harbouring fixed hierarchies and enclosed conventions – became less significant for me. The common grounds of everyday life were slowly changing, at least from where I stood, and so was the weather. The most lasting image of this transformation is to be found in *The Satanic Verses* where the vibrancy and insurgency of migrant life result in a remarkable translation of the metropolis itself – London is renamed Ellewondeon in the invention of a 'foreign' tongue, and Rushdie tropicalises the weather. Suddenly the intimate lives and concerns of London's migrants and minorities emerge as major metropolitan themes and, in this translated terrain, they become agents of a historic transformation. You will remember the carnivalesque spirit of that scene in *The Satanic Verses*, when poetic justice is finally meted out: Mrs Torture is mercilessly taunted and eventually torched in a nightclub act where disco turns into *danse macabre*. Those who are excluded return to claim a place for themselves, to seize an alien time and make it their own and yours.

Literature, however, is often braver with the truth than life allows. The last decade is too close to me, too significantly a part of what is as yet in process, unfinished, for me to give it shape in this narrative. What I have learnt, so far, is this:

No name is yours until you speak it; somebody returns your call and suddenly, the circuit of signs, gestures, gesticulations, is established. You are part of a dialogue that may not be heard or heralded at first, but your person cannot be denied. The voices of the crossing, once drawn by the siren's song, may lead you astray, but strangely you find yourself the long way around. In another's country that is also your own, your person divides, and in following the forked path, you encounter yourself in a double movement . . . once as stranger, and then as friend.

James Berry

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Ancestors I Carry

James Berry is a pioneering voice in Black British writing. Drawing up on his African Jamaican roots, his best poetry is a dialogue with history. Angry at times, but never without compassion, he asks probing questions of both Africa and Europe. His anthology of Black British poetry, *News for Babylon*, was a ground-breaking achievement which showcased several new Black British poets in the 1980s. Now in his seventies, he is a celebrated poet with numerous prestigious prizes to his name. He continues to read his works in public.

In 1924, eighty-six years after the abolition of slavery, I was born in Boston, a rural and coastal village of Portland, in north-east Jamaica. The fourth of six children, I was soon brought home to Fair Prospect, three miles along the coast from Boston. Here, domed with regular orange blooms, around the hills and flatlands, above the common features of coconut palm trees, the mightily spreading poinciana, or flame tree, flourished in the drumming wash of the seasound. At a distance, the high trees hid vegetable gardens and tethered or penned domestic animals.

My parents had background histories in the two nearby former slave plantations of that area – Boston and Fair Prospect. With no wage earner in the family, we depended on sales from foodcrops we grew and domestic animals we reared. This meant