

CROSSING THE BORDER: An Encounter with Odysseus

This is the text of a lecture delivered at Portland State University's Multi-Cultural Centre, for the Third Annual Portland International Performance Festival, sponsored by the Portland State University's School of Extended Studies. The lecture inaugurated the Festival's Spring Lecture Series on "Border Crossings".

"Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many turns, who many ways wandered..." - with these words, Homer begins his tale of Odysseus and his twenty-year wandering before returning home. My story begins with a variance from this model: where Odysseus left his home reluctantly, I was enthusiastic in leaving the safe haven of home.

Picture if you will an Indian boy of 14 in eastern Africa. Born of Indian parents who had been required of their British masters to build a railway from the coast to the interior of East Africa, he grew up under British imperial rule, full of the imagery of *'the green, green meadows of England'*: meadows interrupted by the occasional red double-decker bus. An England where gentlemen wore hats, which they doffed at white-clad ladies passing by. An England where *'to err is human'*, *'invention is the mother of necessity'* and where one does not *'cry over spilt milk'*. Where Robert the Bruce learnt bravery while watching a spider patiently spinning its web, and Robin Hood robbed the rich to help the poor. Such was the education of an Indian in dusty, colonial Africa. (Looking back, I see now that I had already crossed a border, or several borders: Indian language, dress and mores at home, English language, dress and mores at school, and African language, dress and mores at play. The accident of history had made me a mulatto well before I came to consciously recognise myself as one.)

So, unlike Odysseus, I leave Africa in the late-60s with enthusiasm for England. My ship flies through the air and my mind aches to see the pictures in books transform to material reality.

On St. Valentine's Day 1968, our plane circles Heathrow in the twilight and I recognise the blinking lights of pedestrian crossings and watch the red buses crawling along highways. I am home! Passing through customs, we enter a red bus. The conductor rings a bell to signal the driver to move off. The bell is not in my imagination, but it fits, accreting to my childhood pictures of red buses. But then, devastatingly, the first fault-line in my picture and my sense of homecoming: I cannot understand the conductor! He is speaking an English - if English it be - that I cannot understand. Crude, gruff, impolite to my ears. (The conductor is a London Cockney: in Africa I'd learnt the Queen's English - oblivious that English, like Punjabi or Hindi or any other language, also has dialects and colloquialisms.) And then I saw a white dustman - another fault-line cracking my picture! The whites - who had been literal gods in my Africa - had fallen. Shattering, to realise there was a whole variety to whiteness - not just teachers and policemen and judges and governors and other bosses in general.

While these scars did appear in my rebirth as an Englishman, Circe - to return to the Homeric metaphor - still held me in her enchanted grasp. England was *better*, England was *civilised*, England was *culture*, England, above all, was *modern* - not god-ridden.

A chance encounter with a family friend turned my thoughts homeward... much like Odysseus turned one day from Circe's sensual embrace to think of home and Penelope. The family friend pooh-pooed my uncritical enthusiasm for English culture by drawing attention to the subversive tradition of Indian thought. "*Let a man raise himself by himself*", so, my friend informed me, Krishna had spoken to Arjuna before the great battle in the Mahabharata. This violated all my sense of "Indian-ness" - a sense epitomised hitherto by the sight of my mother at prayer each morning. Where was God in Krishna's statement to Arjuna? Was Indian thought actually denying God? Too simplistic, as I was to discover later, but nevertheless the friend's comment had set me off from Circe's enchanted isle and I was out on the open seas again, rowing desperately in search of a part of myself that I had until now considered "un-modern". I read voraciously, consuming as much of Indian philosophy and literature as I could - indiscriminately, from any period of India's long history. In the Rig Veda (composed c.2500 B.C.) I found perhaps the most eloquent expression of doubt, in the prayer to Dawn (Usha): *Who created the heavens?*

*The trees, the mountains, the
wind and the water?
Perhaps he who sits in highest
heaven, he alone knows.
Or maybe he does not:
for even the Gods are after creation.'*

Little did I realise then, in the rediscovery of a part of myself on the open seas between school and university, that the Sirens were beckoning.

From an Indian kid out of Africa, I had transmuted into an Englishman, eschewing all things Indian, embarrassed even of being associated as an Indian; and now had transformed again - into an Indian: a proud, self-conscious *Indian* in England. Using my burgeoning knowledge of Indian thought and literature to distance myself from England; indeed, to peer superciliously across the border at England. In the Gita and other philosophical texts I discerned the proto-Hegel and Marx, in Kalidasa I cheered the forerunner of Shakespeare. Becoming more Indian, naturally I sought to reach my Mecca: to go to India and so have confirmed my third birth - a pilgrimage at the age of 21.

India, that first time, did indeed prove to be the Sirens Song. I was the first of the immediate family to go to the land where the Ganga flows. It embraced me. My sense of self submerged in the sea of humanity in Delhi's bazaars, on the train from Delhi to Bombay, amongst the pilgrims to the majestic, 16,000-foot height of Joshimath in the Himalayas. I began to dream in Hindi. In conversations with fellow passengers on buses and trains, I hid my London origin, not wanting to sully the purity of the Sirens' song, inventing an Indian history for myself. Mercifully, in time, like Odysseus, I stopped my ears to the alluring song. Sitting on the plane back to London, I reflected I could not lie to myself again: India - to paraphrase Goethe - *'stands off from me afar'*; and, in being lost, *'is real, my guiding star.'* The only true possession of India for me, I have come to realise, is the *imagined* India...much as the England I possess in truth is the imagined one conjured up in equatorial Africa.

So, three rebirths, three transformations, three border crossings, all proving incapable of filling what Salman Rushdie has called "*the god-shaped hole in the heart*". What was I in search of? To quote from Rushdie's The Satanic Verses, "*the booming words, land, belonging, home.*"

And then, in 1976, the Asian was born. On June 4th 1976, at 7pm, a young Sikh boy of 17, Gurdip Singh Chaggar, was knifed to death in London by 4 white youths. The words of Aime Cesaire (the French-African architect of the Negritude movement of the '30s) came searing into the heart: "*there is not anywhere in the world a man who is lynched, kicked and spat upon in whom I am not spat upon, kicked and lynched.*" Gurdip Singh was not killed because he was Gurdip Singh Chaggar, a Sikh who wore a turban and came from the Punjab plains of northern India. He was killed because he was an Asian - an Immigrant-Wog-Paki-Black.

As I lay crying on the shoulder of a friend 200 miles from the scene of the killing, it began to dawn upon me that this was where I belonged; and that this peculiar relationship between England and me had to be made sense of somehow, had to be voiced. A relationship where two souls stand gazing at each other across a frontier, unable to hold hands. Odysseus gazing at Penelope - and vice versa - across a vast, sometimes benevolent and sometimes benign sea. That feeling inspired the formation of Tara Arts in London.

In 1982 I wrote a play on the life of Gandhi: specifically, how England had inspired the development of Gandhi's thought and action. Entitled Salt of the Earth, the play concluded with three conflicting views on the legacy of Gandhi, by the three storytellers of the play. One decried Gandhi for his legacy of non-violence, which has made the Indian ripe for violent attacks on England's streets. The other extolled his defiant Indian-ness: sipping tea with the King in Buckingham Palace clad in a simple homespun dhoti. The third echoed my own sentiment: "*Neither Indian nor English, more English than the English and more Indian than the Indian, the Asian was born with you. Teach me, teach me to accept both poles of my existence, denying neither, satisfied with neither pole of my existence, striving for the peace of perfection through both.*"

To return to my starting point, unlike Odysseus, my journey has not ended. Loss sustained Odysseus through the long, arduous years of his travels. Loss of home, loss of Penelope. Ultimately, of course, he regained what he had lost. I am all-too aware that, as a first-generation immigrant, there is one loss - of a geographical space called "home" - that I shall never regain. We are a people (to quote from Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses once again) with debris for a soul - "*broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, lost loves...*" All immigrants, I think, carry this 'god-shaped hole' in their hearts. This loss makes their lives epic. Choices there are, of course, and we all exercise them: to locate a sense of community (self) in a geographical space - however distant or near; or, more painfully, in the existential space afforded by our own conscious bodies. Mohammed Iqbal, the great Urdu poet who, quite literally, *sang* into creation the modern nation-state of Pakistan, one wrote: "*the destinies of the world are fashioned behind the awnings of my mind*".

As the years pass, I have come increasingly to reflect upon his words. Yes, the world - my world/community/self - is the one I *imagine*. This imagined community is for me the preferred choice in my border crossing; it seems to me that the geographic sense of community inexorably tends towards parochialism - or, more accurately, nationalism.

So, as an Asian in Britain - for the term "Asian" itself is an imaginary construct - I am on the road of constantly accreting to my sense of community: Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Burmese, Japanese, West Indians, Chinese, Irish, Welsh...an ever-increasing spiral of individuals willing to hold hands across the border, if only from the shared perception of being essentially mulattos. Bastards in the literal sense of the word. Half-castes, mlecchas. The journey to the border, fuelled by the engine of loss, turns us all into "impure, "un-authentic" selves. Odysseus can thus truly hold Penelope in his arms.

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Portland, Oregon, USA
9 February 1994