Binglish: a Jungli Approach to Multi-Cultural Theatre.

Address before the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments (SCUDD), Scarborough, 19-21 April 1996

In modern Hindi, "jungli" - deriving from the ancient Sanskrit word for wilderness, "jangla" - means, naturally enough, "wild man". There was a very popular Bollywood film of the `60s where the hero was called "jungli". A film I saw in East Africa, where I was born. But until I came to York to study, and began to walk about the Yorkshire Dales - and particularly when I came across the surreal radar domes in Fylingdale - I had thought that the wilderness I'd so loved when growing up in Africa had been lost to me forever when I made the journey from Kenya to England back in 1968. It seems appropriate, therefore, that, here in Scarborough, I am reminded again of my jungli-ness!

In East Africa where I spent the early years of my childhood and youth, the jungle was quite literally around us: I remember as a child waking up one day to find that my pet dog had been gored by a wildebeest. My transportation - or translation - to England has been a journey towards the appreciation of another kind of beast in a different jungle. Salman Rushdie in *The Satanic Verses* draws a pregnant image of this sort of beast. His hero, Saladin Chamchawalla, who literally falls into England from the skies, wakes up one day in his flat in the East End of London to find that he has begun to sprout horns on his forehead and hooves for feet. The demonization of the "other", I think, was what Salman was alluding to as a characteristic of modern England. A demonization that achieved the stamp of political orthodoxy when Mrs. Thatcher in one of her election speeches of 1979 invoked the fear felt by the host community of aliens "swamping the country". Extraordinarily enough, neither her successor nor any of the other contemporary leaders has ever sought to overturn this statement. And that is perhaps due to the fact that the legal fabric of our society in fact demonizes the Others in our midst. Some here may recall me falling foul of Portuguese immigration a couple of years ago, since my status on paper did not allow me the freedom of movement around the European Union that a number of us cherish. Under the terms of the recent Asylum and Immigration Bill, I also learn that my official British Overseas citizenship, despite 38 years of continuous residence here, may disqualify me from receiving any benefits. It is a well-known fact that if you're a Black migrant, it is immensely more difficult to enter the country than if you were White. The law uses the euphemism of "Commonwealth immigrant" to escape calling a spade a spade. But the spade, as in a deck of cards, remains nevertheless Black.

If I elaborate upon the political context current in our society, it is because I think it fundamental to an appreciation of the problematics of multiculturalism. For it suggests that, for here and now, the starting point - perhaps even the underlying premise - of multiculturalism is a sensibility of Otherness, of being an Outsider, a Demon. Starting from this premise, there seem to me one of two choices: either try and become an "insider" - join the Club, as it were - or try and change the rules of the game. After all, as an Outsider, you're not expected to be offay with the rules. The former strategy, I believe, leads to attempts to conform, to integrate; the latter, to confront. Multiculturalism is, I suspect, about encountering the Other - a city boy confronting a beast in the jungle.

There is another sense, too, in which modern England is best characterized as a jungle: the gap between the lords of the jungle and their prey. Social Darwinism has had a revival over the past two decades, under the guise of "market forces". The ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor, the enlargement of the hidden economy, the rise in power of marketeers and accountants in theatres as in other walks of life, the homeless dotting every city and town, the multiplicity of languages, faiths, diets, dress ... of course, England was never a homogenous society. But in former eras, the facts of Empire and Whiteness at least kept alive a notional sense of "One Nation". Today, all but naïve politicians find this notion highly suspect. Issues surrounding gender and ethnicity alone make society today a multiplicity of "nation-hoods", bound within the geographical confines of this island. Brecht's *Jungle of Cities* is a more useful way of viewing the nation today.

In deploying the metaphor of the Forest, however, I understand by it not only the post-Enlightenment Christian sense of an abode of mystery and malevolence but also the Indian sense of an abode of self-discovery and fulfilment. In Indian thought, the Forest is regarded as the crucial stage in the rites of passage between earthly life and *moksha* - the release from cycles of re-birth. In literature, this Forest is time and again characterized as the space where characters achieve an acute knowledge of their own natures - not at all unlike the heath in King Lear. The Forest, therefore, is sage, guru, teacher, prophet. It is an actor in the unfolding drama of life.

In the Mahabharata - one of the 2 great epics of Indian literature (and one that is known now to most of us multiculturalists!) - the central section is entitled *Vanavasa* – loosely translated as “exile in the forest”. It is in this section that the heroes acquire the necessary tools to achieve their goals - weapons of combat, love (and with it, a knowledge of their own roots as well as an acuter perception of the routes panning out before them), and wisdom. Perhaps most importantly, it is in the Forest that the characters are most acutely aware of their loss; and that awareness of loss provides them the key to unlock the door to self-knowledge.

Loss, I've come to believe, is central to multiculturalism. That ever-present shadow alone lends depth to the gains of multicultural practice. Without that 'chip on the shoulder', the picture is flat. I suppose I have come to this realization because of the fact of migration. To quote Salman Rushdie again, Saladin Chamchawalla falls from the sky into England, and in the process "there floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes ... the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, land, belonging, home."

To put it another way, there are many actors today who stand in English rehearsal rooms or drama schools reading texts while the shadow of other texts cloud, confuse or beat upon their hearts. Take the word 'honour'. Individualized, even atomized in modern English. But it also offers an approximate translation for the Urdu concept of *izzat*. Izzat is familial, transmitted through generations, a treasure to be guarded jealously; where the gain by one is the gain of all, and so too for loss. Or take 'thee' - the ubiquitous word in the Shakespeare canon. Old English now; almost, dead English. But offering me the only means of translating the concept of the honorific that is a structural component of all Indian languages. Speaking in Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu (the 3 languages I do speak with relative fluency), I could not and would not address my elders or those I accord respect with the familiar 'you': that is reserved for those I consider my equals, or lower. Speaking in English to my mother, how do I say 'you' without violating some sense of myself - without feeling (as I always do when I've used the familiar word) as if I've sworn at her? When I first came to England, schooling in Manchester, I latched on 'thee' as offering a way out - until I was reminded by my teacher whilst giving a talk on Gandhi (yes, in a Geography lesson, of all things!) that English had moved on!

One of the characteristics of the English language - and, dare I say, the English - is a universalizing tendency; a characteristic legated by the Raj; which seeks to reduce all othernesses - language, custom, dress, artifact - to its own image. A means of absorbing or side-tracking the potential of encounter that is presented when two people face each other across the border-post. Take the words of Thomas Babbington Macaulay, who in 1833 was charged by the East India Company governors of India to arbitrate upon the relative merits of universal education being in English or in the native languages. "All the literature of Persia, Arabia and India would suffice only to grace one bookshelf in an English girls' boarding school ... for it is a literature that teems with mountains of butter and a history that streams with seas of treacle". This from a man who, by his own admission, knew neither Persian, Arabic nor any of the Indian languages. Today, we can laugh, even dismiss, such crass Imperial ranting. But is this a million miles away from Peter Brook's own account of his initial encounter with the Mahabharata? I quote: " The day I first saw a demonstration of Kathakali, I heard a word completely new to me - 'The Mahabharata'. ... Through the magnificent ferocity of the movements, I could see that a story was unfolding. But what story? ... Gradually, sadly, I realized that my interest was lessening, the visual shock was wearing off. After the interval, the dancer returned without his make-up, no longer a demi-god, just a likable Indian in shirt and jeans ... and I realized I preferred it this way. ... [Later] through that remarkable Sanskrit scholar, Phillipe Lavastine, I began to understand why this was one of the greatest works of humanity..."

To return to Macaulay (if only because enough blood has been spilt on Peter Brook - and no doubt more will be later on today!), there is a more acute legacy of his pronouncements. He of course chose English as the medium of education in India and his most compelling argument for this choice should give us pause today: "...to create a class of Indian that is English in language, culture and value, that could act as the arbitrators between the rulers and the ruled." This is my 'tradition' of the English language: a language of alienation as much as of mediation. Is it any wonder that words like 'universal' and 'humanity' signal a hiccup in my brain whenever I hear them?

In multicultural practice, how aware are we of loss? Or rather, is the awareness of loss one-sided - i.e., empathy or recognition, at best, of the loss experienced by the Other?

In the early-60s, when mass migration from the Commonwealth began, government social policy was aimed at 'integrating' the foreigners into the host community. A way, I think, of keeping one's own sense of loss at bay, by inducting the others into one's own mores. Ironically, I think now only Enoch Powell was brave and honest enough to articulate the white English sense of loss. Though I do not accept his prognostications - of "rivers of blood flowing along the Tiber" - I have come to understand the deep sense of the loss of a particular kind of England engendered by the arrival of so many people different in so many ways into the landscape of England. If the admission of feelings of shame, of guilt are necessary in the cementing of individual relationships, they are no less so in the fostering of cultural relationships. All cultures are rapacious: it is the fuel to go forward, to change, to evolve. Empire, however, opened another chapter in cultural exchange: borrowing without acknowledgment. A borrowing that is engrained in the very language we use today.

- How many shampooed their hair this morning? - Right. Well, you've been massaging a bit of India in your scalps! For the word comes from the Hindi 'champa', meaning "to massage with oils". To quote an example from the OED, one John Forbes observed of a woman in India in 1813, "She first champoes her husband, and fans him to repose; she then champoes the horse"! Thankfully, not many of us are called upon to do the latter nowadays - or the former, more's the pity. A similar etymology goes for the vehicles that plague our roads – juggernauts - the word deriving from the name given to Krishna in eastern India (Jagannath) and the festival in praise of him in the city of Puri - when devotees pull along a huge cart through the winding streets. Should the cart slip from the control of the scores of men pulling it, and trample devotees under its myriad wheels - which tends to happen often - it is considered a blessing. I'm not sure the families of the victims would feel they were blessed, any more than would we should one of the modern-day juggernauts plough through our living rooms.

This process of linguistic borrowing has not ended. Today, the most popular take-away food in England is Indian. Indeed, ready-made Indian foods, spices and other ingredients are now commonplace in most shops and supermarkets around the country. Not too long ago, one of the major car manufacturers in the country advertised its latest sports car with the slogan "faster than a vindaloo!" Here is an acknowledgement that for many Britons Indian food is no longer exotic. Biriyani, ghosht, kebab, pakora, samosa, popadom are all popular items of food and have begun to be incorporated in the vocabulary of modern young Britons. So, in a quite real sense, the development of multiculturalism is being led by the stomach.

Food, however, is not the only source. Politics has also provided some impetus. In the wake of the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, *fatwa* and *jihad* are now common parlance for many British political commentators and journalists.

Jokes, it is commonly assumed, are among the most difficult things to translate from one language to another. Two years ago, I put this to the test in a play I'd adapted and staged - Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilehomme*. The father, foiled by his son in his attempt to seduce a fashionable woman, rounds on him angrily and shouts - "Why must you forever be a bone in the kebab?" To my amazement, this literal translation of a Hindi joke elicited hoots of laughter from a largely English middle-class audience. I shouldn't have been so surprised: we are all now familiar with the properties of a kebab and know that a bone in a kebab is the equivalent of being a 'stick in the mud'.

Such inter-lacing - what Edward Said calls "over-lapping" - of texts and tastes is what I've come to call *Binglish*. - Yes, it means exactly what it sounds: not quite English! Food, popular music, dress are pushing this sensibility ever onward. In a consumerist sense, admittedly, with all the attendant dangers thereof: to eat does not obligate one to love the source of the food. But, faced with the babble that abounds in the modern Forest, the jungle that is England, can we ignore the creative challenge and possibilities of Binglish?

Binglish for me denotes more than modes of speech. If language is a way, following Marina Warner, of structuring the world, then Binglish more accurately reflects the fractured world - the overlapping world - that is modern England; where English vies with a whole host of languages in our cities and towns. As is amply demonstrated in the works of the current masters of English literature - Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry. Indeed, I would suggest that literature is currently at the forefront of multiculturalism, to an extent that theatre, certainly in England, has simply not caught up with. The great writers of today have realised that standard English is simply not capable of giving adequate expression to the fractured narratives of our times.

Binglish, by definition almost, is inherently inclusive. It is an expression of the Other in constant dialogue with the Self. (A modern paradox is that post-colonial societies consider the mark of modernity the acknowledgement, even emulation of the West; whereas post-imperial societies characterise modernity by the denial of the East... borne out of unvoiced shame of Empire.) This inclusivity tends towards a consensuality: attempts to make whole the fractures of oneself. Like the Asian kid growing up in a Mirpuri-speaking household in Bradford is faced constantly with the need to negotiate between Yorkshire and the foothills of the Himalayas where Mirpur district is located.

Such consensuality perhaps suggests an alternative model to the conflictual one that has been for so long a paradigm of Western society and thought. Our economic fabric is founded on the weave of Them and Us: the Bosses know best (are literate, cultured) and the Workers are dumb (illiterate, slobs). In the search for profit which is the definition of economic vitality, lay-off workers ... and no one dares question the rationale for doing so, for it seems such a self-evident truth. Increasingly, however - led of course by the examples of many Asian economies - economists and entrepreneurs are beginning to acknowledge that the most successful enterprises are the ones where the Bosses work and eat with the Workers, where lay-offs are not the only options available to sustain a decent enterprise.

This slow turn in economic thinking leads me to wonder whether the time has also come for the Aristotelian conflict-based paradigm of drama. A paradigm that has acquired the status of a transcendent Truth. Yet Indian and many other Asian dramaturgies of the classical period drive towards a consensual notion of drama. In Indian thought, a central notion is *satchitananda* - "Truth is Joy". Joy as Truth sounds quaint to our post-Freudian ears. What about Good and Evil? But life - certainly life in the Forest - is somewhat greyer (or browner) than that.

In arguing for the metaphor of the Forest when considering the possible practices and strategies for multiculturalism, I have in mind that the forest is both malevolent and the abode of self-enlightenment. And in the Forest, the sensibility of Binglish offers a means for the construction of rich - inclusive, consensual - pathways out of the Forest.

I'll end by invoking Shakespeare as a guide: "Bless thee, bless thee. Bottom, thou art translated!", shouts Snug on seeing Bottom in the forest with an ass's head. "Bless thee, bless thee". Not "curse thee, curse thee."

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