

The Bilingual Imperative by Jatinder Verma

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When I first came to England as a teenager, I was hooked to the black & white TV series, *The Prisoner* - though not without being a little bewildered by the exotic setting in which the series unfolded. Little did I realise that, 30 years later, my own body would echo the eclectic exoticism of Port Meirion.

What has transpired in the 30 years since *The Prisoner* was first seen on TV that has made all Britain - certainly all England - one huge Port Meirion? A one word answer is - "curry"! Laugh at your peril: you only have to think back 30 years to the range of diet available to the ordinary English. Today, one is positively spoilt for choice: in every corner-shop and supermarket, we can (and do) consume the world's cuisine. Napoleon (or someone equally famous) said that an army marches on its stomach: can it be that equitable cultural relations beat to the same rumble of the tummy?

On our television screens today we can see an Aboriginal stoop to listen to the red earth - only to hear the purring of a new Vauxhall Cavalier. We watch dazzled as an Indian yogi in Rajasthan bends his legs over his shoulders in order for his toes to tap the keyboard of an IBM Think Pad laptop computer. Or we involuntarily tap our feet to the beat of Fateh Ali's quawaali music, as it wafts over a scene in a small Pakistani town where Pakistani youngsters are playing cricket - and quenching their thirst with Coca-Cola.

Ethnicity is commercial, as never before; and, consequently, available to the highest bidder. What once were signs of difference are rapidly becoming signs of fashion. In London today, I passed by a young Black man with blond hair, a white man with rasta locks, a young woman swishing down Sloane Street in a salwar-kameez, sporting a bindhi - the red dot - on her forehead. Food I remember in the 60s was another badge of ethnic difference: many an Englishman objected to renting houses to Asians because of the "smell of curry". Now those same smells waft through suburbia as much as they do in inner-city ghettos - indeed, there's many a white expert on Indian food, judging by the host of cookery writers and commentators! Language, too, is becoming less of a badge of ethnic distinction: in the East End of London, white market traders effortlessly slip into Bengali in front of their largely Bengali customers. Colour, that perennial barrier of ethnic distinction, is finding its status as a badge of distinction being eroded under the weight of the consumerist imperative: consider the fetish of tanning that has seized the white imagination - and pockets - over the past 30 years! Indeed, having a brown, burnished skin is a positive sign - of affluence, healthy living, of being able to escape the confines of this isle.

And it is that sense of escape which is the key that clever marketers are turning, to get us to part with our cash: there is, I believe, a genuine feeling that this island is not enough. A residual legacy of Empire, perhaps, but an important feeling, nevertheless.

Where in the 18th and 19th centuries young affluent men (and sometimes women) took the "Grand Tour" around Europe, now one back-packs around Australia or South America, cruises in the Caribbean or sunbathes in Malaga - if not actually migrates there. The more "ethnic" the better, because every tourist wants the "authentic" experience ... so long as the day ends with a welcome pint of warm beer and chips! In the arts, we flock to see a Japanese *Midsummer Night's Dream* or a music troupe from Senegal. Television has made the world enter our living rooms and now our cash is bringing the mountain to Mohammed.

But, has the rumble of the tummy made for equitable cultural relations? Because we consume the Other as we've never done before, do we love - care for, respect, honour - the Other any the more? Or, to pose the question in another way, do we accept in the Other the same eclectic zest we value in ourselves? Or is this consumerist eclecticism so distinguishably a "Western" post-modernity that the "non-western" Other sporting the same is in some vague way "in-authentic"? I do believe that this consumerist eclecticism has shrouded ethnic distinctions: it certainly does not suggest a road to eradicating them. If anything, it has reinforced cultural hegemonies.

Consider the paradox of the modern *Binglish*: those "inauthentic" mongrels - products of migration - who are located neither Here nor There. To take one section of these Binglish, the Asians, they are too Indian to be English, and too English to be Indian. The world - perhaps the Western world? - cannot deal with multiplicities of identities, however much it may relish eating Caesar's Salads! When I first came to England, a product of solid colonial education in East Africa (where I was born), the first request my teacher made of me was to speak to the class on "that great Indian hero, Gandhi"! And this was in a Geography class!! I could have spoken much more eloquently of Jomo Kenyatta, or my own personal hero, Nyerere of Tanzania - even of the Duke of Edinburgh, whose face I'll never forget when the Union Jack was lowered and the Kenyan flag raised in December 1964. But I looked Indian. By a process of reductive logic, I was a 14-year old expert on Gandhi. For many English film and television producers today, conversely, the Asians here are not "Indian" enough: they've been there, you see, they can hear the "authentic" lilt of English when spoken by Indians, a lilt which none brought up here could acquire.

Fuelled by commerce, this cult of / for the "authentic", masking as it does a cultural hegemony, skews most cultural transactions: a Peter Brook can layer his productions with performative quotations from Beijing Opera and Kathakali and be hailed a "world" director; I do it and I re-confirm my status as a creator of "ethnic" theatre. Skill at masking the sources of inspiration has some part to play in this, no doubt; but a greater part is that played by the desire to want to perceive. For to ascribe to the Other (me) the same eclectic imagination as our own great and good (him), is to accept that the *Binglish* are an integral part of this landscape. To accept that, is to let go of all notions of distinction - and especially, cultural (national) distinction.

At the moment, I'm having a fraught time with my marketing person over how to present our forthcoming production of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. She feels one of the great selling points of the show is the diverse company I've assembled. I agree. But I disagree with calling them African, Indian, Arab, Caribbean, Chinese, Burmese. They are English, as far as I'm concerned. Yet, I concede, their features, colours, sensibilities also be-speak a "non-Englishness"; the shadow of another "home" sits

on their shoulders. But, yet again, I argue, they're all either born here or are of mixed parentage. To say "international cast" only compounds the problem: the only "nation" each of them belongs to is England. They're all equally unaware of the language and performative traditions of "over There". If we're having such problems describing them, how will their eventual audiences perceive them? Perhaps - and that's the hope and my concluding points - as provocateurs: as being familiarly-unfamiliar.

This familiar-strangeness I think now is both the legacy of Port Meirion and the beacon of the future: the refusal to be pinned-down to any one location. Port Meirion to me represents now a denial of roots and a celebration of routes - "routes", as the Americans pronounce the word for roads. It is this latter sensibility which brings our minds to be in concert with the rumble in our tummy that we currently relish. And lest anyone think that provocation is too strong a word - or too suggestive of combat - I ask you to think on Bosnia: that little state fought for a "route" against all the forces of "roots". And we cannot yet say that it won.

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