

WRITERS MOSAIC

The freedom of diaspora identity

Sita Brahmachari

Where did the bird who dropped that seed come from?

When working on an MA dissertation entitled 'Theatre and the World' at the Central School of Speech and Drama in 1999, I came across two portals of thought that have enabled me to fly as an author. The first was the assertion by anthropologist Clifford Geertz that culture and art are inextricably bound within the same symbolic field:

'A culture is a system of symbols by which man confers significance on his own experience. Symbol systems, man created, shared, conventional, ordered and indeed learned, provide human beings with a meaningful framework of orienting themselves to one another, to the world around them and themselves' (Geertz, 1973).

In his later writing, Geertz asserted that it is 'out of the participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture, that participation in the particular we call art...is possible' (Geertz, 1983).

I mused deeply on these words, but the aspect that felt missing for me from his theory was 'imagination'. When I discovered Paul Gilroy's exploration of diaspora's 'cross cultural poetics' (1993), I remember feeling that I was edging closer towards something I had been reaching for creatively all my life. Gilroy painted a picture for me that seemed to explore a much freer discovery of identity than I had previously discovered.

'Diaspora's cross cultural poetics allows for a complex conception of sameness and an idea of solidarity that does not repress the differences within in order to maximise the differences between one 'essential' community and others. Diaspora's discomfort with carelessly over-in-

tegrated notions of culture, and its rather fissured sense of particularity, fit readily with the best moods of politicised post-modernism which shares an interest in understanding the self as contingently and performatively produced. Diaspora accentuates becoming rather than being... Foregrounding the tensions that Diaspora brings into focus allows us to perceive that identity should not be fossilised or venerated in keeping with the holy spirit of ethnic absolutism. Identity too should be a noun of process. Diaspora's infinite openness provides a timely alterity to the authoritarian implications of mechanical – clockwork – solidarity based on outmoded notions of 'race' (Gilroy 1993).

The convergence of these two revolutionary thought tracks from Geertz to Gilroy left me feeling that I had space to breathe. It feels strange to think of a space...not a no-man's land, but an open, unbordered space, an 'every-man or -woman's land'...that is, an imagined space... but the discovery of this landscape of the mind and heart that explores how we stretch out into the world in all directions...that encompasses in its thinking that we may be rooted in one soil, that our branches may spread out and flower in one wood, while our roots burrow deep in the ground and may stretch out way beyond one woodland floor to travel beyond borders of place and time out across the world.

This theory of belonging, identity and interconnectedness has become a creative home for me. Taken further, the migrating bird that dropped the seed from which the tree grew, perhaps hundreds of generations back, came from a far-away place. We will never know where that favourite tree we shelter under, or made into our tree house, began, or what bird carried it across oceans to grow in soil familiar to us, but it seems to me that it is part of the process of writing to attempt to trace those branches and roots, not simply as a research journey (e.g. by tracing family histories through a DNA test) but as an act of imagination. My first foray into writing and performing my own work was a poem entitled, 'Walk Along A River With Me', performed as part of the London International Festival of Theatre. The poem explored through poetic monologue, music and dance the many rivers of the world that connect our family. I have always felt myself to be engaged as a writer in the process of exploring the ebb and flow of journeys, as so many writers have done before me. There is something so satisfying in the notion of the constant flow, the refusal of rivers to be contained, their ability to forge new courses. In one of

my stories, the authorities attempt to create a river border in children's minds. They fail because the children, believing the surface of the river to be dangerous, make it their business to swim underneath to freedom.

In our times, identity politics – the insistence on reducing your skin-deep colour to a mask – based not on any true sense of sameness or difference, but on constructs born from power inequality and the long and painful history of slavery and colonialism, has felt to me to be a confinement. I wasn't able to articulate this as a child but the fuse of confusion it laid in me burned for a long time. From the days of my own childhood in the 1970s, though I was born on British soil I was called 'half-caste', and nowadays 'mixed heritage' or 'mixed-race'. None of these ways of naming encompassed an identity that went anywhere near to feeling like a 'freedom'. In fact, they all seemed like ways of reducing, containing and pointing to difference, mixedness or halfness, as if 'other' people were somehow whole, essential or pure. As an adult, I understand 'Blackness' as a political construct of solidarity and survival born from racism and inequality; as a child, I remember wondering how the experience – cultures, histories, religions, landscapes – of all 'Black' people gave us something in common when 'Whiteness' was not used in the same way. I remember wondering why people wanted to define the non-white side of me... to find a way of saying 'you are other'. The child can't articulate these things, but coming from a family that came together across continents through love, despite a colonial history that contains pain, conflict and the need for reparation...I didn't feel like half a person. If anything, I felt the experience of having root and branch from different lands to be expansive, not half of anything.

Yet the inequalities that exist in all areas of society require naming. In children's publishing and in theatre, where my writing has been located, the statistics show a woeful lack of representation of the wide diaspora identities that make up our nations and world.

I sometimes feel that if you constantly seek to tell the stories of diverse people, as I do, to step into the shoes of a Syrian refugee child or a Sikh family looking after a homeless Scottish child, your stories may be considered to explore 'issues'. People are not issues: their lives are made into issues by social inequalities.

My father, who was born in Kolkata, India and lived all his adult life in Britain, used to talk

of the experience of being a migrant as being 'suspended between worlds'. I worked on an adaptation for theatre of a graphic novel by Shaun Tan: one artist spiralled around the stage in a giant hoop while another walked on a low-slung slack rope...these two images stay with me as a metaphor for confinement and difficulty...being framed by the constant presence of a border, or offered a difficult way of walking, where the drop might not seem great, but feels constantly unsettling.

As a child, I loved listening to my father's stories and looking through black and white and sepia photographs which held a particular monochrome magic that worked powerfully on my imagination. One photograph of my Dad standing in Trafalgar Square letting pigeons balance on his hands and head has always had a strong pull on my imagination. He's with several other doctors recently arrived off the long ship journey from India, come to work in the newly formed NHS. All the men wear long woollen coats. If you cast a look down at their shoes, all are shined to perfection. Dad told me that they thought all English people wore smart coats like this. He'd watched a lot of Marlon Brando films! This was a time when the vast distances travelled by sea could only be bridged by a rare emergency telephone call or telegram which was usually opened with trepidation, in fear it would be the bearer of bad news. I am moved by the meditation of these memories of the odyssey my father and all migrant people make in leaving their homeland and building new lives. These small details snagged into anecdotal tales filled me with empathy. Once when I didn't understand what 'subtext' meant, Dad described the bright knitted tank tops that these smart-looking doctors wore underneath their greatcoats, knitted in 'bright sky colours', pinks and oranges, mustards and greens, knitted by their mothers to keep their sons warm in a cold country. 'Subtext is what is underneath', he told me...the undercurrent of the story...the space between what you can see and what exists.

I felt more at home than I have ever felt when I discovered the notion of an imaginary space that would not hold me to a border, that would allow me to explore both the coat, the tank top and all that was knitted into the life between! A notion that allowed for a complex understanding of sameness and difference and also allowed identity to be a visceral act of creation and re-creation. I felt like someone who had thought their wings were clipped, discovering they could fly after all. The space...head and heart space...it has opened in me has led me to write

all the stories I've written.

It was not in going to Kolkata that my father's stories grew in me. It was in the imagined space that was evoked as my young mind and heart reached out in empathy to my father's experience, even though my life and experience was rooted in a very different place and landscape.

So to return to my own childhood...perhaps because I was not able to negotiate or navigate these complex thoughts and they left me feeling vaguely sick, sometimes unwelcome, confused, angry and clipped-winged...I feel compelled to bring this discovery of a 'cross cultural poetics' to young people through my stories, to allow characters to have root and branch in seemingly wildly different but connected landscapes so that history does not keep repeating itself.

I love nothing more than meeting a hall full of young people and asking them to consider how they and their families stretch out in their own, and previous, generations around the world. I love asking them to picture some of the places where their roots and branches spread to... to think of people of all generations with whom they have shared wonderful stories in languages or nuanced ways of speaking, unlike their own voices. I love to read some of the voices and narratives in the stories I have written and to see the shine in young people's eyes as they understand that their wide diaspora identities don't make them outside of the story...but uniquely rooted in the material out of which stories grow.

References

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Sita Brahmachari

Sita Brahmachari's creative projects with diverse communities are at the heart of her writing. She has a BA in English Literature and an MA in Arts Education (Central School of Speech and

Drama). She has been Writer in Residence for The Book Trust and Islington Centre for Refugees and Migrants. Amnesty International has endorsed her work as upholding the rights of children and families, and she is an Amnesty Ambassador.

Sita has worked in theatre, creating education and new writing projects for The Royal Court, Talawa Theatre Company, Tamasha and The Royal Shakespeare Company. She co-created a play inspired by Shaun Tan's novel *The Arrival* for Tamasha Theatre Company.

Her debut novel for young people, *Artichoke Hearts*, won the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, 2011. Subsequent novels including *Jasmine Skies*, *Tender Earth*, *Red Leaves* and *Kite Spirit* (all published by Macmillan Children's Books) have been nominated for major awards. For Barrington Stoke, she has written *Worry Angels*, *Brace Mouth False Teeth*, *Car Wash Wish* and *Zebra Crossing Soul Song*. Her most recent novella *Corey's Rock* (Otter Barry Books) is illustrated by Jane Ray.

Sita has contributed short stories to a number of anthologies with a human rights focus and is under commission to Orion Books for two further novels, the first of which is to be published in July 2019. She is the recipient of the UK Honour (2018) for her novel *Tender Earth* from The International Board on Books for Young People. **www.sitabrahmachari.com**

This is a version of a talk given by Sita Brahmachari. The recording can be found on the Writers-Mosaic website at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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