

Belonging and a sense of place

Meena Kandasamy

When I was planning my third novel, *Exquisite Cadavers*, I decided to set it in London, which took audacity. In fiction, it is a city that has been written about by some of the greatest names in literature: Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, DH Lawrence, Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. Naturally, it was very intimidating. I felt it was a sort of self-sabotage, a kind of writing where I was consciously setting myself up for absolute failure in front of thousands of people.

I was perplexed about my choice, but I still decided to go ahead and do it. I have lived here for a solid three years now. It is not only my proximity – my intimacy with this city – that made me choose to write about this place. At some point, I realized that without too much thought going into it, London has become the only home I have.

Chennai, in Tamil Nadu, the southernmost state in India, where I spent the first 25-odd years of my life, has refused to feel like home since I left. The more time I spent away, the more I felt like I was just a visitor. When my parents decided to pack their bags after four decades of living in various rented homes in Chennai and to permanently move to a smaller town about three hours away, it came across to me as a definitive break. I felt I no longer even had a home to go back to in Chennai.

Like a lot of people who have uprooted themselves from elsewhere to put roots down in Lon-don, this happened entirely by accident. I am a first-generation immigrant. I was visiting this city for a few weeks for work. I met an angry young socialist, Cedric, and fell in love, and in a sense, haven't looked back. We live here because he and I cannot seem to agree on living

anywhere else. For the two of us, London is what one can call 'neutral' territory: I don't have to displace myself to the very francophone country he comes from; he doesn't have to move to India.

Is three years enough to foster a sense of belonging? Is three years enough to say, this is my home? In the shadow of Brexit, as an Indian woman with a Belgian partner, and as mother to a toddler who is British and an infant who is American, I struggle to look at any map and point anywhere else in order to conjure up a home. We have between ourselves Trump and Modi and Boris Johnson. We are a bureaucratic nightmare when we cross borders. We are also crazy fun.

On my mother's side, people mark their ancestral origin by carrying the name of their village in their family name. In my father's family, a nomadic tribe which survives as witch-doctors and faith-healers, every man only names his grandfather's village when asked to name his hometown. As a people on the move, who lack record-keeping, who only preserve their memories orally, there is no further they can trace their way back into history. When my grandfather died aged one hundred, I had not asked him where his grandfather came from. Deprived of the old, we forge new histories. In the line of nomads, we seek new lands.

Strangely enough, the rationalisation of how to inhabit and embrace this city came to me from lines of poetry that exist in Tamil, and date back to roughly two thousand years ago. Kaniyan Poongundranar wrote *Yaadum oore, yaavarum kelir*: 'Anywhere is home, everyone is kin'.

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Meena Kandasamy is a poet, translator and writes fiction and essays. Her debut collection of poems, *Touch*, was themed around caste and untouchability, and her second, *Ms Militancy*, was an explosive, feminist retelling/ reclaiming of Tamil and Hindu myths. Her critically acclaimed first (anti) novel, *The Gypsy Goddess*, smudged the line between powerful fiction and fearsome critique in narrating the 1968 massacre of 44 landless untouchable men, women and children striking for higher wages in the village of Kilvenmani, Tanjore.

Kandasamy's second novel, a work of auto-fiction, *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Writer As A Young Wife* (published by Atlantic Books) drew upon her own experience within an abusive marriage, to lift the veil on the silence that surrounds domestic violence and marital rape in modern India. It was selected as book of the year by several newspapers; and was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2018 among others. Her third novel, *Exquisite Cadavers*, was published by Atlantic Books in 2019. She has a PhD in sociolinguistics. Her work has appeared in 18 languages. She lives in East London. **www.kandasamy.co.uk**

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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