

Us and them: the advantages of being both

Umi Sinha

As a child, I didn't realise that I was a 'half-caste', as people like me were described then. I knew that my father was Indian and my mother was English, but it never occurred to me that this was anything to be ashamed of. In fact, Europeans at that time in India were regarded as superior, in social if not religious terms – an unfortunate legacy of colonialism. Being disparaged was even more confusing because we were a privileged family. My father was a naval Captain and the station commander of the naval base where I grew up in the Western Ghats. We lived in the Captain's House, a spacious bungalow with a large garden, pond and mango trees. We had uniformed servants provided by the navy – a cook, a bearer (domestic servant), a *mali* (gardener) and cleaners, and the sentry box at the gate was occupied by a sailor in uniform who leapt to attention and presented arms whenever we passed. My father had an official car – a white Hindustan Ambassador – with a flagpole on the front; the miniature Indian flag was covered in a leather sheath and unfurled by his driver only when my father was in the car, and as we drove around the base everyone turned to salute. My mother was the head of NOWA – the Naval Officers' Wives' Association – and all the other wives on the base deferred to her.

My father aspired to be an Englishman. He had been one of the first few Indians to be accepted as an officer into the Royal Indian Navy and was stationed in Britain throughout the Second World War. After India achieved Independence in 1947, British officers were retained in the senior ranks of the new Indian Navy to train Indian officers to replace them. So, in my childhood (I was born in 1952), English was the official language in the military.

My father, a village boy from northern India with a talent for languages, had served with the son of a Lord and several other minor British aristocrats as a midshipman on the HMS Vindictive, and modelled himself on them. He assumed the manner and the plummy accent, and said things like, 'Oh, I say!' and 'Quite so!' Although his accent reverted as he grew older, he continued to say 'Marvellous!' in a resounding voice until his death.

My father met my British mother at a dance in Chatham in 1945. Both were based at Chatham Dockyard in southeast England, where she worked as a secretary and he was stationed while waiting to return to India after the war. My mother was from a working-class estate in Kent. Her father was a serial bigamist and conman, who abandoned the family when she was five and her brother was one. Her mother was a cleaner, and they were so poor that gypsies sometimes left rabbits at their back door. She told me once that she only married my father to escape from rationing and the dreary post-war years, ignoring her mother's objections to her marrying a 'darkie'; though Dad told me years later that he had succeeded in winning her mother round with a box of chocolates and his posh accent, persuading her that he was a 'gentleman' after all.

After she arrived in India, my mother, who loved colour, decided to try to fit in by dying her hair black and wearing the brilliant rayon saris and glass cow beads worn by the 'ghati' women who worked in the fields, rather than the elegant silks and gold jewellery preferred by the other naval officers' wives. So, while my Indian father was doing his best to act the Englishman, my English mother was trying to pass as an Indian, which was typical of the cross purposes they were at throughout their thirteen-year marriage.

I knew my family was important because, at the naval primary school one day, we were told that two very important people were coming to visit our class. When they arrived, I was astonished to discover that they were my parents. It was probably around the same time that I started to notice

that no one wanted to be friends with me, and other children were reluctant even to sit next to me. I was puzzled, and with that grew an uneasy feeling that there must be something wrong with me, something everyone could see, except me. I sensed it with adults too – my mother’s friends constantly exclaimed about my luck in being ‘fair, like mummy’, and yet I sensed their distaste. I did not want to be ‘fair’ because it seemed to be connected to whatever was wrong with me, and I noticed that Mummy, too, despite her ‘fairness’, did not seem to be all that happy.

I had started school in 1959, when I was seven. It was twelve years after Independence, and we sang the Indian national anthem every morning, and were made to draw, over and over again, the flag and map of the new India. We were also taught the history of India, introduced into the curriculum after Independence; before that, Indian children had only been taught British history. The teachers took particular delight in recounting the many injustices and atrocities committed by the British – the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the Bengal Famine – and each time the other children would turn to look at me. I felt indignant about being blamed for something I had not done, defensive of my mother, and guilty, all at the same time.

As I grew older I learnt about the British stories of Indian atrocities – the ‘Black Hole of Calcutta’ and ‘The Indian Mutiny’, as the British called it, or as it was known in India, ‘The War of Independence’, when, in 1857, northern India rose in violent revolt against the British. I would discover years later that my father’s great-grandfather had fought with the rebels during that uprising.

The more I learnt about my heritage the more bewildered I became. Where should my loyalties lie? Who was wrong and who was right? I was not only mixed race, but mixed-up.

For children with Indian names, growing up in India, we’d had a strange upbringing. My father was always busy and barely spoke to us – and never in

Hindi. He felt, as he told me later, that 'children were the mother's province', so we were brought up without even the basics of Indian culture, speaking English at home, reading voraciously from my mother's huge collection of European literature, listening to Western music. As I grew older and became more aware of my invidious 'half-caste' status, I decided that I was really English. England, to me, was a land of eternal summer, leafy, romantic, full of the daffodils, glades, knights and the chivalrous highwaymen we learnt about in English lessons.

My parents divorced and my mother finally moved back to Britain with us in 1968. We arrived less than a month after Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech, following the first wave of Asian immigrants with British passports who had been forced to leave Kenya. Over the next four years more expulsions would follow from both Kenya and Uganda.

England was not what I had expected. The cold, grey skies, silent empty streets, and lack of colour depressed me. I missed the warmth, the colour and busyness of Bombay, the noise and nosiness of neighbours, even the blunt speech that the British often perceive as rudeness. In England, I could never work out what people really meant.

My mother was depressed too, quickly regretting returning to her unhappy roots. She'd had a successful career as an advertising copywriter in India, but found it impossible even to get an interview for a job in Britain, until she twigged that her Indian surname was the problem. When she reapplied for the same jobs using her maiden name, it turned out that the 'already filled' vacancies were still open.

I crammed my O and A levels into three years and scraped into the University of Warwick, situated in Coventry, where many of the Kenyan and Ugandan immigrants had settled to work in the car factories. There

was a major backlash against immigration while I was there. People would confide in me their objections to all 'the 'coloureds' and 'wogs' who were 'swamping' the city, not realising I was one of them – that cursed 'fairness' of mine again. I missed India and was so homesick that I would try to strike up conversations with Indian bus conductors and shopkeepers. When I told them I too was from India, they would look intrigued and a bit disbelieving. 'Where is your father from?' was always the first question. I would tell them and they would nod. 'And your mother?' I learnt to dread that question knowing that the moment they heard the answer their curiosity would turn to indifference and they would turn away.

The search for belonging, for a place I could feel accepted and at home, has occupied most of my life. After university, my search took me to Crete, halfway between India and Britain geographically, climatically and culturally – I discovered that Greeks even watched Indian films and knew the film star Nargis. When I realised I would never feel at home in Crete, I went back to India and got to know my father again. Four years later, frustrated by the fact that nothing had changed – at twenty-six, I was still looked down upon as an unmarried, 'half-caste' woman – I returned to Britain. By then I had accepted that I would never belong anywhere. When I moved to Brighton, a town that seemed to be a gathering point for misfits, I realised that the feeling of unbelonging came in many forms and for many reasons, and for the first time I felt, not 'at home', but at least as if, in this feeling, I was not alone.

I explored the feeling in my novel, *Belonging*, through the lives of several displaced characters – British men and women despatched to the colonies for their lifetimes, but unable to assimilate because their role was to represent Empire; Indians educated in Britain who returned home to find

they no longer fitted into their own culture; mixed people like me who were outcasts in both of their cultures; and Indian soldiers fighting in Europe for a cause that wasn't theirs. And, in the course of exploring these multiple issues of belonging, I realised that every one of those characters, despite their alienation, had one major advantage over those who retained a single cultural identity: they had the ability to imagine what it was like to be someone else.

For writers, such an ability is a huge advantage, enabling us to look at our own cultures from other perspectives, and to imaginatively inhabit characters of different races, genders, ages and temperaments. As with being bilingual, the ability to imagine being someone else leads to a widening of both mind and imagination.

For me, the most destructive aspect of the colonial mindset was the arrogant belief that there was only one right way of doing things: the way of the colonisers. By arrogantly imposing attitudes and political systems that had developed from their own particular circumstances and culture onto other cultures, whose way of life they were unsuited to, they effectively arrested the development of systems that had been naturally evolving from and reflecting the values of those other cultures – cultures that they might have learnt much from. For example, Ubuntu – an African philosophy that translates as 'I am because we are', and which emphasises the importance of relationship, community, cooperation and compassion for others – or indeed the Islamic tradition of unconditional hospitality to strangers.

In an era of globalisation and multiculturalism, we can no longer isolate ourselves from the rest of the world, as global warming, the pollution of the air and seas that we all share, and the spread of Covid-19 illustrate only too clearly. We face major threats to our global civilisation, ways of life, and

to life itself. We cannot afford to be insular anymore, or to pledge exclusive loyalty to one nation, one race, or one way of looking at things.

It has taken me many years to realise that the lack of a sense of belonging to one place or culture, and the confidence and autonomy that that brings, can be an advantage; that being 'less sure of one's ground' can also mean being more self-questioning and more open to other points of view and other ways of doing things. As the lessons from dystopian fiction, no less than from human history, often show, cooperation and the sharing of knowledge, skills and resources are the best ways to survive, and those things require understanding – tolerating and even embracing our differences.

Umi Sinha

Umi Sinha is the author of the novel *Belonging*. Born in India, she spent her first ten years at the naval engineering base in the Western Ghats where her father was stationed. She moved to Britain with her mother and siblings at the age of fifteen. Her British-born mother was a writer and an artist. Her father was one of the first Indians to be accepted as an officer into the Royal Indian Navy and served on the Arctic Convoys in the Second World War.

Umi Sinha's short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies. She has worked as a Lecturer in Creative Writing on the MA at Brighton University and currently teaches on the Creative Writing Programme at New Writing South. She also runs her own courses and workshops at her

Writing Clinic. In 2006, Sinha and a group of other storytellers founded The Guesthouse Storytellers, an oral storytelling club based in Newhaven, East Sussex.

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

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