

Freedom has a Thousand Charms to Show

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When the date for this Research Fellowship event was decided, Prof Dabydeen said to me, ‘We would like you here as a writer, not as a critic, we would like you to read passages from your novels introducing them as you go along.’ I replied that in addition, I would say a little about my background and what I believe spurred me to write.

I do hope that in this telling one sees how the imagination presses against the violence and fragilities of life.

A Chance Meeting

It was 1994 and I was walking on the one and only main road in Berbice, Guyana. There was a curious absence of sound in the village. No clatter of carts, swerving bicycles, bulging buses, huge tractors and hens crossing the road. I could hear only my footsteps and see the moving shadow of the walk; suddenly I was caught in a strong shower of convectional rains. Having no protection from a tropical downpour, and seeing a bungalow ahead of me, tall on pillars, its yard –open, with neither gates nor walls, I ran quickly to reach it. Partly soaked, standing still, underneath the house, I looked out at a misty cold wind, feeling its drift of fine sprays rapidly transforming the other houses and the road itself, into that slivery strangeness of dreams; I had no idea of what was awaiting me.

My thoughts, my focus, were outside the shelter; they were towards the now partially visible road. It was not long, however, before my attention turned to the wide covered space where I stood. A group of 5 men sipping, steaming tea from large enamel cups were absorbed by the voices their circle contained.

To this day, I do not know why, I moved from the periphery and its splashes and said: with a broad smile, “Good afternoon, just sheltering from the rain, wouldn’t be long now.” I, from an urban culture, was trying to cover my embarrassment, this boldness of running to someone’s house without asking permission, then standing at ease, looking out and in silence as if it were my right.

“Come.....Join us,” one said. Hesitating, I looked at the group. “Come,” hailed another, as he made room in the closed circle. The lady of the house, seeing me, spoke from her open kitchen window. “I will bring another cup of tea,”

And it was there, in quiet tones, I heard the tragic tale of 1964 - the driver of a tractor sitting high, turned its steely sharp blade upon living human forms as if they had already become earth. The horror

directed upon Kowsillia, and the other agricultural labourers, all women, at Leonora plantation, was being re-lived by eye witnesses.

Those peasants, in their telling, had, unknown to me or themselves loosened the pull strings of their home-made cloth bag of memories. What floated from it was the daunting courage of the powerless as they faced the powerful, standing their ground in the knowledge that death awaits them.

The spirit of Kowsillia left the circle, for when the rain stopped and I walked the road, she walked beside me leading my steps to 'For the love of my Name'.

[Reading from 'For the Love of my Name'].

The Alphabet

I would like to turn to the ingenuity, the creative imagination of early man. I refer only to one, of the many fine creations of our Ancient Civilisations which enabled us to progress rapidly. So difficult was this art, that many cultures never attained it, yet today, we expect a six year old child to master it.

For some time, I have been excited by the invention of the alphabet. I marvel at the idea of early man catching a sound – something the eye cannot see, only the ear hears, and then, with artistry, enabling the eye to hear and the ear to see. Reflect on how many sounds there are, and would have been, even in time past; contemplate upon the idea of being able to reproduce them all on a tablet.

Consider the sifting of thousands of sounds until, one arrives at a small number of key-sounds, which can be brought together in any desired combination to open the wished for sounds of the voice – the spoken word, the language or dialect of the time. So well formulated was this art, that it was able to carry concepts and thoughts yet to be born, as man's understanding of his environment and of himself developed.

I refer to this beautiful human ingenuity—the 26 letters of the alphabet. It enabled, the vast accumulation of knowledge to be passed on from one generation to another, so enhancing our thinking and civilisation itself. It even seduced our thoughts to remove their cloaks of invisibility into diaries and letters, further contributing to our understanding of the variety that the word humanity encompasses.

Today, many seven-year olds can read and write as a Mandarin of old, who would have had to dedicate the best 40 years of his life, to master the art of reading and writing the hieroglyphics. It is these creators of the alphabet, from a foreign land, who laid the first foundation stones of our democracy.

In the novel Sastra, the narrator pays homage to the alphabet, as well as to the sacred chants of these formations, not often understood.

[Reading from 'Sastra']

From the Permanent to the Elusive

Many are familiar with Monet's paintings of the ephemeral— sunlight playing upon water lilies—his attempt at netting on to the canvas, the fleeting moment of light as it passes by, at varying times upon a rotating earth.

In this short extract taken from Sastra, another art form is used to hold what is indistinct and equally transitory— a feeling unaccompanied by words—an embryonic thought— fragile as new born wings – it rests and passes without leaving a trace of itself. We have all experienced such a feeling, yet one of its characteristic, is that it cannot be recalled at will. It is as if such feelings rise from a depth of the human spirit, where things are unsullied, true to themselves and return from whence they came, uncompromised by words.

[Reading from 'Sastra']

My Parents

My first novel *Butterfly in the Wind* is in part autobiographical. It is literally true some of the time but psychologically true the whole time.

The chapter called *Fatima Girl's High School* brings me to my parents. To this day, it remains a great regret to me that it was only after my parents died that I realised they were remarkable people for their time and place.

It is with the wisdom of hindsight and the appreciation that comes with understanding a little better, what life is about, that I came to see their quiet, unpretentious ways, their gifts of a secondary and tertiary education showered upon all six of their children. In addition and of equal importance, they gave us a sense of pride in our being and in the philosophy of the inheritance that was brought by their grandparents from India. To do so would have been difficult for they were untutored, not equipped to withstand two highly seductive, compelling forces: the overpowering certainty of muscular Christianity and its missionaries, as well as the enormous arrogance that comes with power, that came with the culture of British colonial rule. Then, the idea— multiculturalism— would have been seen as a special pleading for significance by the weak, the world's poor.

Even at such a time and with the thinking that pervaded it, what my father said to me, what his response was, when a Catholic nun explained at length, that my family and I would burn in hell fire for all eternity unless we became Catholics, is remarkable both for its philosophical sophistication and judgement.

How did simple country folks, who were perceived as illiterates, by the ignorant and the insolent, able to keep their identity, not lose themselves in times past? I believe, it was the quiet doggedness that came to men, who in order to survive must cope with the harsh realities of the vagaries of weather, the sudden invasion of insects, and the destruction of diseases descending on their crops and cattle, that led to an alert, dependable, self reliance of self made men. It is a characteristic of peasants, men and women who laboured and saved, denying themselves basic necessities, in order to purchase land, to own their land, to gain an economic independence from which grows a larger independence of the human spirit.

My parents were children of peasants. The English Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the Peasants' Revolt of 1524-5 in Germany are earlier examples of the courage of that independent spirit. My father's reply was: "Were you to become a Catholic, you would be moving from one form of imperfection to another, your second position may be no improvement on the first. In fact, I suspect it may be worse; for Hinduism is more open; We expect to see Catholics in heaven, they are sure we won't be there."

[Reading from '*Butterfly in the Wind*']

An Enlightenment

There were two surging streams of thought flowing in opposite directions; when the raging force of the waters led to the bursting of their banks, a lake was formed. Raise the Lanterns High, like a lotus lily sits comfortably on that lake.

Today when we think of rational thought – the basis of Western Europe’s growing secularity, we think of Europe’s rationalists— Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. (1596-1650). They believed that knowledge of the world could be gained by reason alone. It was a time when the Church’s authority over thought was loosened and so men with such ideas were able to speak.

In a BBC radio 4 programme, the economist, Amartya Senn, Nobel Laureate, was angry that it was being suggested to him that the West had a monopoly of rational thought. There and then Senn pointed out that “in both Sanskrit and Pali there is a larger atheistic and agnostic literature than in any other classical literature”

Intrigued by this, I went out and discovered the Charvakas, in my local library and the British Library. With the emergence of Hinduism in India, round about 70A.D. there were men and women who for the first time in the history of the world, asserted the complete independence of the human mind and attempted to solve their problems solely by the aid of reason. Like the Buddhists and the Jains, the Charvakas opposed the Brahmin caste system and its ceremonial rites, but they went further still and denied the belief in an after life which is the central core belief of most religions; they also threw out the other beliefs that are dependent upon it — Retribution and Salvation—which are based on an understanding that human consciousness survives death

My first encounter with suttee, an ancient custom no longer practised in India came about once again by chance. I was six years old and there she was, a woman, climbing upon the pyre. She stood tall, the flames engulfed her and I stared and stared, bit my handkerchief, and then when the flames and smoke subsided, she stepped down from the pyre—whole— not a hair singed. As we left the cinema my mother in an effort to ensure that my wayward ways were curbed, seized the opportunity to say, ‘Did you see that when you live a good life, good things happen to you.’ I nodded in full agreement, completely taken in by Sita, the consort of the god Ram of the Ramayana.

As I grew taller, and began to perceive reality without a cinema screen, the old custom of suttee, no longer practised, intrigued me. It was a unique phenomenon. It was applicable only to widows never widowers. But so also was the custom of foot binding in the old China. It was never the male feet that were bound. In West Africa there is still this practice of female mutilation; the burning of witches in Europe from the 15th -17th C, made me ponder on the male equivalent of witches. The word is wizard. They are magicians, men with remarkable powers.

Though the time of suttees have passed, there are families in India, to this day who continue to put to death by fire— young brides. It is known as dowry deaths. From time to time, I would ponder on an ugly way of thinking that has remained with us to this day. Both raging streams of thought, deposited a fertile alluvium. From it grew leaves and petals which opened to become a lotus flower. It is here that Raise the Lanterns High rests.

[Reading from 'Raise the Lanterns High']

Finally...

Henry Miller said that 'Art teaches nothing except the significance of life.' I think Art gives significance to our lives. It enables us to uncover the veils that mask the ugliness of our rulers. We are also better able to see the common bond of all humanity. Art offers us a larger freedom and so helps to strengthen us in a significant way from authoritarian tendencies and the mantras of today's Big Brother.

Amartya Senn also said: 'A sophisticated human being should be able to treat another person well, sympathetically, without actually seeing that person as an extension of himself'. If that day does come to us all, art would have played no small part in its coming.