Migration, Diaspora and Exile: The Writer Survives

Kavery Nambisan

Panel: Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile (II)
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All those who worship that which is not knowledge enter into darkness
Those who delight only in knowledge enter greater darkness.
- The Upanishads (800-400 B.C.)

Our ancestors knew how to bend the meaning of words so you could ponder over them long after they were uttered or read.

Coming from India, where we have 22 major languages, hundreds of dialects, nine religions and 400 million who are illiterate, where the population of 1.2 billion makes it necessary for people of all classes to be migrant laborers within their own country, I see this topic quite differently. I have been a migrant laborer through my entire medical career. A major portion of what I am is defined by this privileged status.

Can Migration and Exile shape and define the way we write? In India, most young girls migrate when barely out of their teens, or still in their teens. It is common practice for a girl’s marriage to be arranged to a man she has not seen. In the process, she gives up her home, and her name. Not just the surname but in some communities like mine, even the first name. Just like that, overnight, she is a different person with different people in a different place. Normally, an Indian woman does not lose her composure or fret about this dislocation. She adjusts. In India, we are very used to ‘adjusting.’ Shift a little…adjust. The young girl who, until her marriage, is controlled by her father will now be controlled by her husband. A little adjustment.

This life of dislocation and adjustment has produced some very good literature in India. In Mahabharata, which is perhaps our best-loved epic, Gandhari, a young girl of noble birth marries Prince Dhritharashtra. Traveling in a palanquin for several days to reach the palace of her groom, the bride is eager with excitement. During the wedding ceremony she learns that her groom is a blind man. Gandhari picks up a scarf, blindfolds herself and remains blind for the rest of her life. This royal couple raised a hundred sons who became the main perpetrators of the battle of Mahabharata. Gandhari was regarded as a woman of virtue and self-sacrifice for foregoing the gift of
sight in sympathy to her husband. But just before her death she reveals the truth: her blindfolding was a statement of anger and rage at being cheated.

I tell this story to demonstrate how the emotional scale of the human heart oscillates. Our actions are not always what they seem. Our lives and the lives of those around us are not always what they appear to be. On this fertile ground of illusions, unrealized truths and tensions of everyday life, literature is built.

I belong to a small tribal community in southern India, a martial race of hunters and ancestor worshippers. Our people have retained their unique methods of worship and festivity in spite of being Hinduized in the 17th century as a result of invasions. We speak a local dialect. In school we learn Kannada, one of the major south Indian languages. As a child, I read avidly in Kannada. The back issues of a children’s magazine, which an uncle brought home in stacks, were my first introduction to the Arabian nights, the Greek Legends and parables from the Old Testament. It is believed in our part of the world that if a pregnant woman reads good texts, the child will be blessed with wisdom. I don’t know what my mother read when she carried me. When she was carrying my younger brother, she had to read seven cloth-bound volumes of The Ramayana. I read them along with her and tasted literature for the first time.

Then my father moved to Delhi on work and I had to learn English and Hindi at the age of twelve. Deprived of Kannada, I turned to these new tongues. My library was the single bookshelf of my politician father, but there too I found books, autobiographies, military tales and some fiction. One of the earliest adult books I read was the English translation of Doctor Zhivago. I don’t know how much I understood then, but remember being fascinated by a single phrase in the novel: “flying shirts and pink bottoms.” I wanted to know more about flying shirts and pink bottoms and therefore I read.

After my medical degree and then my surgical training in England, I went back to India and worked in different parts of the country. I had to learn the language or the dialect of my patients in order to communicate. So that was another three languages. I married, and wow – my husband spoke yet another language.
Which language should I write in? Thanks to my migratory tendencies, I have many tongues swirling in my brain. I think and dream in many languages and dialects. I must choose my medium, just as I choose my profession or vocation or husband. I want that decision to be mine. My method is to think in the language of the character I’m writing about and then translate it in my head into English, which, since it isn’t my Mother Tongue, is perhaps my Father Tongue, the tongue which enables me to communicate with more readers while retaining my very Indian thoughts.

I am skeptical about the very concept of nationhood, which, like religion, like the color of my skin, is a mere accident of birth.

Here’s what Buddha said 2600 years ago:

In the sky there is no distinction between East and West; people create distinctions out of their own minds and then believe them to be true.

So it is with nations. It is not a writer’s business to bad-mouth his country or to showcase it to the world. His only business is to showcase truth. We live in difficult times, when the purity of prose is hijacked by ad-men with jargon and by politicians with more jargon and platitudes. This is serious, because through jargon and platitudes, truth is distorted, so much so that on one extreme we have terror being waged in the name of God and on the other, countries being invaded in the name of peace. In both cases, the innocent become victims. E.M. Forster refers to the contamination of language in his essay about George Orwell. (Recall the double-speak in Animal Farm or 1984 and you can see how it happens):

If prose decays, thought decays and all the finer roads of communication are broken. Liberty is connected with prose, and bureaucrats who want to destroy liberty tend to write and speak badly, and to use pompous or woolly or portmanteau phrases in which their true meaning or any meaning disappears. (It is the duty of the citizen, particularly writer, to be on the lookout for such phrases or words and to rend them to pieces.)
For the writer in me, two aspects of migration are important. There are two types of migrants. One is the group of educated individuals, myself included, who leave their place of origin and move elsewhere, not because our survival is threatened but because we’re confident that our attributes will be recognized and appreciated elsewhere. But a much larger number are forced to uproot for survival and move to unknown places. Hungry stomachs can travel great distances and withstand extreme privation. Their reality is harsh. A contractor or an agent takes them to the Promised Land of work and livelihood. Trustingly they go, and then find themselves in a place where they do not understand the language or the customs, where they must work excruciatingly long hours and accept whatever money the contractor gives them. There is no healthcare, no education, no shelter except what they can pull over their heads from littered scrap, the residue of the houses they build for us to live in, the roads, the bridges, the drains and sewers. They are the powerless and the voiceless. Who will speak for them?

For a writer, the physical pains of migration are very real, but they may or may not be crucial to writing. Last month, at a reading in Pittsburgh, I met the Chinese poet Huang Xiang, who escaped from his country following imprisonment and torture. Pittsburgh gave him a home, a Pittsburgh surgeon operated on the wounds on his face inflicted in prisons so he could speak normally again. Huang Xiang speaks no English, not a word. He may not even be able to return to his country. But he continues to write.

James Joyce famously said that the three essentials for a writer are Silence, Exile and Cunning. We know what he means by exile, that self-imposed exile, the flight of thought which allows men and women to produce literature and art even when they are shackled, whether by custom, tradition, law, tyranny, or a well-meaning society.

For every writer there has to be a self-imposed exile from the tug and pull of living, but not from life. According to the Indian tradition, there is a very interesting journey between the mind and the soul (the man and the athman). The mind/man is that with which we perceive the outer world through our senses: through touch, sound, sight, taste and smell. When we are able to understand and use the knowledge received in this way, we gain intellect or budhi. If this intellect/budhi is used in the best possible way, we reach a higher sense of awareness or consciousness, called chith, which is
akin to wisdom. A wise being can, with practice, gain spirituality – that is, can be in touch with the innermost, the soul or *ātman*. The *ātman* is a part of the Universal and Eternal: the *Paramātman*. When that ultimate is reached, God and Man become one continuous whole.

Human emotions move like a wave across this distance between mind and spirit. Many great writers have a sense of the spiritual. A self-imposed exile which reaches inward is a way of communicating with oneself, in order to better communicate with the world.

But even having distilled every migratory experience, a writer does not lose rootedness. The problem is that, for some, it can be confusing to know where this rootedness is. The mind of a writer imbibes, chews, digests and discards experience. A writer travels in her imagination. Can there be a greater freedom than this? As long as the heart has a fixed point of departure and arrival, no matter where one’s physical presence is, the writer survives.