The View from Elsewhere

Fiji

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In his extraordinary confessional narrative “Prologue to an Autobiography” in Finding the Centre: Two Narratives, V.S. Naipaul writes that from Bogart, his first character (in Miguel Street), he got his gift of a vocation to be a writer:

And it was that fear, a panic about failing to be what I should be, rather than simple ambition, that was with me when I came down to Oxford in 1954 and began trying to write in London. My father had died the previous year. Our family was in distress. I should have done something for them, gone back to them. But, without having become a writer, I couldn’t go back. In my eleventh month in London I wrote my book, about Bogart. I wrote my book; I wrote another. I began to go back.¹

In this passage, Naipaul captures the essence of the Indian diasporic writers’ narrative, which is created out of the dislocated psyche of the twice-banished in the indenture experience of one hundred years of servitude. Indenture was, to many, a new system of slavery with an expiry date. And peasants were cozened, recruited, and transported to many parts of the British Empire as girmityas. Mohandas Gandhi grew up among them in Natal, South Africa.

Going back into one’s self, family, relationships or country, and the search for a habitus, history, and home, are the multiple themes and realities of our lives that intersect daily. It is only now that many of us are beginning to understand how that intertwines with the destiny and destinations of people in other places. Writers’ going back is also contingent on how they were first forced out into exilic archipelagoes of peoples. This deepening awareness adds an edge of grief to our daily existence, grief so common that you see it in the trembling of a sugar-cane leaf. It keeps flowing like some subterranean stream. Then one

clings to remembered relationships for support, sustenance, reassurance, and resources one does not quite possess in a dispossessed situation.

The body of the other becomes your surrogate country; a country snatched away under the excuse of indigeneity, more truthfully for brute power and racial politics of the postcolonial kind, without kindness. It is really power without responsibility to other lives. The writer then clutches at sounds; having lost the sounds of his childhood, he clings to the voices of his children, and their new friends, their songs, goodbyes, and quarrels. Then – when the curtain is drawn and the autumn sunlight fills the room and you see a rose blooming from a twig you had planted last year, a magpie fluttering its wing on the iron balustrade, complaining in the cul-de-sac that defines your pre-fabricated, mortgaged home – a sense of belonging returns in small fragments, like drops of blood from a drip.

I am often told in Canberra that I am in a better place, but how can I explain to well-meaning friends that the people of Fiji, now scattered in many parts of the world, are all in search of a home? Even an exile has a country to be exiled from. Fijian Indians don’t have the luxury; they are always on the broken road, traversed by their *girmit* ancestors, who were cruelly defined in colonial terms as coolies; they were not conquerors. They will build better houses and live more comfortably than Mr Mohun Biswas, but how will they carry the dust of burial or the ashes of cremation of their parents or grandparents? A house is not the country of one’s birth; it is the garment but not the body of human breath. All they often carry is their children’s plastic toys in battered and borrowed suitcases; what they cannot regain is the soil that they dug, or the trees they planted, the piece of earth they played on, or the streams they swam in. The memories are multitudinous and the losses of a place are unnumbered.

This rupture happened in Fiji in the two dramatic coups in 1987 staged by an indigenous colonel.

Writing, then, is your inner hope, even when one is writing about despair. Often it is other lives that affirm your existence, whether they are your neighbours or characters from some old story. An occasional thought, a remembered touch, an imagined memory, all fall into the sentences and paragraphs, the structures of reality, that we build with the bricks of words. It is in the act of writing that one really finds the depth of one’s honesty, the limitations of one’s version of truth. Writing can be as lyrical as love-making and equally painful in its utter nakedness.

I’m personally sceptical of words like ‘truth’ and ‘nation’ in literature: they are the mammoth monoliths that dominate and dissect our lives and often even displace us. The writer in my mind must be seen to be nibbling at these