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Politics into Economics Don't Go

Akash Kapur on the pitfalls and politics of diasporic writing.

Once upon a time, diasporic literature was political literature, our interest in it focused, as Joseph Brodsky said by 'the rise of tyrannies' and our engagement in the Cold War. Today, the collapse of old political certainties has fundamentally altered the debate over immigration and the significance of immigrant literature.

Amid all the rhetoric over cultural homogeneity and collapsing welfare systems, it's easy to forget that the debate on immigration was once driven by geopolitical considerations. Today, the West's attitude to immigration is insular, expressed as a provincial fear of the outside world; but for much of the late twentieth century, the politics of immigration was a window onto that world, a sign of the West's inextricable - if often misguided - engagement with lives and events beyond its borders. Refugees from behind the Iron Curtain were fleeing a tyranny that threatened us all. Immigrants from the former colonies, while received less enthusiastically, were nonetheless reminders of a common history, of imperial entanglements that were not so easily disentangled.

Perhaps inevitably, the literature produced by these immigrants was invested with an often obfuscatory symbolism. A generation of writers who had little in common other than their non-westerness were conflated under the rubric of post-coloniality; authors as varied as Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott and Chinua Achebe were grouped together, their wildly varying uses of the English language reduced to the slogan of 'empire writing back'. Writers from the communist world likewise became tokens of freedom and democracy. When, in 1980, the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz was awarded the Nobel Prize, art was demoted to *témoignage*, Milosz' historical chronicling garnering at least as much attention as his metaphysical poetry.

Diasporic literature was political literature; in 1987, Joseph Brodsky, also a Nobel laureate and also an often reluctant ambassador for warring cold war ideologies, made explicit the equation, telling an audience in Vienna that 'the current interest in the literature of exiles has to do, of course, with the rise of tyrannies.'

Today, Brodsky's remark seems positively quaint. The collapse of old political certainties has fundamentally altered the debate over immigration and, with it, the significance of immigrant literature. Abdulrazak Gurnah, himself an emigrant to England in the 1960s, captures some of this shifting landscape in

his last book, *By the Sea*, a novel of multiple journeys and exiles. Latif Mahmud, one of Gurnah's narrators, follows a previously common trajectory, escaping on a communist scholarship from Africa to East Germany sometime during the Cold War; he then jumps ship and escapes to England, where he is welcomed by a government eager to score propaganda points, sharing coffee and sandwiches with the harbour policeman who finds him. Decades later, Omar Saleh, Gurnah's primary narrator, flees imprisonment and torture in the same country as Mahmud, but receives an altogether less friendly reception in England: berated and humiliated by an immigration officer at Gatwick, he is locked up in an immigrant detention centre, enacting the sad prison-to-prison trajectory that has become the plight of so many refugees to the West today.

The irony of Saleh's reception is that he, much more so than Mahmud, who is clothed and fed by the East Germans, fits the bill of a political refugee. Now, however, the distant rumblings of African political upheaval no longer carry much significance in the West. Immigrants like Saleh are escaping local, not global, tyranny; the only thing they represent to the West is danger, a threat to cozy post-cold-war prosperity. 'This asylum business ... is really just looking for jobs and prosperity in Europe,' says the immigration officer, in disgust. 'There is nothing moral in it, just greed.' It's a self-righteous line we read every day in the tabloids, and it suggests the extent to which the political narratives of immigration have been replaced by economic narratives. It no longer really matters whether a refugee is friend or foe; ideological considerations are bit players in the drama of asylum, and today what really matters is whether an outsider is rich or poor, whether he will top up the state's coffers, or sponge off of it. (Sometimes, of course, these economic considerations masquerade as cultural concerns. But it's telling that, in their attempts to solve the 'problem of immigration', European governments have been moving toward a North American system, in which doors are opened to immigrants with certain skills and income levels).

Predictably, the new narratives of immigration have attached themselves to diasporic writing, filtering what the West reads, and how it reads it. Immigrant writers today tell us very little about politics or 'tyrannies'; they are emblems, rather, of a new economic order and, in particular, of a new cosmopolitan class that has emerged triumphant from that order. The rise of South Asian writing - probably the most flourishing and readily identifiable diasporic school of writing to have emerged post-1989 - is a prime example. Insofar as South Asian writers today do indeed constitute a diaspora, they do so not because they are exiles, banished from their homes, but because they possess the financial means and cultural vocabulary to have two homes. VS Naipaul has written that RK Narayan worked in a vacuum, without the comfort of history or literary tradition; much the same could be said of Naipaul's early struggle to find his voice, but one would be hard-pressed to say it of today's post-colonial authors, who confidently occupy a terrain charted by the rise of global capitalism and culture. Culture brokers rather than culturally marginal, they display none of the tortured relationship to home evident in the works of writers like Naipaul and Walcott; nor is one likely to find the poignant sense of estrangement, of writing in a foreign language for a foreign audience, that populated the writings of disinherited communists like Milosz and Brodsky.

The problem with the predominance of cosmopolitan diasporic writing does not lie in the familiar charge of inauthenticity: cultural heterogeneity is an undeniable post-colonial (and, indeed, western) reality, and multicultural literature is giving voice to a very real condition of our times. The problem, rather, is in the absence of that other diasporic voice, in the silencing of the

men and women who arrive in Europe not safely buckled into their seats, but clinging frozen to the undercarriage of aeroplanes and trains, or suffocated in the backs of lorries and vans. If immigrants are today a window onto global economics rather than global politics, then the literature of immigration is a window only onto the sunny side of the new economic order—a happy (and, for the West, self-congratulatory) literature of Video Nights in Kathmandu and Global Souls that comforts with its false promises of converging living standards and common culture.

This silencing of the diasporic underclass may be unavoidable: literature is, after all, a luxury. Perhaps, too, an alternative literature may develop over time: immigrant populations take years, even decades, to form new communities and communal voices. But if such voices do develop, what story will they tell the West? As anthropologists know very well, all ethnography is a form of autobiography, the fascination of the genre lying as much in what it tells us about the other as it does about ourselves. In a marketplace where diasporic literature is still read (and certainly promoted) primarily as ethnography, it's not very clear what light tales of immigrant hardship can shed on the West's knowledge of itself. Cosmopolitan writers—and their so-called chutnified literatures—speak to the West of a world it understands, and of values it shares. The current interest in diasporic literature, we might say some fifteen years after Brodsky, had to do with the (perceived) end of tyranny and the (once again perceived) rise of global democratic capitalism. This provinciality in reading tastes has much in common, of course, with the general insularity of Western immigration policy—except that while the latter is motivated by fear (by the imperative of keeping out what Robert Kaplan has notoriously called 'the coming anarchy'), the former is motivated by an impulse far more banal: boredom, a lack of interest in anything that is not about ourselves.

It's possible that the events of 11 September may change some of this. Certainly, the war on terrorism has reintroduced into our political lexicon the all-encompassing –and brutally simplifying– narrative previously provided by the Cold War. Literature from the Islamic world will never be read in the same way. Nor, post-Afghanistan, can those distant broken states ever seem quite so remote and tangential to the West again. It may be that out of this enforced banishment from insularity a more global (which is to say representative) diasporic literature will develop. But until then, the literature of emigrants continues to be a literature about ourselves, the diasporas we know only the diasporas we want to know.

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