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# The Bottle Imp

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**An *Émigré* at Home**  
**Bashabi Fraser**

I started writing poetry in London when I was seven and I wrote for my parents' friend, the writer and academic, Julian Dakin, who bought me books which we read together. Julian entered my first poems for the Commonwealth Scholar Prize which I won, but did not understand the implications of then. Ours was the only non-English family on the street we lived in in Barnes, and as my parents were away most of the day as researchers at LSE, I was with my English friends, swinging in their back gardens and very much at home, mixing cake with their mothers in their kitchens after school. The idea of being part of the Commonwealth struck me when I first came to study in Edinburgh University and a leaflet appeared under my door, telling me I could vote as a Commonwealth citizen!

The reappraisal of existing perspectives that postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Terry Eagleton burgeoned, deconstructing and challenging the idea of representation and perspective in their postcolonial analysis of a literature of resistance, has influenced my own positioning of myself from a Commonwealth citizen to a transnational writer and postcolonial academic in a now devolved Scotland.

The anthology, *Wish I Was Here* (2000) was groundbreaking as it showed how many Scottish poets have dual identities like New Zealand/Shetland/Nigeria/India/Pakistan and Scotland, to mention a few. The anthology, *Scotlands: Poets and the Nation* (2004) widened its boundaries as it anthologised some poems by 'New Scots' with mainstream Scottish writers, in a positive step towards recognizing the reality of Scottish multi-ethnic literature which has been enriched by fresh 'voices' of diasporic groups who have made their way to Scotland from lands where once Scots had

worked, married, lived and where many had unfortunately died and lie buried. While *The Redbeck Anthology of British South Asian Poetry* (2000) fulfilled a much needed task of a consolidated compilation of diasporic writers from the sub-continent, it needs to be followed up with another volume including unrecorded voices of poets who have been writing then and continue publishing, in order to have a fair body of representation from Scotland.

'Race' with its suggestion of the essentialist/purist has been continuously challenged by the global reality of the demographics of migration, transnational journeys, resettlement, intercultural marriage, mixed race children and naturalised citizens, giving rise to pluralist societies in a globalised world. On the sub-continent the dominant 'brown' population subverts all constructs of distinctive racial characteristics in the evident intermingling of 'racial' groups. In view of earlier perceptions/representations of easterners, Paul Gilroy asserts that 'The old racial myths of Asian passivity, homogeneity and cerebral malevolence have been laid to welcome rest. The burial of the orientalist baggage has taken place amidst a comprehensive exploration of the identities, histories and memories which might define the boundaries of newly emergent ethno-political communities that are understandably ambivalent about locating themselves inside the discourse of raciality if they have a chance to escape it'.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the reality is of metropolises as multiethnic spaces where interaction and interchange between different groups become inevitable and Scotland is no exception. Reading Bashir Maan's 1992 social history of *The New Scots*, one realizes that it is not just *The Story of Asians in Scotland* as the sub-title suggests, but one that looks at Irish, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish or Jewish Scots, Scots who were in India and who brought an 'elsewhere' back with them to Scotland. So when Scottish society was augmented by people 'of colour' from the sub-continent, from west Asian countries, North Africa and South East Asia and China, it was already a mixture of ethnic identities which were slowly being assimilated in the tartan fabric, while adding to and retaining some lines of their identity in the blend that is Scotland today. As David McCrone says, 'States have several nations within them. They are multi-ethnic states'.<sup>2</sup>

For me, it is problematic to consider myself part of an 'ethnic minority' in Scotland where I live now, since I am continuously aware that I am from a country with over 1 billion people

and a sizable diaspora which connects me to one of the world's largest group of people in a world of seven billion. Indian economic growth and colonial links with Britain account for a strengthening of trade and investment links, renewing if not continuing an interest in this socio-historic association in educational and cultural partnerships today. Moreover, coming from a truly multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious country, multiculturalism is my cultural heritage as I have lived it in spite of violent ruptures along communal lines. 'Saskia Sasen [...] places the study of transnational migrants in a kind of mutual interaction with attempts to understand global structures, national politics and international economics'.<sup>3</sup> I now feel the pulse of a new confidence in India's huge middle class and travelling IT personnel who have no wish to settle in the west but are happy to pick up their bags and move on to where their skills are needed. Witnessing this new breed from my birthplace with their globalised confidence and footloose existence and the counter-migration of Scots who now take up jobs in India's big cities like Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi and Kolkata, diaspora takes on a wider dimension of a scattering of people who cross and re-cross borders as transnational citizens of the 21st century.

As Tom Devine said when introducing his new book, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora* at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in August 2011, Scots have always been a 'restless nation', which drove them to settle in settler colonies in the USA, Canada, the Antipodes and also in Europe, and to travel to colonies to work, marry, live and create a 'home'.<sup>4</sup> They crossed and re-crossed borders with ease, being transnational citizens, who maintained a network with Scots at home and abroad. It is inevitable that the transnational Scot has informed Scottish literature and the community it reflects in Scotland and in diasporic Scottish literature, e.g., in Robert Louis Stevenson's work, in writers like Andrew Greig, David Greig, Megan Delahunt, Angus Calder and Alexander McCall Smith or writers who continue to live elsewhere, like Kenneth Whyte and William Dalrymple. The Scots took Scotland with them when they travelled, worked or settled 'elsewhere', and brought the 'elsewhere' back with them when many returned, especially the colonial workers, wives and children and the discontented would-be settlers. In an unpublished paper, presented at an Edinburgh Napier University seminar, Scott Lyall said 'in Scotland, especially throughout the twentieth

century, it could be argued that culture, particularly literary culture, attempted to fill the gaps, plug the holes in an absent national community, and that indeed, culture has preceded and informed politics on what the practice of that community might actually look like'.<sup>5</sup> Lyall shows how MacDiarmid plays a central role in forming/framing this literary community in Scotland. My first poetry collection was published in Scotland at the end of the twentieth century, and was launched to mark the fiftieth independence of India at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, where the 1997 edition of the poetry journal *Lines* was launched, featuring five poets of the South Asian diaspora, living and writing in Britain. These poets, like me, had crossed and re-crossed nation-state boundaries with the ease that comes from the confidence of cosmopolitanism.

I feel very much part of this transnational community of writers, who think global while they act local, whose border crossings have only made them aware of the Scottish reality as part of a greater reality, as their vision and perspective push and challenge a horizon that refuses to be bounded by the kailyard.

So where do I see myself as a transnational writer living in Scotland?

My two nations have lived with me whenever I have travelled between them, as my research and writing, both academic and creative, combine and cover the socio-cultural historical links in books whose titles reflect my diasporic interests, *A Meeting of Two Minds: the Geddes-Tagore Correspondence*; *Rainbow World: Poems from Several Cultures*; *Tartan & Turban*; *From the Ganga to the Tay*; *Scots Beneath the Banyan Tree: Stories from Bengal* and *The Broon Scots* (the last two in press). My first children's books combine two traditions, that of Lewis Carroll and Sukumar Ray (the father of the Oscar winning Indian film director, Satyajit Ray) in their storytelling methods and mixture of verse and prose. Much of my writing is about explaining one nation to another. So when I encountered the 'silence' round the Bengal Partition in the west, I felt the need to fill this 'gap' that existed in the memory/knowledge of those who were unaware of the eastern border in a book which analyses the events in Bengal that led to the Indian Partition in an edited volume of translated Bengal Partition Stories from both sides of the border which shows the relevance of Partition today.

However, who you are depends greatly on how you are perceived by others. In India I have been considered westernised, while

in Scotland I am the 'exotic' easterner. Here where an unpredictable weather pre-empts my effort to wear a sari with dignity against a wind that threatens to unwind it with 'outraged fury', I have stuck to practical attire:

I have swathed my femininity in denims and coat  
My tresses held back by a tea-cosy hat  
In a crowd I know I always stand out  
In spite of my accent and tartaned format.

I continue to 'stand out' as I live 'between my two worlds':

Carrying deep longings  
When I was away  
To be enfolded in India  
In its rich living spree  
Yet turning to Britain  
In my memory

as I travel between them. I have studied and teach English Literature, my research project is on the personal narratives of Scots in India and I am involved in establishing the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs) at the University where I teach English and Creative Writing. The idea is to create a platform for Scottish-Indian partnership programmes round the figurehead of Tagore and his circle of luminaries like Patrick Geddes, the Scottish polymath.

I feel I am not alone as I follow the modernist tradition of the émigré writer who lives and writes in cities away from home. The salient point here is that I don't feel an outsider. I have entered the Third Space and since I encountered the west at a formative age in its own territory and then went to a very British boarding school in the Himalayas, I have never felt a clash of cultures. It has been an unconscious assimilation and association, a love affair with literature in English that has fostered this sense of always being in my own comfort zone. First-hand knowledge of Bengali and Hindi literature has only enriched my understanding of form and the dialectics of social narratives which inform my writing and living now in a country with three languages (Scots, Gaelic and English) it seems only a microcosm of my own multi-lingual heritage, which I feel at home in.

Sometimes there is sense of disorientation which reconfirms my transnational positioning, subsuming the 'here' and 'there' in parallels and analogies rather than in disquieting differences:

as the sea sound in a seashell:-  
... makes me understand  
That it carries  
the same sea music  
In it hollow  
Which I had heard in Goa.  
And it has followed  
Me here.

In a poem, 'The Homing Bird', commissioned by Scottish PEN for a CD entitled *Departures and Arrivals*, to mark the Year of the Homecoming in Scotland in 2009, I devote Part I to Kolkata in which the refrain is 'Kolkata do you remember; Kolkata do you miss me?' Part II is addressed to Edinburgh, where I ask, 'Edinburgh, do you accept me?' And I think the Scottish nation has answered my question as I continue to interact with the writing community here and look forward to more Scottish anthologies reflecting its 'new voices'.

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### Notes

- 1 Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (Routledge, 1987; this edn 2002) pp. xiii-xiv.
- 2 Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone eds., *National Identity, Nationalism and Constitutional Change* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) p.3.
- 3 Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (Routledge, 2009) p.31.
- 4 Tom Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth: Scotland's Global Diaspora* (Penguin Allen Lane, 2011)
- 5 Scott Lyall, "Hugh MacDiarmid and the Limits of Community", p. 1.



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