

A Room to Write: End of Life without Fiction

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Call this piece a parable. It could be read as a story of how the writing self comes into being, or as the birth of literary life in a small corner of Oceania. Expressed in more grandiloquent terms, it may be interpreted as the story of an alternative vision of work and labour entering the consciousness of an isolated community whose bodies had been employed essentially to fuel the colonial economy. Now that can immediately create certain ambiguity and expectations of the essay. It might be assumed that there will be much theorizing and history. However there is nothing consistent or comprehensive about this piece. It is just selective bits of observations, perceptions and revelations. Mostly it is about trying to be a writer in colonial and post-independent Fiji.

In the language of parables, one might say the boy protagonist in the interior monologue of the early part of this essay is accorded the subversive function of interrogating his community's idea of itself. The moment this piece attempts to record is the initial promptings of the creative spirit struggling out of the machinery of the colonial market operated by the CSR, the community's ruler, Government and benefactor. In the cultural life of the community, the creative spirit that flashed in the form of a couple of narrative tracts during plantation history, now starts to establish itself more securely signalling the end of years of silence—the end of life without written fiction.

Such parables, for archetypal reasons, fall into four parts. In keeping with the fortuitous meandering in this essay, all parts aren't accorded equal focus. The first part of the parable is the child's misadventures while seeking a room for his imagination in a confined world. The second part is about golf and movies. The boy in the parable is temporarily distracted by a vision of triumphantly knocking the tiny white ball into a hole, in the sumptuous pastoral setting next to his house, to a chorus of applause from the villagers in the background. In this part also the boy is attracted to the movies and is hooked.

There are more digressions in the next part where the young would-

be writer procrastinates, romantically waits for the Muse to set words into life, and hopes that he will be known for the unborn book in his imagination. Writing as a habit eludes him for a long time as he finds himself frequently on the wrong road, and gradually starts to accept that in all likelihood he will end up as a venerable teacher of language and writing. For the purpose of this story, this paper is greatly edited and many details erased.

In the final part, the would-be writer finds himself in a roomful of writers. He fraternizes with them and draws support from them for his creative ambition.

This is one version of a writer's beginning in Oceania; other versions can be fabricated with many variations and embellishments. In all versions, whatever the creative path, a significant fact about emergence of writing in Oceania is that it generated an energy larger than that which already existed. New ways of seeing and feeling came into existence; at the same time it fostered the gathering of ideas and visions in one place that posed a challenge to the existing epistemologies and sensibilities.

One has to admit that writing of such a parable has its own narcissistic side, and also its value. This version begins with the child artist feeling the first stirring of the inventive force, and discovering that there is no room to write in his house. His house is a forgotten godown—unfinished, solitary, and empty of any furnishing—situated next to the sugar mill workers' camp; it is neither a part of the colony of barracks nor the newly strapped mud and thatch houses. It's a dwelling for a family of eight, and for the boy a warehouse to dream in. He does nightshift under a mosquito net, curled in front of a hurricane lamp with his books. This is the beginning of his life as a reader. Every night after the mosquito net is rolled down blocking out the colonies of sounds: snoring of sleepers, barking of dogs, whispering of prowlers, clanging of machinery in the sugar mill, chug-chugging of train—blocking out also from the boy's mind the emaciated faces of men and women, their stories of indignities, disease and death, and all the bad times ahead of them—the boy makes his imaginary journeys, his imagination becoming the room through which various worlds enter from many directions.

There aren't any users of books in the colony that the freed labourers refer nostalgically as 'the village'. The boy realizes that if you are interested in books you will find them in unexpected places. His search in the village leads him to various religious tracts, texts on the occult and Black Magic, popular fiction and treatises on sex—books that travelled in ragged bundles across the Black Waters. In a deracinated world, a book, any book, meant to him the possession of a brighter, happier world. He

develops the habit of holding a book like holding the hand of a companion. Books keep him buoyed so positively that neither poverty nor sadness or bad times can sink him completely. Seeking happiness in imaginary worlds takes him away from the confined and impoverished world of his family, and they make him dream of serving humanity or a higher purpose and the possibility of an exalted life.

The boy's appetite for books grows when his father starts to bring home rejected novels from the bungalows, where he is a cook and a gardener; mostly books with forgettable titles. These books have the appearance of having been salvaged from fire and water. The moth-eaten ones have neat cracks and holes in the pages that the boy fills with his own words. Although he could decipher only a fraction of the written words, and tiny bits of the story with strong emotional appeal, he pieces them together, at the edge of sleep, into a ragged narrative.

From one shaggy parcel, his father pulls out a book with a loose spine and urges his son to read to him. The book, translated from the Italian into English, is a novella of raunchy tales. The old man, who knows Malayalam and no English, greatly approves the boy's reading ability. Looking at his father's face, he senses that he is being prepared for something elevated, and secretly convinces himself that his father feeds him books because he wants him to be a writer.

There are other publications in the bundle his father brings—gold-edged and precious-looking, which the old man stores in a wooden trunk like real gold for the future. The old trunk is secured and pushed under the bed as an extra precaution. After his death, the trunk is brought out from under the bed; the boy eagerly opens the parcel of books and discovers they're only a set of the National Geographic.

His father leaves behind his own books, smelling of camphor and carrying stains of turmeric and vermillion, wrapped in a piece of orange cloth. To his shame, he makes no effort to learn his father's language. The old man is able to read and write, therefore could have been a Malayalee Brahmin—the disgrace of indenture is written all over his face. He is an awful misfit in plantation life; he easily develops calluses in his hands and feet, and that is why he is sent to the bungalows to cook and take care of the gardens. The boy doesn't know his father well and his father dies.

Obviously the old man didn't want his son to become a mill worker or a peasant. He fed him books, as if nurturing him for a vocation in the larger world, but actually making him unfit like himself to handle the everyday things of this world. The boy has the satisfaction of feeling his father is promoting the artist in him. He inherits his father's reverence for

books and also his air of detachment. Books are to them other worlds and they facilitate, in that constricted place, the cross-over to the larger universe. Exiled from his home and his language, his father, it would seem, lived mostly in his memory, and the boy in his imagination.

Books gave the boy the space to nurture his discontents and cultivate a way of perceiving that is different from those around him. All the fictional possibilities increased his awareness of an alternative way of being in the world. He plays the child philosopher in the village, and naturally the villagers, starting their history in deprivation and oppression, regard the self-absorbed boy who has his head in another zone, with impatience and certain amount of disdain. The little anarchist ought to be reading religious books, and if he really wanted something deep let him tackle the ancient texts, the *Puranas* for instance, instead of wasting his time on romantic novels and comic books. And he should learn to fix a few things around his house, specially the roof of his house that has been leaking forever. What does this smug-faced imposter know that we don't know? The boy explains to them, foolishly displaying adult-like intelligence, employing fake erudition, the tragedy and sorrow of lost history and erasures that occur when no record is kept. Moreover things that you don't seek remains buried forever, and every community has a buried life, and it is his responsibility, as a would-be-writer, to excavate the buried life of his community. He did not understand the full sense of that thought; it was a vague idea he had picked up from an otherwise useless book his father had brought from a garbage heap.

Clearly his father doesn't have a clear notion of what the boy is meant to be. Nonetheless his difference is nurtured. Later he develops this image of his mother and five sisters huddled together exchanging reminiscences, and one of the recurring subjects is how the boy was given to them after repeated pleadings to the Higher Authorities. He is a revered presence in the house—someone who is never referred to by his name—and he, on his part, readily embraces the myth of his difference (it is genuine difference plus vanity), and cultivates the air of the unaffiliated. His is not an overpowering or demanding family but one that shows respect and leaves him free to find his own way. Their affection doesn't place any conditions upon him. He starts to live what he is perceived to be (not understanding the mythologies but believing in them anyway has been part of his inheritance). He derives egotistical pleasure in the pampering and idolizing which perversely hastens his drifting away from his family for something he vaguely treats as more elevated.

Can the boy be called a writer without having written a book? At high school he writes his composition without any reference to the as-

signed topic, practicing his own brand of aestheticism. The English teacher, who wants a straightforward essay, isn't too impressed. Not to be deterred in his ambition he fills up a whole exercise book that he regards as his first novel, this time written in his mother tongue. Set in an alien and faraway place, the story has nothing of the world around him. The narrative has fragments that filtered into his imagination from books he had read. To find his way back into the familiar world of daily existence he had to wait for the right books, and that visit to the room full of writers.

The Hindi teacher, less decisively discouraging, puts a tick in red in the margin of the final page of the narrative.

Many decades later he tries to retrieve that story for his novel but it's lost forever; what remains though is the language that he reinvents for his purpose. Even at this early stage, he subconsciously understood that things do get lost in translation. The English language, the great gift of the Empire, was useful for maintaining distance, for irony, but not useful for intimacy and local brand of humour.

The boy realizes school is a dangerous place for someone who aims to be a writer. You could easily enter the wrong room, and be directed to knock the wrong door to discuss your future. He is glad he has no career's master who would assign a rational path for him. Most of his peers are aiming for medicine and law; these pursuits, the boy is counselled, are beyond him as he does not have the means but there are scholarships for dentistry if he is interested. He shakes his head vigorously. Someone wants to be an engineer, and is cheered. He closes his eyes and imagines the applause is for him, the writer. The class teacher gets him to put down on paper what he wants to be and why. He writes in a deft clerkly hand, which the master approves, but he isn't going to be a clerk; he would never be able to manage other people's business.

It is risky to say you were going to be a writer. It would be regarded as living up his image of cleverness, to be promptly dismissed as conceit. His peers too would see him as an imposter: what do you think you're Shakespeare or something? To that he would reply (the repartee is all in his head, of course), No, not Shakespeare, just Jane Austen. He expects more sneering remarks. Come on, he wants to say to them, corner me, knee me from the back, punch me in the bicep. They do no such thing, just ignore him, let him live his image of cleverness and play bookishness.

The piece of pastoral next to his house is the golf land. The boy philosopher uses this idyllic creation for wandering and reflection with a book in his hand. It's a perfect colonial set up—the players come down

the bungalows with their clubs, and the barracks supply the caddie brigade. On a glorious Saturday afternoon, the boy is reclined under the shade of a palm tree with his book. What he is reading is not certain. Let's say it is *Great Expectations*. A red-faced, angry-looking golfer (obviously a sugar mill overseer) approaches the boy. The boy is not able to figure out why the golfer is annoyed: either he is playing badly, or he's unhappy the boy is using the shade of the golf palm tree for reading. The golfer wants to know what the boy is reading. He shows the book's title. Still the golfer looks unhappy, and says to the boy, 'So you want to be a taxi driver'. As the boy lacked coarse invective, which he mastered subsequently, he quietly wished the ball from the golfer would swing into the nearest guava bush with a dozen hornet's nests inside it!

In the end, the boy reluctantly joins the caddy brigade, offering coaching advices to gawky golfers who invariably find the ground getting in the way of striking a ball; the golfers who never ended the game with the ball they started with. He counsels them on perfecting their swing, keeping their heads down, overcoming unwarranted fear, and avoiding unproductive thinking. In his head he compares the two diversions, writing and golf: both hellish pursuits for the beginners. Having postponed his first ambition—there would be endless postponements—he cultivates golfing interest, and discovers striking the ball is much easier with a guava stick. When the garrulous ground keeper isn't watching, he makes a round with his guava stick and picks up a trail of pars and bogeys. He never understood why they needed an arsenal of woods and irons to put the tiny ball into the hole. He mentions the secret of the guava stick to his bungling golfer who just laughs and rewards him with generous caddy money that he uses to buy books and movie tickets.

The boy's imagination, first lit up under the mosquito net in front of a hurricane lamp, now glows in the darkened cinema hall illuminated by the magic lantern. Books were the first agent of change for the boy; now movies become the greatest transformer of life for the entire community. For the latter, life gravitates between two factories: the sugar factory and the dream factory of the movies. Everyone is hooked to the mythological cinema—the popular genre of the era.

The two mythologies—the mythologies of the great epics and that of the cinema—traffic freely in local debates. The intellectual life of the community is altered somewhat. He begins to understand how the written epics get transformed into films. Through the black and white films about Aladdin and Ali Baba he rediscovers the magical world of the tattered volume of *The Thousand and One Nights* his father had brought from a bungalow. He treats movies as an extension of reading. What he looks for

is interesting and original words and expressions. The true language of cinema, where images weave narratives together, comes to him gradually.

The boy quickly grows weary of the predictable pleasures of conventional mythological and magical cinema and seeks contemporary, daily portrayal of life but that cinema is part of the illicit pleasures and he doesn't have access to it yet. In the film literature that circulates under the desk at school, he discovers a review of a struggling, angst-ridden poet registering his protest against a materialist culture; he identifies with the poet straightaway but has to wait another decade before he is able to view the film, in a greatly changed circumstance.

Now we approach the years in the parable when other adventures drag the would-be-writer away from the direction of the room with a desk and a view of the sea. The creative urge in him remains trapped in its own inertia. These are the blocked years of probing for something and casting round for support, when writing is a non-activity of perpetual postponement. The room with a desk and pen and paper, and a view of the Ocean, remains at the back of his mind. He convinces himself that when ready he will own that room and churn out images, dreams and stories for his writing from the Ocean. In waiting for that room, the childhood dream begins to fade without a clear, creative path, though he feels he has a whole country inside him, many incubating novels, clamouring to be born. The opportunities multiply for him to cultivate a life of discontent, to suffer the anguish of unrealized promise and unfulfilled ambition.

Life of creativity in a remote colony has its own picaresque side: innumerable misadventure and vicissitudes. For instance, feeling the surge of talent he consumes huge philosophical tracks by the existentialists in order to awaken the creative demon that resides inside his consciousness. These are more dangerous times, more threatening than the school years, of various roadside attractions, detours, u-turns, dead ends, stasis. He imagines a life devoted to scholarship or seeking spiritual epiphanies, even institution building: the revolving doors that take him nowhere close to that room to write.

A particularly distracting roadside attraction is the military coup in his country. Either he had written or said something, there are soldiers in his house. It isn't a serious affair; he is taken away for questioning and returned to his house with the soundest possible advice he could expect to receive: stick to your pen, he is told, and don't think too much about politics. By then his whole universe becomes strangely defamiliarized; there is no need for writing fiction anymore.

Meanwhile in his country a golfer is born who will win fame and fortune; a man who sees a lot of movies makes a film; and a vernacular

poet is accorded recognition abroad. Elsewhere in Oceania, a writer publishes his first novel, and island poets are ready to publish their works.

In the middle of his journey, writer as a young man, still waiting for some fillip of the imagination to occur that would spur him on a secure creative path, stumbles into a room where writers are holding a literary colloquium. An atmosphere of festivity pervades the room: writers celebrating each other's work, bookseller hawking new releases, subscription writer soliciting membership to the writers' club, and the stage is decked with flowers and there is a banner shining in the background. He nervously reaches for an empty seat and turns his attention to the podium. At the podium a senior writer is explaining how writing emerges from the Void, a dark murky place, the creative womb, and slowly takes shape when the artist relinquishes control and doesn't resist the birth by throwing roadblocks. The speaker has the presence of a writer who is a hero of his culture. At the end of his discourse comes the startling revelation: he writes to fill the Void.

After the writer's presentation, a poetess reads an elegant lament on arranged marriage.

In the room writing is already born; the critics are giving it a name.

The editor in the writers' group, who orchestrates the meeting, exhorts the gathering to write, and to write more. She regards writers as like-minded souls forming a creative circle and banding together because, as it's often said, creativity flows with friends and wanes among foes. At the end of the colloquium, a poet who also encourages others to keep scribbling - writing is healing, writing expresses our complex fate, it's a way of engaging with the world - produces a slim volume from his pocket and reads poems with a stock of semi-humorous rural images.

Afterwards the writer in the parable mingles with writers and critics savouring the literary banter. Among them is a migratory tribe of scholars, travelling from one city to another city attending seminars, who have dexterity and skills to ask three questions simultaneously and to dazzle the listeners with clever exchange. He is afraid one of them will search out his eyes, and balks at the prospect of being asked to comment on a far away topic, afraid also that at the critical moment he will be tongue-tied or a slip of the tongue will expose his pretensions. Not being one who is used to moving a conversation along, he stutters, looking ill-at-ease. He is reassured when he encounters a scholar who says he prefers late night soirees to seminars; nonetheless he dispenses authoritative discourses that are full of guiding ideas for writers. The writer in the parable moves to a corner at the back of the room where a linguist is standing with an umbrella in the crook of his arm. He eagerly shakes his hand. The linguist

with fastidious manner is also a writer who composes his tales using conventional rules, proverbs and adages.

The writer in the parable emerges out of the room high on the creative plane no longer feeling that he had come too late to writing to be fully seduced. He had always been on his way to this room before he knew that it existed. The image of writers in a room acts on his imagination opening doors he didn't know they were there. He is not a lonely voyager anymore. There is community of writers and he belongs to that community. His alienation problem finds a solution. This encounter with writers defines for him the work that is to be done. Writing will give him a second life. He is convinced that his salvation as a writer, and eventual fulfilment, will owe much to the writers in the room.

He becomes a regular visitor to the room. New writers come to the room: playwrights of multicultural life, and poets with poems in one hand and books of theory in the other. One of the poets reads to the gathering highly cerebral composition in youthful flurry, and offers to expound on the meaning of hyphen, the many faces of exile, and the anguish of constant dislocation and relocation. He quotes an *avante garde* author who wrote, 'Writers have to have two countries, one where they belong and one in which they live'.

The door of the room opens and closes; writers come and then disappear. Two women writers who had lost their way in the corridor-- they had strayed into another room where the battle of the sexes is being debated (the meeting is held in building where higher learning is emerging)-enter, and are welcomed to the podium and invited to read. The poetess reads various confessional pieces that describe the virtues of moving between languages and identities and mixing registers. The other writer, a prize-winner, who had dragged an enormous scroll with her to the stage, consults the scroll to explain where we once belonged.

Meanwhile the writer in the parable ruminates: So the writer's salvation isn't enough. He has other responsibilities. But writing as a way of life is something he himself had imagined. His vocation isn't chosen by his society. Writing will not give him riches; nor will his society invite him to present his gifts or give him recognition. Writers will always transgress, and will be censured and face litigation and rejection. Books will be written and forgotten. Writing can only be an act of faith: one cannot predict its creation or reception.

While he is reflecting in this way, a writer starts to read his highly scatological story with an amused expression and twinkle in his eyes. The rising laughter spreads quiet unease and, suddenly, just for a moment, appears to subvert everything that went before.

When the writers mingle again after the presentation, the old idealism, that writing is a superior vocation in the midst of philistine pursuits, is tempered by an altered perception. He reaches the conclusion that writers resemble each, and yet each is different from the other. The wounds, the pains, the dark inward places, the joys and sadness' may be similar but ideology and politics will be different. The latter divides writers as they divide the rest of the world. And friendships will be formed and tainted. So as he mingles he observes attitudes he hadn't noticed the first time: wilful misrepresentation of each other's work, the readiness to be disagreeable, the retriballing processes, the proneness to jealousy and jubilation, and to quarrel and to congratulate.

Both this writers' room and that other room, the solitary place, that he had been seeking all his life are really hybrid places. He needed the writers' room, with all its energy and contradictions, as much as he required that room his imagination had created. As for that elusive room with a desk and a pen and a pencil, and a view of the ocean, that will remain a distant hankering, and in the meanwhile he will have to create a writing space for himself in the room that the imagination had provided, and thus some of his important writing will be produced in noisy libraries, in airports, hotel lobbies, railway stations, and ashrams and temples. He will take that room inside his head everywhere.

Not all writers can afford that room with a view of the Ocean but thankfully they will always have the solitude of the room inside their head where they can imagine anything they want and express that in the language and style of their choice. The significance of that room came forcefully to him when another writer, with the perspective of the persecuted, said this about that room: 'Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our heads, we can hear voices talking about everything in every possible way. The one reason for ensuring that that privileged area is preserved is not that writers want the absolute freedom to say and do whatever they please. It is that we, all of us, readers and writers and citizens and generals and godman, need that little unimportant looking room. We do not need to call it sacred, but we do need to remember it is necessary'.

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