

What Singapore's Bicentennial Means to the New Immigrant

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In this bicentennial year, a walk past Raffles Hotel, or a wander down Empress Place with Raffles' statue standing imposingly against the river, immediately stirs to life the past and the shadow of colonialism. It is a shadow Singapore, the 'last bastion' of imperialism not that long ago, knows too well. It is a shadow that has impacted my life as well, born as I was at the heart of the Empire, in London, and the child of two immigrants from different sides of the globe. I am also not easy with the word "immigrant" in the title of this essay, although I know as a new citizen of Singapore that is what I am. To me there is something 'other,' something harsh and resistant that echoes through the word.

I do not want to dwell on these shadows as I walk through Empress Place, past Sir Stamford Raffles' statue. I prefer instead to concentrate on the nearby and stunningly refurbished National Gallery, the graceful Asian Civilisations Museum, and the charming Arts House, where the bold art of modern Singaporean artists is displayed on smooth lawns and where Raffles' statue was recently and brilliantly disappeared, in a trick of artistic cunning. A stone's throw away, Raffles Hotel, that great dowager duchess of abodes with its turbaned doormen and Singapore Slings, once a home away from home for a colonial elite, is being revamped to meet the demands of a vastly changed world, a world in which all the colonial chickens have finally come home to roost. To today's young Singaporeans, a large majority of whom are well-educated and -travelled and driven by a sense of rightful entitlement, Raffles and the imperialism he stood for, that cowed an earlier Singapore, is now so distant and irrelevant as to appear almost comic. Fifty years ago, who in Singapore would have had the insolent irreverence to 'disappear' Sir Stamford Raffles?

I prefer this bold new Singapore, rooted in the country's independence in 1965. It suits my needs as an ethnically mixed up polyglot, and in its atmosphere even the word "immigrant" begins to lose some of its sting. Singapore is like nowhere else in this world for me, and I have lived also in Japan and India for considerable lengths of time before arriving in Singapore in 1997, and finally becoming a citizen in 2011. In those places I lived the marginal and completely irrelevant life of the expatriate, excluded from the centre, unable to satisfactorily participate in the society around me; a diminishing position in the long term and the human scale of things.

But Singapore enfolds me so easily. The double, triple, multiple consciousness that is, and always has been, a way of life to me, is also known well to so many here. Every detail of life in Singapore reflects this unique and quintessential hybridisation. New York and London are known for their diversity and multiculturalism; different cultures live side by side, learn from and accept and appreciate each other. Yet, neither place has achieved the inimitable crossbreeding of cultural elements that Singapore has, blending ethnic and traditional multiplicity into something entirely original and new. Singapore has been doing this in varying degrees for as long as anyone can remember. It has evolved into 'the Singaporean way,' and has now produced a distinct people and culture.

My effortless adjustment as a new citizen of Singapore is an experience very different from my father's immigrant experience. In January 1919 he landed in Liverpool as a new arrival to Britain from India. One hundred years previously almost to the day, in January 1819, Sir Stamford Raffles,

making an opposite journey to my father, had arrived in Singapore. Although far from home, and tried and tested as he must have been by all manner of inconvenience, Raffles came to Singapore not as a lowly immigrant but as a colonial ruler.

In the long ago days of 1919, my father's life as an immigrant was fraught with problems on every front. He came to England to study medicine. And when a man travels into a far country he must abandon old gods, old concepts and the codes of conduct by which he has been shaped. This is the lot of the immigrant, and if he cannot do this, he can find no way to new growth. In those long-ago days Britain was not the multicultural place it is today. There were few Indians around, and my father faced prejudice in the monocultural society of that time, although he always preferred to speak of the kindnesses received. It was in London that he met and married my Swiss immigrant mother.

The harsh and marginal life my father faced as an outsider in Britain, so obviously 'other' to those about him, is sadly still largely unchanged in our modern world. In this age of mass migration, the daily news bears testimony to the fact that life for many immigrants is ever more brutal. I mention these things and my father's experience, because it reveals to me how different my own experience is as a new immigrant in Singapore.

In her poem *diaspora blues*, the Nigerian poet Ijeoma Umebinyuo (Umebinyuo 2015), writes,

so, here you are
too foreign for home
too foreign for here.
never enough for both.

In Singapore, I find the sentiment of this poem does not resonate with me as it would have with my father as an immigrant to Britain so long ago, or as it still resonates today for so many who have become exiles in the Western world, far from their homelands for their own pressing reasons.

Here in Singapore the lot of the immigrant is historically that of complete transformation, a relatively rapid melting and welding into a new image, a Singaporean image, especially since independence in 1965. With independence, the customary journey of the immigrant towards assimilation in the new country, that may take two or even three generations, became suddenly the journey to forge a new homeland, a journey that turned the exile into the native.

As a writer I can see this most relevantly in the literary community of Singapore. Whatever their ethnicity, writers in Singapore write as Singaporeans, examining their sense of self, their connection to the local world around them and their engagement with Singapore and Singaporean issues.

In many other countries, immigrant writers of different ethnicities form distinct sub-groups, for example Indian writers in the United States or the United Kingdom, and Chinese writers in Canada. In their writing there is often a conscious looking back to their homelands and roots. In Singapore, writers, regardless of their culture and whether they write in English or their own vernacular, are known as and see themselves only as Singaporean writers. They have made the long transitional journey through difficult post-colonial terrain, to the wholeness of a new and unique Singaporean identity, and Diaspora no longer concerns them to

any great degree. According to Edwin Thumboo, “the freedom from Exile is a release from having an alternative to whom and where you are. It is the prelude to relocating culture with which comes greater management of image, metaphor and symbol as they acquire a local habitation” (Thumboo 1988).

I have never suffered from the sense of exile Thumboo speaks of, because I am rather like those rootless plants that blow about in the wind; I essentially have no homeland. However, blowing about and having no roots eventually become exhausting. Singapore has given me a sense of home for possibly the first time in my life. Home is where there is comfort, acceptance, appreciation, a place in which there is the support to evolve.

In my previous life I was of British nationality, but when I first began to publish, I was known as an Indian writer in Britain, even though my connection to India was tenuous and my connection to Britain was overwhelming. When I finally, for the first time in my life, settled

in India for a few years, I was immediately categorised there as English. While living in Japan over several decades, the confusion grew much worse. At one conference my nationality was listed as UK/India/Japan. It is a relief, and with much gratitude that I can now simply say, I am Singaporean. In Singapore the more ethnically mixed one is, the more, it would seem, there is to celebrate. People relate their complex ethnic lineages to me with pride. For a new settler like myself, the inclusivity that I have found to be the essence of the culture, makes Singapore in this bicentennial year not the experience of exile most immigrants must live with, but rather a sense of ‘coming home.’ □

Bibliography

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