

TRANSCENDING BORDERS - AN ANGLO-GERMAN JOURNEY THROUGH ANECDOTES AND POETRY

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I recently attended a lecture on linguistic issues, which had an incredible effect on the audience: some stifled a yawn, others yawned openly and the lady right opposite the speaker slumped in her chair and fell asleep. So that this will not happen today I have chosen the stimulating topic 'Transcending borders - an Anglo-German journey through anecdotes and poetry'. And by transcending borders I mean physical as well as mental ones. For both offer knowledge and insights, which a stuck-at-home person will neither have the pleasure to enjoy nor plight to suffer.

Why do I call my journey through anecdotes and poetry an Anglo-German one? Well, I am a German writer residing in India mainly writing in English. And I am a translator translating from anyone of those languages into the other. To boot it, I have translated my own work from English into German, which means from a foreign language into my mother tongue. Odballs like me are nowadays labelled 'migrant writers'. More about this peculiar tribe later.

When a guest from Germany listened to a conversation between my German-speaking Indian husband and myself he was surprised how effortlessly we switched between English and German spiced up with a liberal dose of Hindi. He asked me whether we do it for any particular reason, or - being German - whether there is a system behind it. "No system," I replied spontaneously. In fact, I was not even aware of these switches. They have become a natural way of communication for me. Only later did it strike me that one reason for switching languages might be that, in a fast moving world, we want to get our message across quickly. And if we cannot express ourselves swiftly in one language we do not fumble for words, but switch to another. And English is a fast one indeed! While translating my books from English into German I noticed that I need about twenty per cent more words in German than in English to convey the same content. Maybe the English vocabulary is larger with its West Germanic as well as Latin roots. Maybe it means that the German mind works in a more complicated and complicating manner. Instead of complicated you could, of course, also choose words like complex, intricate, convoluted, etc. - The translators amongst us know that translation means, to a large extent, also interpretation.

Another reason for switching lingo, of course, is that certain concepts and notions either do not exist in a language or lead to different associations. Footwear, for example, creates a different mental picture in a Rajasthani farmer, a German Hausfrau, American cowboy, or a Paris Hilton. Once I had a

tough time translating a brochure about Karnataka for the Berlin Tourism Fair from English into German. The brochure consisted of different articles penned down by personalities well known in their respective fields. Though I could tackle most articles on my own, two subjects foxed me. They were Bharat Natyam and cricket. In the first instance, the author, Pratibha Prahlad, was kind enough to explain to me over the phone the meaning of certain movements, so that I could at least describe them. In the case of cricket, however, I could not get hold of the author, Ramachandra Guha, and thus went to Google and keyed in something like 'German translation of English cricket terms'. And what do you think I got? I got no translation help. Instead, I got a statement, which went somewhat like this: 'Cricket is such an idiotic game that only people who have lived under British rule can understand it.' Fortunately, my translation had to fit into a certain format. And since, after all, a German translation usually turns out to be about 20% longer than the original English text, I ultimately just cut out what I could not figure out.

As already mentioned, I belong to a breed, or rather crossbreed, of writers called migrant writers. They are writers who write in a country, which is not their native country in a language, which is not their mother tongue. These authors no longer merely deal with topics, which offer an escape or insights into the culture of their country of origin, but deal with phenomena of the country of their choice as well and, thus, blur the lines of distinction between the two. They are able to transcend borders, for they do not accept them as barriers. Personally, the word migrant suits me well. For I have never regarded myself either as an emigrant nor immigrant, somebody who gets out or somebody who gets in. The word 'migrant' depicts mobility, a coming and a going, the way migratory birds fly to and fro, back and forth. Deep inside I have never felt the necessity of borders, especially mental ones. Therefore, whenever I encountered them, I attempted to overcome them by, at least, trying to understand the circumstances and mindsets of those who erect or perpetuate them - to fence themselves in and keep others out.

Preconditioned minds and the prejudices resulting from them have constantly presented me with challenges. And by that I do not only mean the biases of others, but my own as well. A couple of those challenges confronted me right at the inception of my Indian sojourn, when my Indian fiancée and I decided to tie the knot in Hamburg. I could not resist depicting them in a humorous story called 'The final

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verdict', which is part of my forthcoming book 'Fool's Paradise'. I will read it to you now -and not only for comic relief.

One of the collateral damages of these court sessions was that I started to regard every Muslim man as a potential lecher desiring and conspiring to bed as many women as possible either in parallel or successive relationships.

Thus, when my husband and I decided to shift from Hamburg to Bangalore and came to know that our landlord there would be a wealthy Muslim businessman my feelings vacillated between curiosity and apprehension, as images of harem scenes instantly popped up before my mental eye. Though socially disapproved of harems and their seductive inmates were yet romanticized in European art, maybe because they possessed the charm of the forbidden fruit.

Our landlord's residence proved to be a stately, but decayed looking mansion, over which ancient trees cast an almost sinister shadow. A large, overgrown compound, out of whose shrubbery a few simple bungalows peeped out, surrounded the mansion. One of these bungalows had been allotted to us. After inspecting our new home and depositing our suitcases there we proceeded down the garden path to introduce ourselves to our landlord.

It took but a few minutes and we arrived at Mr. Ahmadi's mansion. The door stood ajar. The bell did not work. We sneaked in and hesitantly walked through a row of dark cavernous rooms. From somewhere close by the commanding shrieks of a female voice hit our ears. They alternated with nagging lamentations. We also caught glimpses of a woman who swished around like a faceless, hyperactive ghost.

Finally, we found Mr. Ahmadi, a dignified looking, elderly gentleman, sitting alone in a large hall. We took an immediate liking to him. He was polite and humorous and seemed not only delighted but also relieved about our arrival. And he seemed to take an equal liking to us, for he henceforth invited us regularly

for informal chats.

During one of these chats the female poltergeist noisily blustered in. She looked and acted like a witch. To our surprise Mr. Ahmadi introduced her as his wife. She paid absolutely no attention to us, but, in a language we did not understand, immediately set out to spoil her husband's mood. Then she blustered out the way she has blustered in, leaving a sad and embarrassed looking husband behind.

Mr. Ahmadi really deserves somebody better than this harridan, I thought and, finally, dared to ask a question, which I had lacked the courage to ask him before. Now I asked it almost hopefully. The question was: "Mr. Ahmadi, do you have more wives?"

Mr. Ahmadi's jaws dropped. Open-mouthed he stared at me for a while like I had gone mad. Then he grimly replied: "My dear lady, have you really not noticed that it is bad enough to have one wife." Now it had become my turn to stare at him open-mouthed.

Ever since my arrival in Bangalore in the seventies, India has offered me a field to explore, which is uniquely colourful on account of its inherent

multiculturalism, whereas in Germany multiculturalism has only relatively recently emerged as a factor to reckon with due to European integration and globalisation. I recently spent a couple of days in rural Bavaria and - just imagine - in a tiny little town a tiny little man delivered a lecture on no other topic than India!

Red-faced and trembling with excitement, he puffed out the statement: "Eines könnt Ihr mir glauben: Indien ist das närrischste Land der Welt!" In translation this could mean: India is the world's maddest, funniest, silliest, strangest, most eccentric, extravagant, wondrous, magical etc. land of the world. Again your choice of word is also an act of interpretation, for it emphasizes only a certain aspect of the huge canvas that is India. I suppose, branding India as 'Incredible India' with its truly all-embracing connotation has been a masterstroke of harnessing the power of language for a good cause, namely tourism with its, cross-border effects.

Learning about the world is a laborious and often disturbing process, which many people tend to avoid. They look without seeing. They listen without hearing. They mainly preserve themselves within themselves. At best they try to create a perfect environment within a limited sphere. It is the plight of many an ex-pat or traveller between the worlds that very few people at home are prepared to listen to their experiences for more than a few minutes. Instead, they prefer to keep the windows of their homes closed, so that no fresh wind even gets a chance to enter. Fresh wind scares them, for it might shatter their 'Weltbild' or view of life.

My own dilemma of whether to open the door and move ahead once manifested itself in a dream, which is still etched into my mind. I dreamed about a single, solid foot. The foot was shod in a heavy walking boot and stood on mossy ground. It seemed determined to take off, yet was tied to the land by a multitude of tiny roots. The picture perfectly fitted my situation. I had developed a strong desire to wander, yet felt tied to the ground by obligations and the fear to displease. I wanted to be dutiful and free at the same time, to hang on and move ahead.

Well, I, finally, did move ahead. But my personal experience too has been that, whenever I had something to communicate that upset the proverbial applecart, my audience showed its back to me. Nobody was prepared to listen to my tales. It was in those times, and only then, that I developed an inner urge to write poetry. May be to get something out of my system with a vengeance and not by ordinary prose. Thus, I wrote a very provocative poem after I had decided to quit my job at the German Embassy, even or especially to the displeasure of those whom I regarded as close to me. I named my poem 'My Way' like Frank Sinatra his famous song. Here it is:

My Way

*When the distribution of lives took place
Something interesting was done in my case.
Instead of getting only one life to lead
I was given one more - the system to beat.*

*If you should set into the unknown your sail,
Society will warn you, you might derail.*

*Society has invented an invisible script,
Which prescribes you to remain in the same
old pit.*

**The pit is so cosy, the pit is so safe
And - not to forget - the ideal place to mate.
But a pit is and remains just a pit.
It is its size, in which you have to fit.*

**And now I wonder whether the word pity
comes from pit?
I would not be surprised because it does fit.
Is this the fitting you want forever and all?
Or do you want to burst out - even if it means
a big fall?*

*But, alas, fortune gave me two lives, not one.
It gave me options for feats to be done.
Society, you cover-up for collective/ear,
Farewell to you without regret, without any
tear.*

We do not really know what prompts a human being to move out of the safe haven of traditional living: same place, same expectations, same celebrations, same dress, etc. into a wider world. Is it boredom? Is it curiosity? A hunger for experience? An addiction to wonderment? The man who believes that everything has already happened is only half alive. The person fully alive conceives ideas, figures out theories and makes plans. He transcends borders and struggles to learn about life, the world, and maybe ultimately himself.

As the saying goes: variety is the spice of life. And I still perceive mental and physical flexibility and variety as the stuff dreams are made of. The reason might be that I grew up amidst the ruins of a war-wrecked Germany and a people, whose shattered material and ideal lives had left them with a desire to play it safe and seek security in immobility. Parents should not shift and uproot the children from their know environment, including their school. It would affect them adversely, was the mantra I heard many a times.

It was a mantra I perceived as suffocating at an early age, for as an avid reader of adventure stories I was only too aware that there was a big wide world waiting to be discovered. I longed for a place under the sun. And I longed for challenges. In India I found plenty of both. Some challenges smirked at me as irritations, others smiled as opportunities. I learnt to face both and, in the process, developed two character traits, which must have lain dormant: patience and humour. The Indian sun kissed them alive!

Cuba-born Italian writer Italo Calvino claims that the ideal place to be in is the one in which it is most natural to live as a foreigner'. For me this has been India. For, with its diverse environment and tolerant atmosphere, it has made it possible for me to lead a stable yet spirited life 'my way'.

Through communication I experienced shifts of identity, rejections of identity and the manifestation of new identities. In fact, I feel that I have acquired parallel identities, not a split personality but a multi-faceted-personality. What I also have acquired is a passion for language. For many years I had chosen

English as means for sharing my thoughts. And they were many. For, when I came first to India I was overflowing with impressions, yet had no means to express them in my Indian environment. So I created the means by studying English for many hours a day with a fervour and motivation, which I had failed to muster at school.

Later, when I ventured to become a writer in a foreign country in a foreign language, or you could say adopted country in an adopted language, I was willing to take the risk of being for some time in a linguistic limbo on one hand and expose myself to the possibility of wrong interpretations or lack of understanding of phenomena or situations on the other. India, which Mark Twain called 'The Land of Wonders' offered me plenty of opportunities to be confused, shocked and shaken.

And also to laugh and laugh and laugh. For I learnt in the process of living and writing about being fully alive here that it is possible to analyse and dig deep into a matter and then step back and, from a distance, see how small things are. Humour, in a way, has also been a shield for me behind which I could hide, at least a bit. I wanted to discover India through my own eyes. And this discovery I wanted to share. The minute details of life, the trivial and the not so trivial. And in a playful language, a language which is fun to read or to listen to.

And, since we are at a university gathering and concerned with language I will now read to you a story truly befitting the environment. It is called 'A tale of educated lions'.

A Tale of Educated Lions

The Vice-Chancellor of a university in Central India and his two colleagues sat together. The room was darkened to keep the glare of the sun out, an old air-conditioner rattled in the background, dusty curtains loosely hung from irregular loops. Lizards had taken shelter behind the faded pictures of academic luminaries of yesteryear and only darted out to catch the odd, flit-resistant mosquito. The picture was completed by three half-empty cups peeping out from piles of learned books and scattered papers.

The men looked as gloomy as the room they occupied. When they were young they wanted to teach values and knowledge. But then they had swept the joys and sorrows of teaching for the prestigious titles and entitlements of administrative posts and, buried under heaps of papers, failed to acknowledge the formation of a current which had now become a sea of young people who were as educated as they were unemployed.

The topic of today's meeting was "job-oriented education". "Oh God," they moaned in unison, "what to do, the problem is so overwhelming," and morosely stared into each other's faces finding there neither inspiration nor consolation. In fact, all they managed to do was to reminisce nostalgically about times bygone. When the gloom was at its peak the Vice-Chancellor suddenly burst out laughing, and, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, exclaimed: "Even in those times not all well-educated youngsters managed to find a suitable job. Let me tell you the story of Surrender:

"Surrender was an excellent but poor student,

whose subject was Hindi. As he could not find employment after graduation he studied for a PhD degree, but still could not land a job. Desperate and hungry he had by now acquired a truly lean and hungry look.

When Surender idly ambled about town he suddenly came across a circus-tent, which had just been pitched at the maidan. At its entrance a notice stared into his hollow-cheeked face "Job as Hindi announcer available". Hunger literally propelled Surender into the circus director's office and there, after a long time, lady luck seemed to smile on him - or so he thought.

"Well," the director said, "the announcer's job will pay you 10 Rs. a day, but, due to the sudden demise of a colleague, another vacancy has cropped up which has to be filled immediately. It will yield you the princely sum of 30 Rs. a day". "I will take it!" Surender exclaimed in hungry enthusiasm - without awaiting a job description. When he finally asked what was expected of him the director disclosed that he would be the star of the circus' most dramatic number, the highlight of the entire show: He, Surender, was the chosen one to stick his head into Samson the Lion's mouth!

Surender's jaws dropped wide open. But before he could protest the director pushed him into the dressing room to change his shabby kurta-pyjama into black slacks and white shirt topped by a jaunty red bow tie. "Hurry up, your number begins in 20 minutes!" The director barked. And Surender, eyes twitching, legs trembling, awaited his turn, fearing it to be his first and final performance before he exited from this world, and that headless.

From behind a curtain he heard waltzes sway through the air, then laughter and clapping. And, suddenly, silence. Surender broke out in cold sweat as, from afar, he heard a lion roar. The roar got louder and louder as a speaker right above his head magnified its ferocious sound. Somebody pulled Surender into the arena and jauntily led him to the stand, on which the huge, beady-eyed lion sat enthroned in majestic immobility.

And there Surender stood, legs shaking, wet palms tightly pressed together. A flourish of trumpets, then the announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, now you will witness one of the bravest acts ever performed. The great Surender Lionheart will put his one and only head into the jaws of Samson the Lion!" Another flourish of trumpets, then pin-drop silence. Surender stood frozen, staring into the beast's beady eyes. Paralysed with fear his matchstick legs refused to move.

The tension mounted. The silence became unbearable. Surender kept standing like a pillar of salt and silently prayed to the Lord.

And, like an answer to his prayer, a small voice emanated from deep within the lion's throat. "Don't

worry, do it. I am also a Hindi Ph.D. "The pillar called Surender melted, and, quickly stepping forward, put his learned head right into the lion's cavernous mouth. And there he stared into another pair of eyes, which mischievously winked at him. Immensely relieved Surender repeated his act again and again to ever increasing, thunderous applause, and, thereby, secured his job!"

The three men laughed and acknowledged that for sheer survival educated people, too, have to be flexible in their choice of jobs. But to prevent extreme deviations from one's desired path they would, hence force, put a lot of emphasis on job-oriented education.

To know important languages like German and English definitely adds spark to your curriculum vitae! By studying them, you gain knowledge beyond your homeland and narrow your knowledge gap. You can enter different job markets without facing a language barrier. You can face an alien environment boldly and pass through doors, which might otherwise be closed. You can reassess established patterns of thought and behaviour etc. and realize that different views and modes of conduct can exist very well side-by-side. And, by taking on translation work, you can not only earn good money but use your manipulative and interpretative skills as well.

My own linguistic journey has helped me to become an insider--outsider, a foreign-native. Not either this or that, but this as well as that. It has also made me conscious of how much more unites people than separates them. As a writer I focus on the human condition in all its colourful manifestations, irrespective of where it is played out.

I will end my lecture with a poem by Goethe in my translation and, well, interpretation:

Wer sich selbst und andere kennt,
Wird auch hier erkennen,
Orient und Okzident
Sind nicht mehr zu trennen.

Who knows his and others' stand,
Will realize with ease:
Orient and Occident
Are meant to be one piece.

Sinnig zwischen beiden Welten
Sich zu wiegen, lass' ich gelten;
Also zwischen Ost- und Westen
Sich bewegen, sei's zum Besten.

From this to that world if you sway
With thoughtfulness, praise I will say,
As moving between East and West
You really might be doing best.