

***Exploring Exile and Crosscultural Complexities in
Yasmine Gooneratne's "A Change of Skies"***

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The Paris Conference on Arts & Humanities 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The paper explores how the past affects the future in Yasmine Gooneratne's *A Change of Skies*. The vital aspects of immigration, adjustment to new lands, expatriation and complexities of cross-cultural negotiation with specific issues of cultural identity and authenticity are dealt in the paper. The paper highlights the experiences of Asian immigrants and how they adjust to living in the new environment of Australia. The major characters, Barry and Jean are subjected to tremendous pressures in Australia. The couple relishes the challenge and ultimately prospers in the environment. However, the couples were disillusioned with the first experience of being forced to see themselves as a generic subject in the gaze of the 'Other'. In the novel, *A Change of Skies*, Gooneratne recognizes the complex sources of the present, she realizes the hope that these can generate a future freed of the limitations of the past, but not free of the universal absurdities of the human condition. People, do, she suggests, change their souls when they change their skies. More importantly, when they change their skies, they do not abandon the past, but produce a new future and new possibilities.

Keywords: Diaspora, Immigration, Crosscultural, Otherness, Identity

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Introduction

One subject that constantly shows up in Yasmine Gooneratne's works is a reflection upon how the past influences what's to come. She relates her own personal memories to come to meaningful conclusions which are more genuine to audience. An example of this is "Relative Merits," a personal diary that draws on interviews with the author's relatives and her own recollections of her family's history. In it, she intertwines her family's past with the broader historical context, showcasing how her distinguished relatives have influenced Sri Lanka's history.

Another recurring theme in the works of Goonaratne is the exploration of migration, adjustment to new environments, exile, and the complexities of diverse interactions, particularly regarding cultural attributes and political hegemony. These aspects of migration are exemplified in "A Change of Skies," which depicts a Sri Lankan family's move to Australia. This work narrates the experiences of Asian immigrants as they adapt to life in their new Australian surroundings. The study of historical changes is a central theme in her writings.

In today's era of globalization, the work of migrant writers deserves to be highly recognized and acclaimed. Elleke Boehmer has noted that the "status of migrant writers like Rushdie, Walcott, Timothy Mo, and Bharati Mukherjee has defined postcolonial literature as essentially cosmopolitan, transplanted, trilingual, and familiar with the cultural codes of the West" (2001). However, these definitions, while theoretically sound, are often abstract and detached from individual experiences. This is evidenced by ongoing discussions about the relative losses and gains for authors in their transcultural experiences, such as feelings of disillusionment and alienation, or liberation.

Discussion

A Change of Skies was an instant success, winning several literary awards. A review characterized it as a novel typical of the 90s, "when language and loyalties tend to spill over national boundaries, and when histories and identities do not always remain contained within small geographic boundaries" (1992). Like much migrant writing, Gooneratne's novel addresses the experience of migration, expatriation, and transculturation. Drawing on personal experience and intertwining family legends with historical reality, Gooneratne, in *A Change of Skies* describes a couple's migration from Sri Lanka to Australia, using their cross-cultural experience to explore broader questions of cultural knowledge.

A Change of Skies revolves around four main characters: Edward, who migrates to Australia in 1882 and returns to his homeland in 1887; his grandson Bharat and Bharat's wife Navaranjini, who come to Australia in 1964 as expatriates and take up permanent residence in the country eight years later; and Bharat and Navaranjini's daughter, Edwina, who is born and named in Australia. Bharat and Navaranjini, who adopt the names Barry and Jean after spending several years in Australia, initially leave for the Antipodes on a short-term assignment. To Edward, Barry's grandfather, who had run from home; thanks to a dispute along with his father, this sojourn is a crucial learning experience, however as he discovers eventually, "I have seen enough and learned enough to myself too to grasp that a life here isn't forme" (pp.166). Initially, Barry and Jean are subjected to tremendous pressures in Australia. They need to address and answer biases and prejudices against expatriates from the East; within the same period, they conjointly endeavor to keep up a Sri Lankan identity

whereas assimilate those aspects of culture which are necessary to survive in Australia. The couple relishes the challenge and ultimately prospers within the surroundings. Also they're higher equipped than Edward to address Australian condition, what prompts them to form their keep permanent residence in contrast to the deteriorating sociopolitical conditions in their country of origin, that they discovered during their vacation. The senseless violence, the commonness of the nouveau riche, and also the realization that they'll now not "relate" to even their closet friends influence their thinking. Recognizing travails faced by less fortune expatriates, Barry resigns from his university position to deliver English classes to refugees. Jean, on the other hand, enriches the culture of her adopted country by introducing Sri Lankan cuisine to Australian. The novel ends with Edwina, their female offspring, who combines Australian pragmatism with Eastern attribute, returning to her roots to complete associate social science project. She has traveled on the far side of expatriation and become a "citizen of the world."

Bharat's feeling of self when he leaves Sri Lanka is in reality that of a "privileged white" and can best be clarified through "a doggy dedication to Britain" and the "accumulated experience of a significantly Anglicize family" (12). And he holds on for him his esteemed genealogical legacy, as symbolized by his name, Bharat Mangala Davasinghe. His issues of mindfulness start when he understands that his character isn't perceived by white Australians. "Look", he lashes out at his significant other, "We're Asians. They're Australians. At the point when Australians meet us, that is the thing that they notice first Difference". (118) Then he hears Ronald Blackstone (1992) a humanism teacher from the University of Woop - Woop who "nicknamed a Sydney suburb "Vietnamatta" in light of the fact that it was full [...] of Asians," lash out on the radio that:

Asians [...] pollute the air with the fumes of roasting meat. And we Australians must be alert to the dangers involved for our society if we allow Asians in who cannot assimilate and accept our customs. (120)

Bharat's reaction to Australia's stereotyping of Asians mirrors Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial stereotyping of Africans. Bharat withdraws "from his personality and his race in his complete identification with the ideal of whiteness." In an effort to erase the perceived strangeness within him, Bharat anglicizes his name to Barry Mundy, following the Australian tradition of name changing—a practice that the author explains dates back to 1939 when many German immigrants anglicized their names almost overnight after war was declared. This statement is laced with irony and echoes the grim underlying truth of what might have happened to German immigrants had they not changed their names and assimilated into the majority culture.

Bharat's new surname, Mundy, carries complex semantic implications. In Latin, it signifies 'world citizen,' a connection to a dead language in terms of effective verbal communication. However, in the more dynamic indigenous language, Sinhala, 'Barry Mundy' takes on a negative connotation: 'barri' means 'weak' and 'mundi' means 'leftovers' or 'residue.' Despite changing his name, in the Sri Lankan context, he is reduced to 'leftovers,' a dramatic fall for someone whose class had once been considered the 'cream of the crop.' For his wife, who understands the cultural and personal history tied to his original name, the name change is something to mourn. She realizes that their new 'nice Aussie' name is merely a practical means of surviving daily interactions, not a true signifier of self-worth or genuine identity.

Paul Carter's analysis of migrant names and their significance for identity can be applied to Bharat. For instance, the surname of R.A. Baggio, born in Victoria, Australia, to an Italian immigrant, was subjected to so many distortions by white Australians that it, and consequently his identity, became "unstable [like] one's place; his name was a swag he shouldered, a means of traveling from one human situation to another, but it no longer provided him with a house of his own, a place from which he could speak" (1992).

In a much more prominent exertion to converge with white Australia, Bharat, as Barry Mundy, starts to copy the cliché sense of self projection of the Americanized Australian. Contact focal points (improving his delightful long eyelashes) clear his approach to TV distinction as an Asia Expert. While he is perceived by the scholarly community for his genuine research, his show up for the normal Australian watcher lies less in his scholarly ability than in his extraordinary sexuality. He gets packs of mail from female fans. Inebriated by his attractive open picture, he starts to disregard his pledge to his scholastic profession and his understudies at the college. He appears to be well while in transit to forming into a prominent generalization: an "attractive item" (146). Yet, his better half understands the threat and sees his character declining practically fix past, his "very substance being tossed into disarray."

Detecting something of his internal weakness, and looking to "reorient" himself, Bharat comes back to Sri Lanka eight years after first leaving it. He understands that he has changed and that he can't fit into the familial or public activity there anymore. Colombo isn't what he recollects that; it appears to have gotten unbridled and dependent on TV, with the universally adored program being the cleanser "Tradition". There are likewise darker substances: ethnic emergencies, and agitators disturbing the framework and murdering honest individuals. Like Rushdie, Bharat finds that "the past is [the] nation from which [he has] emigrated." His Sri Lanka is currently a nonexistent country; he can recover it just in his memory. He has the feeling that his "present being [is] in a better place from before, of his being 'somewhere else'." Bharat chooses to come back to Australia.

Like White, Gooneratne investigates Australian culture by depicting the suburbs as a far reaching and void space. White's case that 'every which way extended the Great Australian Emptiness, wherein the psyche is the least of assets' (38) is resounded by loved ones who regret that the Davasinas are 'doomed' to go through five years in a 'social desert'. Gooneratne disparages even the all the more engaging parts of an 'unfilled' Australia envisioned by Bharat and Navrajini—Bharat at least starts to believe that he 'rather enjoyed the sound of those sheep and kangaroos and wombats' – in her depiction of their first experience with the scene while in quite a while on an interstate (34). Her depiction of Australia as innately void is bolstered further by Srilanka legends about 'the Great South Land'. In one legend, sailors are cautioned to be careful with wandering excessively near 'the Great Southern Land' 'in case they sucked into an extraordinary vacancy, and have their spirits depleted away' (57). This legend turns into a heartbreaking prediction that hints Bharat and Navrajini's destiny as Bary and Jean Mundy. After a real existence in the void of Australian the suburbs, they are truly sucked into the extraordinary empty space when their plane accidents while they are on a household trip among Coolangatta and Sydney.

Gooneratne portrays the Asian characters as "honestly separate, unknowingly supremacist" (1994). While in Australia, Bharat writes to his mother, commenting on the bluntness and harshness of Australian society, which he feels shows little interest in people like themselves who "originate from old cultures and traditional lifestyles" (98). From a colleague's

perspective, "he has succumbed to the stereotyped idea of OZ and the Aussie, i.e., that we are a nation of tasteless alcoholics with the intellectual standards of a TV drama and the social benchmarks of a football scrum" (134). Navaranjini believes that "prejudice is obscure in India and Sri Lanka. Race and caste and color just have their named places there in a divine scheme of things, where everything moves in a perfectly regulated order," though she admits that Westerners might find this concept hard to grasp (119). She sees herself as part of "real Asia," with India at its center, dismissing Far Eastern people, such as the Chinese, as "Ching-Chongs" and not true Asians (119). Grandfather Edward, finally, believes that racial prejudices among his own people exist only among "ignorant and poorly educated women" (75). Racial partialities appear to exist even among the Asians themselves. Gooneratne has taken extraordinary consideration to clarify that there is nothing of the sort as an Asian character. The characters of her Asian strict stratification, Bharat and Edward are Christian Sinhalese, Navaranjini is Hindu Tamil, and the Koyakos, another worker family, are Buddhist Sinhalese, Navaranjini at one point in the novel concedes that Tamils will in general think about the Sinhalese as all similar; and when ethnic aggravations in Sri Lanka cast their shadow on the couple's marriage, Bharat voices the Sinhalese sentiment that Tamils are interminably ascertaining how to jump on in life to the detriment of the Sinhalese.

These distinctions don't exist according to the Australians; as Bharat puts it: "We're Asians. They're Australians. At the point when Australians meet us, that is the thing that they notice first. Contrast. [...] And Australians can't make fine differentiations between one sort of Asian and another" (118). The main individuals they become familiar with, their neighbors and later companions, the Trevallys, double-cross a constrained and stereotyped picture of Asians which, as though on the side of Edward Said's outstanding contentions about the development of the Orient in Western workmanship and Literature, was to a great extent passed on through movies and craftsmanship. Maureen Trevally, making surmises about the fascinating newcomers' set-up, says: "Perhaps they have their tea leaning back on divans and learning against decorated pads like Marlene Dietrich and the Sultan in *The Garden of Allah*" (99), and, to her better half, Navaranjini playing the zither looks "a carbon copy of a composition in [his wife's] library book, 'A princess Waiting For Her Absent Lover'" (100). Maureen Trevally's Asia "is unadulterated dream land," it says toward the finish of the novel: "To her it's as yet a universe of Maharajas and marble castles and enchantment covers, an intriguing fantasy wherein even the homeless people are pleasant" (318).

Moreover, and still as per the cliché Western picture of the Orient, the Sri Lankan couple are viewed as not just colorful but likewise sexual. Navaranjini in her conventional dress of an Indian lady is considered by Bruce Trevally "lovely as an image. [...] Got those large oriental eyes that have all the riddle of the East in them" (99). "Ever observed a sari [...] on a gorgeous young lady?" he asks a companion: "Well, let me reveal to you child, there's an uncovered mid section on it that is God's blessing to a meriting male" (101). Bharat, as well, with his dull skin and "amazingly long eye-lashes" is seen as an agent of the "spiritualist Orient," a 'genuine oriental' whom his female associates consider "dishy." After his significant other showed their duplicate of the *Kama Sutra* at the college's book show, he gets the notoriety of being sex master: while his male associates counsel him as a specialist on affection, sex, and marriage, he is horrified to find that the office spouses harbor firm feelings about his sexual ability. The picture of Navaranjini and Bharat as fascinating and suggestive Orientals denies their human and scholarly characteristics, and diminishes them to the cliché thought of the oriental as an object of sexual want. Remarking on this persistent juxtaposition of generalizations, Gooneratne has called attention to that when composing the short story she felt that, if her "bigot Asian characters were to face anecdotal Australians, supremacist

themselves, to a great extent because of their own pioneer hang-ups, possibly they'd counterbalance one another" (1994). They don't, however the novel doesn't favor one side.

The risk to vagrants, the dangerous capability of culturally diverse contact for a person's feeling of self, is recorded most noticeably in the English names, and it tends to be completely seen just if the authentic setting is considered. From Edward's diary we discover that the Aborigines were insolently named by early European pilgrim vegetables and other trivializing objects. Suggestive of this custom, the Western characters in the novel are named after Australian fish: Kingsley Fysshie, Maud Crabbe, Ann Chovey and John Dory. Likewise, the unfortunate characteristics of certain vagrants are featured in their Sri Lankan names and are very clear to Sri Lankan perusers. Along these lines, the long name of the pioneer of Sri Lankan people group in Australia, Mekaboru Kiyanahati Balapan Koyako, which, as the novel records, recounts to its very own account implies (1995): "Look, mate, at the manner in which this current rescal's laying his head off" (327).

Conclusion

Gooneratne writes from a perspective where the imperial pretensions of her characters can only appear absurd. Her irony operates as a lens through which historical reality is examined at a personal level. Her achievement lies in transforming this perspective into an affirmation of human possibility. While her awareness of the contradictions between culture and individual ambition is postmodern, her exploration of potential within these contradictions is postcolonial. By recognizing the complex sources of the present, she holds hope that these can generate a future free from the constraints of the past, though not devoid of the inherent absurdities of the human condition.

Gooneratne suggests that people change their inner selves when they change their environments. More importantly, in changing their surroundings, they do not abandon the past but create new futures and possibilities.

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