

Talk at Vegas Valley Book Festival
“Environment and Identity : Shores of Selfhood”

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Thank you all for showing up on a Saturday morning, and thank you, Claudia, and Book Festival, for this opportunity to speak on a timely subject. This discussion about selfhood is in keeping with the intense rethinking about selfhood that is evident in this week's election results. I take that as my starting point and build from there.

I begin by giving the example of Baudelaire's albatross, beautiful king of the sky, but when it lands on a ship, becomes clumsy, weak, comic and ugly, giant wings unsuitable for walking. Identity, the way the term is popularly used, is a bit like that.

The other example I am reminded of is the documentary film, "Song of The Exile: Chinese restaurants" directed by Cheuk C Kwan. It's a film that traces the history of Chinese-restaurant owners in South Africa, Israel and Turkey. The restaurateur confesses that when he arrived in Israel, he didn't know how to cook Chinese cuisine. His Israeli friends say, "never mind it's easy, we'll show you how – but you cook, you've got the right face." So-called identity, has its applications.

While growing up in India, my favorite writers were all French - Camus, Rimbaud, Jean Genet, Proust, Blanchot – or German – and in art and film. Moving to Hong Kong in 1993, a new environment impressed me – a wider tonal range, a new attention to form, intricacy in design – and then a home in New Zealand, and travels – Greece, Iceland, Japan, Australia, Egypt – wherever I went, I saw that I was seen as an Indian – at first anyway – and found that I resisted identity as a fixed location. And this idea from Patanjali really resonated for me, that "the mind takes on the shape of whatever it contemplates."

I believe my roots are traveling roots. Belonging is easy for me, I feel more or less at home anywhere – the burning has more to do with 'be-longing,' a quest never fulfilled on the peripheries, always seeking center.

Certainly there is a community I participate in, and that is the community of the English language, it is the only language I am literate in, and which I inherited via colonization. Unlike many writers from India one generation before me, I feel no shame in that. English is mine, and I mine it, I polish it, I wear it, and it is a medium through which I receive both the French poets and the Urdu poets, so in fact I colonize it, same as we all colonize the languages we work in. I also feel intimately soothed by the sound of Sanskrit, I know Telugu and Hindi, I feel comfortable around Tamil and Cantonese and Mandarin; I tap into many resources to nourish my composition, the composition of my self.

All this one may call identity. It is canned identity that I have trouble with. I have trouble with the equation of nationality with identity, gender with sex, with questions of classification – Male or Female? Hetero or Homo? Black or White? Christian or Muslim? and so on. While it is captivating, the problem is that one stays captive in it, in imitation of the image in the mirror, and usually, the mirror is another person. What others say about you usually says more about them than about you.

Of course specific positions exist, I am not denying them, in fact, on the contrary – for they are practices – and all practices need representatives – and in the fact that there is a tremendous pressure for each one of us to become a representative today, I see the momentum of - the necessity of - proliferation of identity, multiplicity, diversity, for that is what it takes to discover the awesome scale of unity.

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I support the reclamations at the "shores of selfhood" but I want reclamation to be a continuous process, and as any identity calls for its share of space, the price to pay for it must not be creativity – which is what is at stake. I am concerned about being trapped at some outpost, while the reality is deeper. I accept particularity, stylization, functionality as long as I am not enslaved by it, I accept custodianship, not territory. Form is okay as practice as long as the infinite formless is forthcoming.

Reading Maurice Blanchot this week, writing about writing, I came across this line, which I felt applied as much to selfhood as to writing – The object of the ideal "words set free" is not to release words from all rules, but to free them from a rule one no longer submits to, in order to subject them to a law one really feels.

While fighting for and playing the roles we want to play, we need to reclaim selfhood to a point where it becomes irrelevant. Where men and women can stop confusing the male and female principles with their selves. Where black and white can go beyond pride and guilt and be comfortably gray. Where nation is understood as an organization. Where we know that we of all cultures and identities are all really mongrels, and Jesus, Gandhi, Greek mythology, Indian meditation techniques, the Bible, the Koran, the Gita, the Dao De Jing, Manga comic books belong equally to everyone, and relativity proves unity.

The experience with hate-based religion has made many of us averse to religion. We are embarrassed of many traditional concepts today, and, lacking the experience of them, we don't know where to put them – so, Infiniti is a car, Absolut is a vodka, G.O.D is designer furniture.

But what do we have left? The idea of humans as civilized animals, reformulations of identity, but we continue to live – in desire, greed, fear, jealousy, laziness, lovelessness, clinging, in the name of instinct – and many of us still live as if we are a mass of sensations that must be, that deserve to be, gratified. Some of us may believe we are human beings having spiritual experiences – where are the spiritual beings having human experiences? This, I see as the heart of the matter, and all other identity quests as really a practice for this central quest. And all of this is directly related to writing.

And we have substitution. Alcohol and drugs, poor imitations of happiness. Sex, a flash-in-the-pan communion. Friends & Family a selective generosity – at worst, an admission of the lack of fellow feeling in the wider community – and at best, unable to take the leap to the bigger picture. Identity, an imposter standing in for Truth. And the tyranny of Political Correctness, instead of an understanding of where we have arrived today. We've come a long way since slavery, but we have a long, long way to go from self-enslavement.

Sometimes I wish everyone – everyone – would go all the way, and say, this just won't do, we're sick of this painfully slow expansion, we're tired of limitations – and we will do nothing, not one act that perpetrates our self-slavery – humility, I'm sick of you – we want to be where there needs to be neither hubris nor humility – we demand nothing less than clarity – we want it all – true philosophy, come to me, true identity, come'on over.

True identity. Where there are no shores.

When one makes that decision, if there is god, true love, reality, knowledge, whatever you want to call it, it has to make itself known to you, how can it be any other way? Because if there isn't, then nothing matters.

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There is. And it matters.

Or should I say – "anything is possible" – "yes we can."

I quote a nugget from a most interesting author I've been reading lately, Paul Schollmeier : i am that which is, and i am not. / i am not that which is, and i am./ i am not and i am. / yet i am not that which is and is not. And I quote Sai Baba - Only one religion, love. Only one caste, humanity. Only one law, karma. Only one language, of the heart. Only one God, omnipresent.

Three poems now... (Reading of *Drought*, *Pol Pot*, *Void Plate*)