

Indias of the mind - Creative writing and oral history

Abstract

This essay explores idea of the story in translation – through time, mode and space using the specific story of Tansen.

While weaving oral history into my creative narrative, I became interested in how this story that I was told as a child in Australia, was being told in India. In Australia, the story existed in our family as a piece of oral tradition that contextualised my inner “Indian” landscape. In India, this age-old story has been built into the physical landscape and seeped into popular culture such as the music industry and tourism.

My own creative work has become the case study and canvas for my quest through text - a journey between longing and belonging, story and sound, fire and water, and the vapours that form when worlds meet. This essay focuses on a number of the issues discussed in *Travellers Tales*, but uses a different style and lens as I interleave theory, my own reflections in trying to source the Tansen story for my novel, and the way that I specifically use this story in *Dancing to the Flute*.

“Tell me a story,” I’d ask every night. My Australian accent dragging the end of the phrase up to hang like a question. My mother would turn off the lights and, in the darkness, take me back to India. The country I’d visited but never lived in. The place I still thought of as home. The tale she told that night was of Tansen, a famous court musician, at the time of King Akbar:

The other court musicians, jealous of his ability as a singer, asked him to sing Raag Deepak. Of course a gifted person who could link to the divine connection in the raag, – the raag of fire - would ultimately burst into flames and die. So

Tansen has to choose between his reputation as a musician and his life.

“Luckily,” my mother would say, as my sister tossed on the bottom bunk-bed.

“Luckily, he had a girlfriend Tani. When Tansen sang Deepak and caught fire, Tani felt his pain all the way from his hometown and sang Malhar the raag related to the monsoon, and quenched his fire with water.” (Dancing to the flute – first draft)

On lazy nights, my mother would sing Deepak and my father would play Malhar on his flute. Those were the nights I liked best.

This story of Tansen echoed in my mind as I grew older. It transported me through the sound of my father’s flute, back to the classical Indian music my parents would play in the house or on long car trips to the Blue Mountains the outskirts of Sydney. Whenever I heard Indian music, I’d remember nights in my childhood, and those lessons on the harmonium when my father first told me that Tansen was reputed as being the father of the Gwalior style of classical music –the same style played by Ravi Shankar today (Shankar 1999).

As a child of immigrants I grew up on stories of India. India was a place for holidays, rather than a home to return to, yet it has always been my point of reference. When I started to write, my stories wouldn’t leave a fabled village in India. It’s not the India of my parents, or the India of the present; rather a construct, a lace of story and song bound together by memories that are in truth, shadows, and half truths built through a childhood in Australia.

In this tale, found on a children’s web site (Davar 2003), there is no lover. Tansen asks Haridas, his old teacher, for a student. Rupa is already a very good musician and Tansen uses fifteen days to prepare her. At the end of two weeks, Rupa had perfected the singing of Megh raga. The monsoon raga.

As Tansen sang Deepak, Rupa’s voice, at first a little tentative, grew stronger and soared.

“Baraso né, baraso kale badle va baraso

“Rain pour down, rain pour down, from those black rain clouds, pour, pour down.”

...the sky became dark with clouds and down came the rain. Tansen's fire was quenched but his fame spread like the flames of Deepak.

But of course the story didn't end there (edited from Amin 2009)

At a linguistic level a people's language can be seen as their history, as an unconscious yet constant expression of their historical being and identity (Ogundele 2002). In my case, language reflected a history of insight born of loss and rediscovery.

The writer Michael Ondaatje, when interviewed in 1995 said,

“Well I think when I left [Ceylon] at the age of eleven, in order to kind of live in England or go to school in England, I thought I had to forget my past, not out of a desire to forget it, but in order to cope with the present... it wasn't until I went back to Sri Lanka at the age of something like thirty or thirty-five that I could kind of look at my past and understand myself, where I came from” (Matthews 2000, p. 361).

At the age of three I was tri-lingual. I spoke Swahili and Gujarati fluently, with English as the poor cousin. When we moved from Kenya to London, and later to Australia, my parents only spoke to us in English to help us assimilate faster.

My parents understood that while you couldn't change the colour of your skin, words, spoken in the same accent as our newly adopted country, and with the same idioms could be the best strategy in the battle for acceptance. The remnants of Swahili and Gujarati disappeared as I made friends out of neighbours and schoolmates.

While I gained a new identity I felt like I had lost my old one. The only connection I had with my past was through stories told in English and the music I understood innately, even if I didn't understand the words.

Whether written or spoken, stories and histories can carry in them the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, and thoughts of a community that are evoked through language to, in Eric A. Havelock's term, provide a constant “remind and recall” of the past (Ogundele 2002, p. 132).

The past is always negotiated with the present. When a language is only part understood, sayings, stories and oral history in translation can bridge continents as well as generations.

As a child I remember sitting on my Aunt's balcony on Rue de la Caserne in Pondicherry in India. We'd spend the afternoons sitting, in the shadow of the building, watching people walk on the road, leaving the cracked concrete pavement free for garbage and the stationary bicycles parked in rows. Every now and then we'd see a person weaving across the road, feet as unsteady as the song they'd sing.

"Drunk or mad?" I'd ask my Aunt.

"Mad," she'd reply one day then, "drunk," the next.

The "drunk" part of the question seemed to have historical context.

Pondicherry was a French territory at the time of the British Raj. Its status as a free port from the time of Independence meant that alcohol was said to be much cheaper than in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, resulting it was said, in a proportionately higher number of drunken people wandering the streets. Pondicherry is also home to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

The "mad" people were seen to be by-products of the wrong kind of meditation or asana practice. My aunt, rather matter-of-factly, explained on subsequent trips that people who were unable to get the right assistance were often unable to contain the forces of evil as they moved deeper into meditative practice and could become unstable. Meditation was a dangerous business.

For the writer, language can act as a tool to provide both content and context. For me, not knowing an Indian language meant that when translating the oral to the written I became interested in both the subject matter and the way it was said. When listening to my family and others of a similar background for example, it seemed that the line between fact and fiction was smudged.

Questions of real and unreal didn't seem to match my experiences at school in Sydney. It was obvious to me that Santa Claus didn't exist, but if I had asked my father if someone could sing until they burst into fire the answer would have been, "it depends". I would have known that that was the Indian in him rather, rather than the West speaking through him.

Much research has been undertaken in exploring the ways that families and, in particular, transnational families use stories to construct narratives of self and kin

(Chamberlain & Leydesdorff 2004; Kasturi 2005) and the question, “*drunk or mad*”, symbolises the glue between history, myth, magic, and my past, present and future. It’s the place where the unsaid is as important as the said. Where landscape, context and audience are as important as the narrative itself.

This is the world that I want to reflect in my work. A place where the narrative defines a place for the reader, and the reader in turn builds their own landscape through the narrative. An equal exchange between the storyteller and their audience.

The third version of the Tansen story was found in the Indian Express website (Dutt 2000).

Here, Tansen leaves Agra in high fever. The fire, although calmed when he stopped singing, was not quenched. He travels back towards Gwalior. It’s hot.

Finally unable to walk, drawn by the smell of water, he collapses by the side of a well. Fortunately, Banno, a low caste woman, sees Tansen half comatose next to the well. She recognises the symptoms Tansen displays. So she sings Mega-Malhar and she sings to ease the pain.

Like Ondaatje, and many others I suspect, in my house no story was ever told once. *In Running in the Family*, he says, “Whether a memory or funny hideous scandal, we will return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in. In this way history is organised”(Ondaatje 1982, p. 26).

While the story I am currently writing doesn’t focus on the migrant or translational experience, it is constructed on a framework of oral history, the stories and histories that I grew up with as a second-generationer within an affluent middle class Indian community.

Mine is the generation that never made the decision to leave a country but the stories I grew up with have been informed by that initial decision to leave India. As someone focussed on the why and where of those stories, there seemed to be a thread - where one longed for something that no longer existed. In addition, the need to affirm the decision to migrate was often an underlying theme to each tale. Yet stories never seemed to focus on the “big” issues. They were never about the caste system, forcible exile, or the loss of community.

The choice of story is as important as the story itself if, as “we become the narrative by which we tell our lives” (Jerome Bruner in Chamberlain & Leydesdorff 2004, p. 231).

The stories I heard were in general celebratory stories revolving around the extended family. The lack of fear displayed by my grandmother, how my grandfather travelled through the country side with Gandhi’s ashes, how when we travelled to Australia no-one mentioned that it could be cold so the neighbours had to lend us blankets and the only chickpeas one could buy were from the Jewish shop in Bondi.

There was, however, also silence. The cracks in the wall covered by fading photographs. Exile at gunpoint, arranged marriages, bride burning - these were only discovered through quiet questioning on long hot days when we were older. They were told, it seemed, almost by accident, in those slow heavy moments of the day when, had we been in India, or in Africa, we would have slept until the cool of the evening reawakened the senses.

These stories reflected a migrant experience that continued through generations. Tales, complete with the contours of a half understood landscape that seemed to be redefined with each telling “served to perform the rediscovery of [a] personal interdependence within [my] familial and cultural community” (Matthews 2000, p. 335), as they did for Ondaatje.

In *The Future of Nostalgia* Svetkana Boym argues that “[n]ostalgia is not always about the past it can be retrospective but also prospective”(Boym 2001).

Writing is one way in which I could create a new world, where the past could only be assessed or explored through the deconstruction and then reconstruction of oral histories where the audience could walk through a multifaceted world that would resonate differently, depending on their own experiences.

By writing I make a place that Tageldin would recognise as nostalgic, “a past reconstituted and futurized”(Tageldin 2003). Narrative can bring worlds together so that the current and the past coalesce with the imagined.

Through text I can convey not just a simple past, but rather, a complex heritage to my own children. Unlike the generation before me the written word holds more meaning and is easier to work with than the spoken. I’ve lost that art.

In Gujarat there is another version, which came from a tourism site (Talash.com 2000). Here, Tansen, unable to bear the heat within him and the heat of Delhi, travels down towards Gujarat, to the town of Vadanager. A Brahmin musician offers Tansen shelter. His daughters, Tanna and Riti, sing for Tansen. They sing Megh so beautifully that the heat within Tansen dies as if quenched by the rain itself.

Tansen returns to the court and Akbar is so impressed by the account of the girls, their voices and their beauty, that he sends a special envoy to bring them to court. However, unlike Tansen, these two decline the court offer. Akbar becomes so angry that he orders his army to attack Vadanager.

The girls see the approaching force, and choose to set fire to themselves rather than allow the army to capture them or the city. So Tansen is saved, but in doing so the two girls who can sing the rain burn.

While I tend to start with stories told from parent to child, new technology has made it easier for the creative writer to find connections through space as well as time.

In looking for the Tansen tale, I did a metasearch and found a multitude of Tansen tales on the internet. Ogundele notes:

“oral memory, or composition, is mobile, audience-adaptable, and dependent on improvisation. Oral texts change during performance, and more so in the process of being handed down from one generation to the next, as each modifies, adds, and deletes according to its own needs”(Ogundele 2002, pp. 132 -133).

My search provided me with a multiplicity of stories almost the same, but not quite. Rather than choosing one over the other, I choose the four that interested me on a personal level the most and wove them all into my work.

By plaiting them together and interleaving them through my main story, I tried to reflect some of those elements of oral histories I found so interesting. The contradictory nature of the oral, the way that each story seemed to contain a magic kernel of the truth, even as the story changed and how each author chose something to keep or leave out, depending on their audience and their vision.

Although I could have looked back for historical texts on the real Tansen, I chose to search for current versions of the story. I was looking for connections between the migrant voices and the non-migrant Indian voice.

What I found was that in India, the story and various versions had reincarnated themselves and merged into the physical and cultural landscape. There were temples and festivals, prayers and pop songs that all relied on the same story that informed my inner creative landscape back in Sydney.

“And every year in Gwalior, near Tansen's tomb, a music festival is held. Musicians come here from all over India to perform and pay homage to Tansen and his virtuosity in playing raga Deepak until there were flames...”

“Well, every year in Gujarat a music festival is held to remember Tana and Riti...”

“And even today Punjabi pop musicians go to the temple built by the well where Banno sang to Tansen to make a wish before releasing a new song...”

“And there, next to Tansen’s tomb is a small tamarind tree “If a singer eats a leaf from this tree, their voice will become strong and sweet.” (From Dancing to the Flute)

These stories, be they real or imaginary, spoken, written or found on the internet all inform what Rushdie refers to as “a short fiction, not actual cities but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind”(Rushdie 1992).

My work then reads like a modern day fable. Where the old stories of Tansen are mixed with the new, and a parallel story is told with Kalu’s illness, and the impact of his musical connection with Malti when her husband tries to burn her. The tone through the work is one step removed from reality. This is where I’d like to take my reader, the place I journeyed to as a child, when I first heard these stories that stayed with me as I grew.

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