

Chapter - 6

Passport Photos & Away

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Amitava Kumar brings his talent as a photographer, poet, scriptwriter, and journalist to the job of critical commentary, refusing to partition and delegate these skills to separate provinces of his intellectual life. The result is an ethical voice and a technical style that often defies our expectations of the critical commentator. Voice and style is immensely appealing, no more so than in the multiage's documentary work of *Passport Photos*. This is not a heavy-handed comment on the condition of immigrants. It is a sensuous guide to the common contradictions and experiences faced by immigrants to the

U.S., whether they are coming from the underside of the international division of labour or from well-heeled and credentialed birthrights.

The South Asian Diaspora -and his own life -provide the context of Kumar's *Passport Photos* , a "multi -genre" report on the immigrant condition, diasporic poetics/politics and transnational identities. Kumar endorsed the thesis of the director Shadwell in Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia*: "The immigrant is the Everyman of the twentieth century".(46) Kumar's identity-Indian and American- is hybrid:

I feel, quite strongly, that in contemporary times the pathos of the human being unable to choose between two national -states has been overwhelmed by a nother, new kind of feeling. This feeling is the abjection of the postcolonial citizen whose problem is not so much being unable to choose between two homelands as bei ng expected to choose only one.(Passport Photos 144)

He writes against "barren binaries ", "theory speak" and superficially "professing post colonialism", he calls for aligning scholarship to activism, to "relate what is taught in the classroom with the world outside it". He cautions that "multicultural education in the US might be nothing more than propaganda -or worse, advertising -if it doesn't hear, and amplify, those voices all over the world talk back to power". He agrees with Houston Baker, that "Pedagogy is a place where the personal and the public meet to give rise to provocative kind of politics"-a politics of affiliation, as well as disaffiliation.

The issue of colonization touches upon more than just the struggle of native people to adjust to a new culture. A more serious obstacle needs to be faced:

the suppression, and oftentimes overt annihilation, of the native people's former lives and culture that comes with the new presence of an other, an other who believes -knows he will even tell you, deep in his heart -his culture is superior. This other, neither a typical enemy nor a traditional invader, does not share similar traditions or warfare. He does not seem aware that he stands on a land that is not his own, but on a land belonging to dead ancestors. Rather, this colonizer -a foreign force -holds the idea that the land he has come to conquer truly can be owned and furthermore, that it can be owned by him. He holds an unfaltering belief that his culture is superior to the one he has come to suppress.(P P 104)

Obviously, problems of crossed identity and imposed inferiority and even a raging hatred for the colonizer surface in the consciousness of the colonized people. Here is where the term "Post -colonial" comes into play. Post -colonial as "the name for a condition of nativist longing in post- independent national groupings" and as

the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism to achieve an identity uncontaminated by

universalistic or Eurocentric concepts and image. Post -
colonialism- a way of examining an unconsciously changed
culture through its literature, creates a "discourage of
oppositonality which colonialism brings into being(PP 96)

Post-colonial refers to more than just a people adjusting to change, it includes the relationship between the changed and the changer, the one and the other, with these roles being continuously traded between the two sides, worn by one and then by the other. Post - colonialism touches upon many issues.

Naipaul expresses serious misgivings about Indian attitudes and the Indian way of life. On the other hand Naipaul also notes the economic growth and its associated emancipation of the various peoples of India. VS Naipaul first visited India, home of his ancestors, in 1962. Twenty six years later he returned and this is a long, detailed thoughtful account of the changes he found. He interviews a former terrorist responsible for at least ten murders and listens without offering judgement. Most of the book is told in the words of the Indians he meets: devout Hindus and Muslims, people of all castes and classes. Naipaul of Indian heritage, was born and raised in Trinidad, but he recognized that it was his ancestral culture that governed who he was and how he thought. In this passionate portrait of a culture, a society, and a country he returns to India, a nation in turmoil.

The ultimate goal of post -colonialism is combating the residual effects of colonialism on cultures -It is an "activist" academic endeavor. It is not simply concerned with salvaging past worlds, but learning how the world can move beyond this period , towards a place of mutual respect. Post colonial academics is a pull on philosophy,

literature, religious ideology, history, politics science, film, song, geography and sociology into a collective discourse.

Passport Photos is representation of the pass port, it becomes a vehicle to introduce an immigrant and the stories that are told by the immigrant and that aren't found in the passport. Kumar goes on to relate “when we use the word "alien" it seems to stick rather unproblematically and unquestioningly to something or someone, and it is only by a conscious, critical act that we think of something different”’. (PP 83) Alien seems so benign and other. Alien makes the human less human. Alien, as defined by government agencies, establishes a legal identity .

Both Rushdie and Kureishi are concerned with the plight of a migrant who is denied a unitary identity because he is shunted back and forth between two cultures and invited to adopt a variety of sometimes contradictory subject positions. Such a dilemma is painful, even potentially tragic, but Kureishi shows that it also contains possibilities for growth and creativity. Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human being, cultures, ideas, politics, movies and songs.

The book is a forged passport. It is an act of fabrication against the language of government agencies. The book, therefore, is structured into sections that correspond to the categories in a real passport, Name, place of birth, date of birth. This novel format when interspersed with evidence of Kumar's multiple talents and occupations - mellifluous poetry, skilful language, great photographs and his passions makes for a great read. Each section shuttles between the diaspora and the home country, between literary theory and political economy, Kumar follows and quotes Edward Said's suggestion that “ since the

main features of our present existence or dispossession, dispersion, and yet also a kind of power incommensurate with our stateless exile, are essentially unconventional so hybrid and fragmentary forms of expression should be used to represent us”.(4)

Kumar clearly subscribes to the view exuberantly captured in subcommand ante Marcos's “Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel....a Jew in Germany...a Communist in the post-cold war era...and , of course, a Zapatista.”(PP 62)

First time, when Amitava Kumar came into the USA, was also the first time when he had boarded an airplane. The immigration officer looked at the visa page on his passport. Then he looked up and asked what he was to do in the USA. He was going to graduate school. Kumar explained. The officer turns around and shouts to the officer in the next cabin, “looks like the whole world is going to school in America ”(12). It may have been his attempt at livening up a boring day but to me it did not sound welcoming at all. And then he proceeds to write F -1 on the immigration form. “I froze. I had a J -1 Visa. I had been warned any mistakes could have serious repercussions .” After a moment's hesitation, “I piped up: Excuse me, I have a J -1 Visas." Smart aleck, huh!" He comments, "Yes, a darned sight smarter than you." I felt like uttering a scream of hopes but didn't. ‘What would he know of my plans. my hopes and my fears’”(PP 12). All he knew about Kumar was what was in his passport.

Each state has the right inherent in its sovereignty to determine who shall be its national and who shall be excluded. Thus, since its inception, the citizenship law, as a legal status and identity excludes the 'other', the non -citizens (the ethic). A quick look at some recent studies will further substantiate the argument. Brubaker observes that citizenships is

not only a set of rights and duties, but it is “also a mechanism of closure that sharply demarcates the boundaries of states ”.(4) Commentating on the same, Christian Joppke maintains, “As a mechanism of closure, citizenship (commonly ascribed at birth) is like a filing mechanism, distributing people to just one of the world's many states. Entry into the territory of a state is the right only of the citizens of this state it can be denied to everyone else.”(76).

It is what is missed out in one's passport that Amitava Kumar explores in his *Passport Photos*. The book is an exhilarating, though provoking attempt at understanding and speaking about the immigrant experience in an "undeniably personal and political way". In the author's own words. “Having a deep experience of two cultures is to know that no culture is absolute; it is to realize that social, political, and linguistic realities could be arranged in numerous other ways .” (PP 101) *Passport photos* ends with a list of immigrant organizations, many of which are at the forefront of the struggle for other ways of arranging these realities.

The text ranges from the discussion of Macaulay's education to contemporary political struggle on the sub-continent, and includes inter alia reflections on representations of tradition and modernity in South Asian film, the religious practices of Trinidadian descendents of indentured labourers, and the politics of the "veil" and the contradictory position of Indian teacher. *Passport Photos* provides what Kumar describes as a simultaneous anthropology and autobiography of the immigrant condition. *The Passport Photos* itself is a metonym for cold, cruel realities of the global economy. By freezing it in a kind of perpetual present, *Passport Photos* wrenches the subject from the temporally and spatially mediated relations with others through which its identity is constituted.

Within a nation-state citizens are always unhyphenated, that is, if we are to believe what our passports say about us. In actual practice the pure, unhyphenated generic category is only applicable to those citizens whose bodies signify an unproblematic identity of selves with nations. For those of us who are outside this identity politics, whose corporealities fissure the logic of unproblematic identification, plural/multicultural societies have constructed the impure genre of the hyphenated subject.

Kumar's spirited response to "a set of pressing concerns in two nations and one world" is extremely timely. At no time in the history of this planet has the world been "one" as much as it is now. The forces of globalization or, to call a spade a spade, global capitalism have made sure that no part of the world are left alone in the never ending search for "new markets". Nothing - food, dress, culture - is immune to becoming a commodity. Kumar writes in one of his poems entitled "India Day Parade On Madison Avenue"

I have lost India. You have lost Pakistan. We are now
citizens of General Electric. In this country, there are no
new words for exile. And if you have nothing to sell, you
have nothing to say that this, or that, is indeed you.

Kumar unfolds the contradictory semiotics of the passport which performs a sort of double movement. While in a very literal way opening up the world to those who hold the right kind of passport; it simultaneously closes down so many other worlds. By drawing attention to the passport as an inherently unstable sign, one promised on the slippage

between signifier and signified, Kumar aims at if not a redemption then at least a certain recovery of these other worlds. In the process, he reminds us those fates of the "first" and "third" word, in a crucial sense, form different parts of the same skein. And who better to perform such a labour of anamnesis than a writer constantly forced to negotiate the perilous borders, both literal and figurative, between the two. Through the book, we get a glimpse of the moment where the subjective and the objective, the autobiographical and the anthropological meet with particular poignancy.

Commenting on the apartment of an Indian computer programmer living in the Silicon Valley with its sparse furnishings, Indian calendar and touristy poster of the Golden Gate Bridge, Kumar States, "I find more clearly the identifying marks of my own history as an immigrant." (PP 156) While passports are susceptible to forgery. In a very real sense all passports are forgeries in late capitalism. They are rarely what they purport to be, which is to say, documents conferring citizenship and political rights; in actuality, they are little more than particular claims to participate in the international division of labour.

Another example of Kumar's attempt to open up the worlds of history and society frozen by the logic of the global economy, lies in his reflections on the fate of those from Kumar's native Bihar state who were transported as indentured labourers to Trinidad. Their memories of Hindu traditions, particularly those centering around Diwali, get transformed into allegories of redemption of all those forced to toil, which, strangely yet entirely fittingly, brings it close to Jewish Messianism. In contrast to the conservative reinterpretation of the Indian epic Ramayana in India so easily appropriated by the fundamentalist Hindu right here, the sons and daughters of indentured labourer turn the ancient epic to a story about exile and transplanted religion. We have come to tell the story

of the children of Ram/Everyday we see leela in this land/ we the children of indenture/building here our own Ayodhya.

Here the anthropological and the autobiographical merge again, yet with a difference. In contrast to his identification with the itinerant computer programmer, here Kumar calls attention to the difference between the privileges that accrue to globe trotting writers and what is called the wretched of the earth. If a passport is to be read like a text, then texts can also function like passports. In the academy, books become passports to enhancing academic exchange value and at present, this value of post colonial writings is inflated indeed. In contrast to much post colonial writing, however, Kumar never forgets the conditions that make his own writings possible in the first place, namely , the global division of labour and drawing widely upon non western writers and poets, Kumar steadfastly challenges these very conditions.

Away brings together great writings by figures from South Asia voicing to the experience of exile and the immigrant R.K. Narayan writes of his first visit to America. Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the Nobel prize for Literature, writes of his first trip by airplane Salman Rushdie eats "the eggs of love" in a Sandinista camp in Nicaragua., V.S. Naipaul describes his sister's funeral ceremony in Trinidad, while the poet Sarojini Naidu sends love letters home to her husband. The memoirist Ved Mehta recounts applying for an American visa. The rising politician Jawaharlal Nehru asks for news from India as he travels across the world campaigning for freedom. This star-studded list of contributors also includes Hanif Kureishi, Rohinton Mistry, Meera Syal and others. Amitava Kumar's introduction beautifully sets out the complex feelings that animate the writings that follow.

Amitava Kumar, himself an Indian writer now 'away' in America, is editing a broad anthology of work by Indian writers whose lives and literary identities have been formed by their experiences in some form of exile. Kavita Shrama states, "Living within the natural boundaries of a single state who increasingly assert group identity rights." As Robert Cohen observes "the world is being organized vertically by nation-states and regions but horizontally by an overlapping, permeable, multiple system of interactions. This system creates communities not of place but of interest, based on shared opinions and beliefs, ethnicities, religions, cuisine, the consumption of medicines, lifestyles fashion, music etc." (6).

Spanning writing from 1920s to the present, *Away* contains work by the writers already mentioned, alongside some earlier pieces by Gandhi, Nehru, and Tagore, and a wide range of writers of the last half century. With *Away*, Kumar trains his sights specifically on writings by Indian expatriates. Kumar divides his book into three sections. The first section features old writings by the earliest Indians traveling abroad. A particularly noteworthy gem is the series of writings by Dean Mohamed, a Patna-born businessman who opened "shampooing parlors" in England and Ireland in the 1820's. His advertisements for the parlors are great fun to read both for the archaic use of the language as well as one of the earliest writings by an Indian abroad. Works by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Subhash Chandre Bose, and even love letters from Sarojini Naidu to her husband, are showcased effectively in *Away*.

The striking story is of Mahatma's chronicling of his discrimination at the hands of White South Africans in Durban, Subhash Chandra Bose approving his nephew's education plans along with some fiery words about his own commitment to India's future. There are

numerous debates about Indian writing in English: can the expatriate serve an enormous burden be placed on authors in the first place, why is it that many Indian expatriate authors choose to romanticize the more exotic aspects of the home country. The cynical answers of course lie in the nature of the markets. If exotic material sells why mess with a good thing. Kumar addresses these and many more relevant points in a brilliant introduction to *Away*.

One of the characters in Rohinton Mistry's 'Swimming Lessons,' enquires why her son, based in Canada, never writes about his life there: "It puzzles me", she said, "Why he writes nothing about it, especially since you say that writers use their own experience to make stories out of ". (Away 43) Then father said that this was true, but he is probably not using his Toronto experience because it is too early'. Bharati Mukherjee's wonderful essay differentiates between an immigrant and an exile.

Away serves as a wonderful introduction to the world of Indian expatriate writing in English. The book has many tasty nuggets by stalwarts of the language now household names in markets abroad. Many an Indian abroad will agree with travel writer, Pico Iyer's famous statement " Out dreams of distant place change as fast as images on MTV, and the immigrant arrives at the land that means freedom to him, only to find that it is recast by other hands". Kumar shows us that we cannot have even a glimpse of satisfying definitions as to what it means to be truly "home" at last.

In *The Auto biography of An Unknown Indian* Nirad C. Chaudhuri records his life from birth. The book relates his mental and intellectual development, his life and growth at Calcutta, his observations of Vanishing handmarks, the connotation of this is dual-

changing Indian situation and historical forces that were making British exit from India an imminent affair.

Nissim Ezekiel was born in a Bene Israel family in Bombay and his Jewish identity and background has been central to his writing. At home in his beloved native city, Ezekiel reports that he has always been aware of belonging to his "own community". "Not being a Hindu..... makes me a natural outsider". . Ezekiel has made it clear that living in India, in Bombay has been a conscious choice even though so many members of Bene Israel have migrated to Israel.

East west is a short collection of short stories by Salman Rushdie. But there is nothing small or even limited about the themes they cover, nor anything bland about the palette Rushdie used to colour his ideas. They were published in the mid -1990s. When the writer was deep into the confines on the wide and poignant use of humor through the collection. The stories are enigmatically arranged in three groups entitled East, West and East-West. They thus form a kind of triptych.

In East we visit territory well known to readers of Rushdie. He is in the subcontinent, addressing notions of tradition and culture, notions that are interpreted and reinterpreted by change, personal ambition and by familiar and religious associations. In West, Salman Rushdie presents Yorick's view of *Hamlet* and an encounter between Catholic Isabella and her hired man, Christopher Columbus. One is fiction superimposed on fact, while the other approaches the reader from the opposite direction. In East -West we find people in new contexts, away from home, inhabiting places unfamiliar to them. We meet people who impose private, personal structures on a wider experience that others

share. Misunderstanding creates their own new language and fiction expresses and interprets a shared reality.

The title *The Shadow Lines* can be read a thousand different ways and the significance of shadows throughout the novel can be interpreted with vast distinctions, but one thing remains clear. The shadows that all human beings reflect are as unique to the individual as each written word is to a talented author like Amitav Ghosh. Throughout literature's long history, shadows have been used as metaphors for secrets. Things hidden in the shadows, things which we cannot see though we can vaguely make out their outline these are the traditional metaphors which Ghosh cannot avoid. Ghosh demonstrates that when secrets come out from behind the shadows and are exposed to the stark revealing brilliance of daylight, they do not immediately evaporate. Secrets tend to linger long after they have been exposed because of the facts that were hidden in the first place cast strong shadows of doubt upon the person keeping the secret.

The revelation of these secrets can have severe consequences, such as being kicked out of school or being labeled a liar. While he is astonished by his grandmother's ability to see past the shadows and into the light, he is equally annoyed by it. It feels that a person ought to be free to keep some secrets hidden, like his "visits to the women", but at the same time he respects his grandmother's insight. While her first revelation caused him great embarrassment, her second was a truth he wished he could have faced himself long ago. He is both praising and admonishing his late Grandmother in a single breath. The narrator's secret love for his cousin Ila was forced to remain in the shadows because the feeling itself, was dark in nature. Anything that is considered taboo, such as sexual relations between members of the same family, automatically quivers in the shadows of its own dark truths.

Both the major truths that the grandmother exposed were laden with sexual taboos, which raised the questions should they have been exposed at all. In the light of the pain they caused, one would think they should not have been, but in a world in which truth is the foundation of evolution into maturity, no truth can be allowed to remain unilluminated.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri wrote *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* when he was around fifty and recorded his life from his birth in a small town in Bangladesh. The book rescaptures his mental and intellectual development, his life and growth in Calcutta, his observations of Vanishing Landmarks. The connotation of this is dual-changing Indian situation and historical forces that were making the exit of the British from India an imminent affair. Tagore's politics exhibited a marked ambivalence on one hand; he denounced European imperialism, occasionally voicing full support for Indian Nationalists. On the other hand, he viewed British control of India as a "Political symptom of our social disease", urging Indians to accept that "there can be no question of blind revolution, but of steady and purposeful education".

Tagore denounced nationalism, deeming it among humanity's greatest. A nation he wrote is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose, a purpose often associated with a selfishness that can be a grandly magnified form of personal selfishness. Tagore stated that, "I suppose it was fortunate for me that I never in my life had what is called an education, that is to say, the kind of school and college training which is considered proper for a boy from a respectable family." (88).

Most of the novels of VS Naipaul take place in England where Naipaul had rented a cottage in the countryside. The book is composed of four sections which reflect Naipaul's growing familiarity and changing perceptions of Naipaul upon his arrival in

various countries after leaving his native land - Trinidad and Tobago. The concept of diaspora, of necessity, represents a concern for the freedom of larger expressions of well - defined ethos of native culture, society, religion and therefore identification of ethnocentric bias becomes a primary medium of expression. There are three different ways in which one can understand this freedom to become applicational- as an instrument of creating a consciousness for nation, generating a scale for transformation of nationhood, and taking a position and started in relation to culture . One has to interpret on author's acquired benefits in motivating conceptual paradigms for each of these.

The idea of nation in diasporic formation is considered to be the basic proposition indicating an enormity of strength, power, conviction or in other words, one can quite easily state the situation, to be play with absolutes in which no error of abstraction is assured. Nation, for that matter , is created in the comprehension of growing reality, immediate association with an objective truth and perceptible sequence of qualitative order of judgement. There might be a case in which approval of value inhibition is halted at the instance of a debate between adoption of the power of reorientation and the power of amalgamation of primary motivation. At least, one activity, proportionately qualifies these valuated norms. A Nation in order to be the continuity of a thoughtful perception -the intensity to prescribe a method for the largest necessity of concentrating cyclical time in each reassessment of the becoming and being. Naipaul, for example, could state in the following a validity for his faithful curiosity.

Their romance was not mine and it was impossible to separate them from their romance. I would have felt an intruder, as I felt in those district clubs where billiard rooms were still hung with framed cartoons of 1930s, where the libraries had gone derelict, the taste of the generation frozen..... Indians could walk among these relics

The depth of perception invites the wisdom of the author to accept the recognition of reality and for that matter there is a generosity of admission of composite irony (Their romance was not mine and it was impossible to separate them from their romance.....). The beginning is made in the description of carelessly crude effects of cultural internationalizations and this interaction accordingly brings a whole supplementary detail of fine ethical object (India, Indian, Indianness). We can propose a set of objects to purposely identify the indifference causing a shift or break in egoistic ideals and here Naipaul's distinction between abstracted error and received error is very important. The abstraction of error is an event of incomprehension of virtue hidden in an ideal and received error is an ignorance causing enormous guilt and sinful overbearance.

It is really in this context that Naipaul admits being '..... not English or Indian, I was denied the victories of both.' This is an actual comprehension thereby fixing standards for courage and wisdom -courage lies in truthful honesty and wisdom comes forth in illustrating the perception of defiance. It has to be accepted that conditions that set up functions for Nation, are exclusively of an authentic nature. This is quite close to assessing one's innate curiosity to substantiate the need to discover the dearth of prospects and

richness. There is a humiliation in probing the other side of the former self though now it is largely antedated and antiquated and perhaps it is this qualitative shade of Nation that finds a befitting expression in Seth as well. The pursuit is always ordained through an antithesis of sincerity and conviction to find out a way for rapprochement:

We are all here; no one is alien

Now radiation's common law

Impel us into common cause. (The Golden Gate 21)

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