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Scotland and India

A new anthology of poems from Scotland and South Asia entitled *Thali Katori*, edited by Bashabi Fraser and Alan Riach, is to be launched at the Edinburgh International Book Festival on Wednesday 23 August at 12.30. Here Alan Riach introduces the book and its significance.

At the Red Fort in Delhi on 15 August 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru unveiled India's flag for the first time after British imperial rule had ended, on India's first Independence Day. Imagine the Indian skies on 15 August 2017, the seventieth birthday of that independence, alive with kites flying, strings held by folk on rooftops and in the fields, symbols of that independence.

We thought it might be appropriate to compile an anthology of poetry from India and South Asia and from Scotland, to mark that occasion and to look into the complexity of identities and relationships that not only characterise both countries in themselves but also the relationships between them, over more than two centuries.

That complexity is described in a metaphor that gives us our anthology's title, from an essay on Salman Rushdie by the politician, diplomat and author Shashi Tharoor, in his collection, *Bookless in Baghdad: Reflections on Writing and Writers*: "In leading a coalition government, the Hindu-inclined Bharatiya Janata Party has learned that any party ruling India has to reach out to other groups, other interests, other minorities. After all, there are too many diversities in our land for any one version of reality to be imposed on all of us." Tharoor's conclusion is crucial: "So the Indian identity celebrates diversity: if America is a melting pot, then to me India is a 'thali', a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast. Indians are used to multiple identities and multiple loyalties, all coming together in allegiance to a larger idea of India, an India that safeguards the common space available to each identity."

"Katori" is a word signifying a small bowl, and a number of different foods might come in such bowls to go alongside the "thali", one plate of an arrangement of separate, different and distinctive foods and flavours.

If India, like Scotland, is threatened by an increasing number of people rejecting the dignity of such diversity and committed to imposing an oppressive uniformity of whatever kind, religious, political or linguistic, we want to oppose that. *Thali Katori* brings together two words that celebrate difference, acknowledge the need for the sensitive appreciation of difference, the virtues of complementarity and the nourishment that poetry and the arts, as vitally as savoury and sweet dishes, gives us, to keep us alive, to refuse, in Hugh MacDiarmid's phrase, "a life deprived of its salt."

The universal metaphor of the nourishment provided by both food and the arts is less of a cliché and made more specific in the historical relations of Scotland and India. When

Alan Riach visited India in 2016 to teach Scottish literature to students at Bankura University, West Bengal, in the first courses offered on that subject in India, the university principal, Professor Deb Narayan Bandyopadhyay provided some details about his own commitment to the teaching of Scottish literature. Most literature taught in India, he said, is traditionally canonical English literature, with extra and optional courses in American literature, “New Literatures”, Indian Writing in English and of course, literatures in Bengali and Gujarati and other Indian regional languages. Some scepticism from certain quarters had met his proposal to teach Scottish literature as a discrete subject. He had persevered with it for two reasons: first, there was no question about the quality of the material being as good as anything else; and also, the whole history of India and the country’s relation to the British Empire was the context for studying the arts of his country. Now, increasingly, this also was understood to be the context for the study of Scottish literature. Such a course would be a study of literature, intrinsically, but it would also prompt questions about political history and future potential that demand answers in the world we live in now. These answers only come through art.

So the history of an imperial power dominating a former colony and that colony becoming an independent country might teach Scotland things of value as much as a study of a country that has preserved its own distinctive cultural identities while, for just over three hundred years, being part of that British imperial project, might benefit students in the new India, in the 21st century.

The political history is rich, and troubling. In his Autobiography (1929), Gandhi wrote this: “I realized that the sole aim of journalism should be of service. The newspaper is a great power, but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges a whole countryside and devastates crops, even so an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy. If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control. It can be profitable only when exercised from within.”

That strikes deep in contemporary Scotland, where broadcasting is still a reserved matter for Westminster control and most of the newspapers are based south of the border. Then Gandhi issued a warning: “What surprised me then, and what still continues to fill me with surprise, was the fact that a province that had furnished the largest number of soldiers to the British Government during the war, should have taken all these brutal excesses lying down... [Now] the reader [will be able] to see to what lengths the British Government is capable of going, and what inhumanities and barbarities it is capable of perpetrating in order to maintain its power.”

But Gandhi also reminds us of the priority of peaceful resistance: “It was clear that a new word must be coined by the Indians to designate their struggle...” Gandhi coined the word “Satyagraha” which has since become current in Gujarati as a designation for the struggle. It implies not only “passive resistance” or “civil disobedience” but what is at the core of things that makes it all worthwhile, the primacy of “Truth”, of Home Rule as a birthright and resistance to foreign domination through a non-violent strategy.

The struggle is experienced in this book not through politically explicit verse but through the distinctions of subtlety and suggestion, sensitivity and enquiry, the exercise of the imagination working through but also beyond the exigencies of any immediate political world. This is one of the virtues of the arts. We have deliberately included a diversity of voices and languages, cultural and religious backgrounds, poetic forms and forms of address, but we could hardly have done otherwise. The diversity is there. It's important to emphasise, however, that this is only a sampling of work that might be expanded into a much bigger book. Still, we hope that the selection of material will show a clear, if deeply patterned, trajectory.

We begin with Walter Scott and his friend John Leyden. The passage from Scott's novel *The Surgeon's Daughter* that opens our anthology was too good to leave out simply because it isn't a poem. What Scott is presenting in fiction here is an essential truth in all the arts. In Pablo Picasso's phrase, "Art is a lie which makes you realize the truth." Picasso also noted, "Art is dangerous; yes, it can never be chaste, if it's chaste, it's not art." The art in all the poems in *Thali Katori* adheres to these dicta.

We make our way through late Victorian imperial poetry, vividly compromised with divided loyalties, uncertain allegiances, or crazily wired to inexplicable enquiries and assertions in the work of L.A. Waddell, on towards the overlapping tides of Empire withdrawing and Modernity coming in, with Violet Jacob, Rudyard Kipling and Hugh MacDiarmid, poems in Gaelic on Empire's meaning and then, later, Tessa Ransford's moving prioritisation of the personal, bringing from her own experience a sense of what it is that makes life worthwhile. Coming into the late 20th century, we can see the move away from Empire's pretentious, dissembling assertions of certainty. "Strong and stable" was a slogan used repeatedly by the Conservative Party leader in the 2017 UK general election. It's a phrase which comes directly from that world of imperialism and that's one of the reasons it feels stale and smells fusty. The distinction made by the modernist movement was to demonstrate forever the truth of multiplicity. There are "eyes in all heads / to be looked out of" in Charles Olson's words. Or in John Berger's line, "No story can now be told as if it were the only story." And yet there are still people who insistently pretend that that there is.

That there is only one, single, imperial story, is a cliché being asserted by powerful people in various parts of the world. It goes with the phrase, "There is no alternative." But there is. Always. Against this, the poems in this book and all the arts are a living antidote, a material and immaterial help. Translations into Scots from Sarojini Naidu and Rabindranath Tagore are one way to show that antidote at work; lyrical poems about the personal experience of living in the context of a multicultural diversity of identities is another. Residents in Scotland, Scots, carrying in their mortal memories histories of a culture from beyond Scotland's borders, maybe coming from their own younger years, or maybe from their ancestors, demonstrate that. Visitors to different parts of India, carrying in their minds their own histories of experience and nationality from Scotland, are others again. The trajectory unfolds in such complexity, but the story is not ended.

In James Robertson's great novel, *And the Land Lay Still*, there's a memorable exchange between Saleem, the local shopkeeper, and his friend and regular customer, Don. This is it:

"Don, let me tell you what I think. My father was a government clerk when we lived in Delhi. He was an educated man. You could say we did not too badly under British rule. Please note my careful choice of word again. And then you could say that after independence everything went to rat shit for us. Yes, you could say that. We had to move and then we had to move again and it is only in the last few years, here in Wharryburn, that I have stopped moving. I don't want to go anywhere else. But what am I? I am a shopkeeper. What did my father, an educated man, become when he came to England? A bloody shopkeeper. I don't want to be a bloody shopkeeper any more than he did, but it is how he survived, it is how I survive. It is not the desired life, it is not the perfect life but it is a life. It could be worse. We could all have had our throats cut on a train. And yet, in all the troubles my father had, I never once heard him say, "Thank God for the British!" He didn't say, "Down with the British!" either but he knew that it was pointless being nostalgic about the past. I think you are too nostalgic about the past, Don. Does it offend you to hear me say this?"

Don laughed. "Nothing you say could offend me, Saleem."

"Don't bet on it. Let me tell you one more thing. I think you had better hurry up here in Scotland or you will be the last ones out of the British Empire and if that is the case, well..."

"Well what?"

"Well, you will look pretty bloody stupid."

James Robertson is careful to make his characters enact the enquiries many people in real life get into trouble for articulating. This is what art can do. The poems in this book sometimes take up positions, sometimes refuse the option of such positioning and carefully prioritise the human universe above all temporal allegiances. Poems can do such things with ease. At the heart of them all, though, is that sense of the human diversity Shashi Tharoor spoke of in the quotation with which we began. The population of Scotland is roughly 5.295 million; in 2015, the population of India was estimated at 1.311 *billion* (one thousand million). What could be comparable?

Perhaps that's the wrong question.

Perhaps the question should be: "What can we learn from each other?"