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Interview

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# Moving world, moving voices: A discussion with Daljit Nagra

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## Abstract

This interview explores a range of both emergent and persistent areas of interest in the work of Daljit Nagra. Nagra's two latest books — *Ramayana* (2013) and *British Museum* (2017) — represent explorations of his interests in both “rootedness” — what it means to be connected or grounded in a cultural environment — and “route-edness” — what it means for cultures to travel and the impact of cultural journeying (Clifford, 1997). In both books he considers how cultures — both as individual and intertwined entities — in complex ways solidify and mutate; how they remain static and move. In this interview he explores his own shifting, layered, and sometimes uncomfortable relationship with diverse cultures, considering the extent to which and the means by which cultures “translate”. Underlining the inevitable clashes and dislocation such processes necessitate, via pluralism he identifies an essential desire for the meaningful connection of diverse cultures. Like the *British Museum* of the title of his most recent work, he sees the importance of his poetry as a project in human connectivity, asserting creative achievement, resilience, and value. In exploring these ideas, Nagra discusses the ways in which his work connects both to Indian culture in transition and translation and to canonical English Literature.

This interview was conducted in Uxbridge, West London on 6 December 2018.

## Keywords

canonicity, cultural transitions, English Literature, multiculturalism, Daljit Nagra, poetry

## Introduction

Since the publication of his first two collections, *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* (2007) and *Tippoo Sultan's Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* (2011), Daljit Nagra has cemented his position as one of the world's foremost contemporary poets. As a British poet of Sikh Punjabi parents who emigrated to England in the 1960s, he has always been interested in what Jeremy Noel-Tod (2017: 36) terms “the conundrum of national identity”. However, Nagra's interests in identity — the confusions, misunderstandings, and serendipities it comprises — extend beyond any singular framing as a “national” issue.

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Kavita Bhanot (2019) argues that identity — and related concepts such as voice and culture — be read in terms of performance. This is certainly a very apposite approach to Nagra's work which has always excelled in its ventriloquism. It is important to consider, however, the extent to which such performances represent not just surface or presentation, but also depth and interiority. Martin Heidegger proposes poetry's capacity to reveal truth through what he refers to as "projective saying", a form of language that offers the potential for the disclosure of truths by bringing forth articulations which are ordinarily hidden (2002: 45). Both Mikhail Bakhtin (1982) and Roland Barthes (1974) also presuppose that literary texts are projections of the self, but additionally insist that in reading literary texts, processes of interpretation are affected by the extent to which their meaning is perceived as fixed — the extent, in Jerome Bruner's terms (1986), to which texts encourage or discourage readers' use of subjunctivizing space. In these processes of meaning-making the liberating, yet anarchic and quasi-destructive functions of Bakhtinian carnival (1965) are never far away. These are rich ideas to bring to Nagra's later (and early) work and encourage readers and students, as this interview suggests, to consider in depth the ways in which the poet seeks his own subjunctivizing and playful space within the cultural storehouses of Britain and South Asia.

*Ramayana* (2013), *British Museum* (2017), and Nagra's current project (a work based on the *Mahabharata*) suggest a shift in direction. Language and the collision of languages has always been at the heart of Nagra's work. Rachael Gilmour approaches his use of language from the perspective of Bakhtinian dialogic, addressing its overtly heteroglossic and multilingual possibilities. Her reading of his work emerges from Bakhtin's view of language, with its inherent possibilities for "ownership" and "power". She sees his work as enacted response to a linguistic politics where "monolingual ideology continues to hold sway" (2015: 688). Nagra's poetic project, as it develops, continues to challenge monolingualism, whereby English is seen as "the guarantor of culture, education, social cohesion, economic advancement and moral order" (Gilmour, 2015: 689). What his work in fact exposes is an alternative perspective based on the inherent insecurity (linguistic, social, cultural, political, literary, moral) that silently underpins a worldview that can frame itself only in and through one language.

In this interview, Nagra shows that he remains concerned with the politics of language. As he has said on previous occasions, he finds troublesome the continued efforts of literary commentators to "place" him as a British Asian poet — ideas redolent of Homi K. Bhabha (1994), perhaps. As he seems to suggest, however, to adopt entrenched positions surrounding language and its possibilities is ultimately to the loss of all. It is equally salient to apply to Nagra's oeuvre Bakhtin's (1965) notion of carnival, with its dangerous and edgy playing with the bounds of acceptability. What emerges through his early work and seems to be becoming increasingly evident in his later work is a playful realignment — an account of a process through which Nagra is (re-)negotiating what Gilmour calls "the disruptive interplay between linguistic systems" (2015: 691).

It is not only in relation to Nagra's use of language, however, that Bakhtinian notions of dialogism and carnival apply; he appears increasingly to engage with what might be seen as cultural heteroglossia. As early as "Darling and Me!" (2007: 3–4) Nagra displayed his love of cultural eclecticism. The celebratory listing of both "high" and "low" cultural milestones we see in that poem is typical of what occurs in more

extended ways in *British Museum*, the title of which forefronts the importance for Nagra of cultural storehouses and cultural display. The culturally plural approach he adopts in *British Museum* and *Ramayana* demonstrates the extent to which Nagra's poetic project might be understood as cultural heteroglossia. His work is inherently resistant to Bakhtinian monologism. He engages increasingly with a world where strong transferrable capitals (Bourdieu, 1984) are not only desirable but personally, culturally, societally, and morally necessary.

As he indicates in this interview, Nagra's work is evolving through a process of personal transition and translation to a broader (re-)reading both of liminal cultures and societies in the process of change — even, and perhaps especially, when this change requires a return to distant or difficult “roots”. His discussion of how this happens in relation to the cultural and other “translations” of *Ramayana* demonstrates Nagra's vital sense of the interaction between cultural roots and evolving cultural routes (Clifford, 1997). The importance he places on creating a “bastardized” version that simultaneously acknowledges and honours as many as possible of the tale's roots while prioritizing none, captures both the poet's vivacious spirit and his commitment to helping write a new direction for cultural connection in the globalized world we inhabit. His *Ramayana* is at the same time an act of ownership and “de-owning”, and it will be interesting for followers of his work to see whether this is the direction of travel that Nagra continues to explore through his current work on the *Mahabharata*.

In true Janus-faced fashion *British Museum*, with its focus on reinterpreting views of Britain and Britishness and the ways in which such views are institutionalized, seems to be born out of a similar but differently aligned impulse. Together, *British Museum* and *Ramayana* suggest a shift in Nagra's sense of his relationship with both British and Asian cultures and contexts. His engagement in each of these works with iconic cultural landmarks indicates, perhaps, a less troubled and more critically playful engagement with the potentially conflicting traditions with which he feels the obligation to engage. In “Informant”, Nagra's persona is burdened with the sense that “whatever voice i put on | i know i'm heading for bother” (2007: 45). However, *British Museum* and *Ramayana* suggest that Nagra is increasingly able to come to terms with the “bother” of voice and to enjoy both the play of Bakhtinian carnival and heteroglossia.

Dave Gunning (2008), coming from a Bloomian (1973) perspective, offers a reading of Nagra's early poetry that fittingly places the poet in an anxious, even confrontational relation to English Literature. In “A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples”, the speaker-poet questions whether he is:

a noble scruff who hopes a proud

academy might canonise

his poems for their faith in canonical allusions? (Nagra 2011: 51)

Nagra's own poetry, however, resists this notion. His engagement with the canon, as suggested earlier, is not an act of faith in the cultural monolith of English Literature. His reworking of the terms and forms of the literary canon (both British and

Asian) demonstrates a playful desire to forge a new and integrative language — literary, cultural, and political. Perhaps this represents a shift in Nagra’s perception of his position as a British Asian poet — a move away from the cultural hyphenation of British-Asian (Chambers, 2010; Mishra, 1996) to a more liberating British Asian.

Nagra’s work insistently worries at the different borders and boundaries he encounters as he charts his route as a poet, be they of language, of colour, or of culture. As he observes in an interview with Claire Chambers (2010: 94), Nagra feels “it’s difficult to take a hard, fast line on hybridity”. Nagra’s work is, of course, still deeply imbued with the need to displace stereotypes and to explore the ways in which divergent histories and identities function in twenty-first century Britain and more broadly around the globe (Clifford, 1997). However, in *British Museum* in particular there seems to be a new solidification of self, a sense that the arrivals of *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* and the vicissitudes of *Tippoo Sultan’s Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* are converting via varied transitional and translational routes into a new, though sometimes uneasy, rootedness. Both *British Museum* and *Ramayana* suggest a new phase in Nagra’s “relationship to the imagined unities of tradition” (Gunning, 2008: 97).

As he has done throughout his career, Nagra continues to inhabit transitional spaces and to (dis)locate them for his readers. This interview suggests, to adopt Harold Bloom’s (1973) theory of poetry, that in his more recent work Nagra — a poet whose work deserves to be more widely known beyond Britain — has moved to a new “ownership” of his distinctive voice as a poet.

**Andrew Green [AG]:** “*Look We Have Coming to Dover!*” (Nagra, 2007: 32), the titular poem of your first published volume, emphasizes “coming to”. Every “coming to”, however, is preceded by and carries with it a “going from”. Could you talk a little about the importance to your poetry of ideas of migration, translation, and a meeting of cultures?

**Daljit Nagra [DN]:** I think one of the issues when I started writing poetry was that there wasn’t really much about Indians coming to Britain, or America, or Canada. Material about migration seemed to be done in the novel, but I wanted to put that in poetry. I wanted to give voice to the experiences of those uneducated Sikh Punjabis who came over in the late 1950s. It was a political attempt to voice their social position. I did that in the first person, because dramatic monologues allowed me to capture the tensions they faced being abroad. India is built on a matrix of regional cultural formations, a framework of codes and behaviours and castes. In Britain that changed and low castes were working with higher castes. Living through that kind of translation between cultural settings with their different demands and expectations caused all kinds of confusion and complications. The children became Westernized, and that caused further confusion. I wanted to capture a bit of that maelstrom. I also felt

that a lot of highly political poetry had been written about the experiences of Caribbean immigrants and tended to focus against the white person, but I wanted to look at first generation Indian migrants and then the kinds of secondary movement that happened within Britain from one generation to another.

**AG:** **The kind of translation between generations?**

**DN:** Yes. That ongoing project of translating the “known” from one place and seeing how it works in another. That is one of the most difficult processes that comes with migration. Sometimes that translation process leads to dilution, but in other cases it can lead to a further hardening of traditional values. I found that interesting, because that’s what migratory people do — they hold on to the values of their homeland at the time they left.

**AG:** **So would you say it’s a kind of regressive nationalism?**

**DN:** Yes, that’s a good way to put it. They are regressing in a way, trying desperately to hold on to values, either through nostalgia or through fear that their children are becoming too Westernized.

**AG:** **It seems like you’re describing a form of political as well as social realignment. How do you see the impact of that? Perhaps on your poetry or on your personal point of view? And what is its impact on the capacity of these incoming groups to engage with their new society?**

**DN:** I think that what happens is that the host community feel fear without even wanting to be fearful. That kind of emotion creates politics. My family — Sikh Punjabis were quite positive about white people in Britain, but they experienced racism and mockery. They also felt their children were becoming too Westernized. So they were reluctant to embrace their new home — partly out of fear, I think, and partly out of shame at losing touch with their value systems.

**AG:** **Can you think of an example?**

**DN:** Yes. My parents had a corner shop and all of my relatives ended up buying shops which was a great achievement. They used to talk when I was growing up about not touching cigarettes — not even with your shoe. You should walk around the cigarettes — smoking was disgusting — it was a taboo thing. And then suddenly they owned shops with cigarette counters behind the till, and they were handling cigarettes. They felt very ashamed about that; about compromising their values in order to make money. Perhaps they’d be eating beef next! Coming to terms with their shifting identity was a real learning process for them.

**AG:** At the end of “Prayer for a Gurdwara” (Nagra, 2017: 5) you write rather beautifully about the contribution of the Asian community to British life. What do you feel about that contribution?

**DN:** I feel that the big impact on British culture was made by the uneducated Indian migrants, whether it be the Sylhetis from Bangladesh with their restaurants, or the Punjabis with their restaurants and corner shops. All the shops used to shut at 5.30 p.m. and for a half day on Saturdays. It was the Indians who began opening their shops seven days a week, twelve hours a day. They had a fundamental influence on the high street. I think that was a massive cultural shift in Britain, but because the Indians had no Windrush — no watershed symbol — Indians’ achievements aren’t recognized. I find that really sad, partly because the first migrant generation is dying off now. They’re all in their late seventies, even their mid- to late eighties, or they’ve already passed away. So I felt that in *British Museum* I needed to acknowledge their contribution; they are part of the British museum, part of what it means to live in contemporary Britain.

**AG:** I’m interested in the variety of poetic voices you employ and how they might connect to your own sense of identity and your poetic practices. In “Informant” (Nagra, 2007: 45), the speaker seems to feel “unvoiced”. I wonder whether your poetic personas are even “overvoiced”, because although on one level they can articulate their feelings, their words either go unheard, or they’re misrepresented. That makes me think — especially given the implications of subversiveness and disloyalty attached to the figure of the informant — about how troublesome words and speaking can be: how speakers can be trapped in languages they can’t really relate to, and that whilst they’re willing to accommodate their language, that leads to a whole set of other difficulties in relation to both “old” and “new” tongues. We’ve already talked a bit about the idea of translation, and I’m wondering how you feel this applies to your characters’ language. What translates well and what doesn’t, what are they content to translate and what are they uneasy about translating? At one point the speaker in “Informant” says: “whatever voice i put on | I know i’m heading for bother” (Nagra, 2007: 45). How do you relate to that idea of language as troublesome?

**DN:** One thing that question raises for me is my position as a poet. I was writing about an Indian community that can’t

speak English, on the whole, but my poetry is largely bought and read by a white middle-class audience. That's unsettling. I'm making fun of my own community, but if they're not reading the poems, what are the politics of that? This creates an almost deliberate tension for me every time I write a poem. I'm bridging two positions. I want people to feel that I'm an outsider, but inside at the same time. I want them to feel that tension of being at odds with myself — the discomfort of using somebody else's language about people who aren't going to read the poems. That makes me a cultural translator, and I have to work out what to represent and how to do it — how to be honest to the people who aren't reading my poetry as well as those who are.

**AG:** **Translation is not just about the surface language; it's also about capturing the cultural, political, and literary nuances that go with the creation of the text. Translation as an act of capturing the spirit, not just the words of a thing.**

**DN:** Yes, I think that's it. It's not just the words that communicate.

**AG:** **In "The Vishnu of Wolverhampton" (Nagra, 2017: 22–24) you explore a similar problem, not with language this time, but with skin. The speaker in "Informant" (Nagra, 2007: 45) was prepared to accommodate language; here the persona is prepared to change skin; they're "ready to leave this skin for other skins" (Nagra, 2017: 23). This embodies in rather a startling way ideas of self-perception and shifting identity, as if there's a problem with their body. How far do you see language and the body as stable and certain, and how far as fragile and exploratory? Perhaps, going back to our discussion about translation, accommodation and representation need to be seen in connection with one another?**

**DN:** Thinking about the poem you're referring to, I believe that migrants, in a sense, lose themselves. The person I based the poem on was a real person — he'd worked on oil rigs in Qatar, then came to the sawmills in Britain, and I don't think he had a sense of who he was any more. Coming from a non-mobile culture, once he'd left he was dead in some senses. So I imagined that his body was no longer his and this affected his connection to his memories, to his wholeness, to his sense of self. For people in this situation, I think there's almost a shame, a discomfort about inhabiting their original skin or, indeed, any skin. Perhaps in making all these accommodations people become somehow unanchored. And yes,



representation has to be a part of that. What do people try to represent and how do they try to do it?

**AG:** **Then perhaps it's important to go one stage further and to consider the implications of seeing people or attitudes or cultural practices as representative.**

**DN:** Yes, proposing anyone or anything as wholly representative is inevitably reductive. Take the English language, for example. For me purism regarding language has its place, but language is also enormously versatile and playful. Not everyone speaks perfect, beautiful English and writers are free to use that. A representative view isn't possible, and it's the same when it comes to other cultural or societal issues.

**AG:** **How do you see the connection between language and migration?**

**DN:** Language is important and complicated for migrant communities and for individuals; speaking somebody else's language. My parents don't really like speaking English any more — my Dad almost pretends he can't speak it. I guess like a lot of men of that generation he wants to become more Indian as he gets older, and that means his relationship with English has changed. I think it's difficult for migrant people who can find themselves caught between nationality and spirituality and cultures and languages. Sometimes it's easier to regress. I like the phrase you used earlier "regressive nationalism" — seeking a kind of remembered (but not necessarily accurately remembered) purity; and maybe English can get in the way of that.

**AG:** **Perhaps we can talk a little about your relationship to the English literary canon. Your poetry is littered with explicit references and allusions to Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Larkin and others. You evidently have a deep love for these poets, but your work also expresses an ambiguous view of the literary canon and the cultural messages it encodes. "He Do the Foreign Voices" (Nagra 2017: 18–19) for instance, places your voice deliberately in an ironic relation to both Dickens and T. S. Eliot, simultaneously connecting you to and distancing you from them. How far is your work a deliberate challenge to or a reaction to or an antidote to the entrenched monolingualism and political-cultural tunnel vision of English Literature?**

**DN:** I feel my work is an inevitable departure from the canon because the authors you mention and others see a wholeness, a homogeneity. They speak from the centre of Britishness. I'm much keener to speak from the margins.



When I see myself as being British, it's almost ironic or pastiche British; I quite like the idea of putting on a pastiche voice. Taking on the voices of the Shakespeares or the Eliots feels *ersatz*, humorous, a play on the high solemnity of the past. There's a sort of modern-day politics of retrograde "owning" going on. I can't subscribe fully to those authors and their worlds, but I can make them function in my world. The challenge is to bring them alive again. So I think it's an honouring and a rupturing as well.

**AG:** **Those contrary movements happen at the same time?**

**DN:** Yes. I think the polysemic ambiguity of language allows that. Often my poems exist on the boundary between seriousness and humour and create quite a discomfiting tone, neither one thing nor the other. It's a way of exploring the boundaries between things and their contradictory nature.

**AG:** **There are two characters who appear repeatedly in your work and seem quite relevant here because they capture these contradictions — Mr Kabba and Mr Bulram, an *alter ego* English teacher. How far are they you?**

**DN:** Mr Bulram needs to be seen alongside Mr Kabba. I imagine they're embarrassed or offended by each other. They are both aspects of me, I suspect, though I'm not sure where exactly they came from now. I like Mr Bulram's attempts to seek dignity and acceptance of the past and his need to find a way for people of colour to lose their embittered attitude. I think Mr Bulram subscribes to a belief in language being central to identity, to a belief that modifying and playing with English might tarnish the language's link to the past, to its pure cadences as best articulated by the likes of Shakespeare.

**AG:** **It's quite striking how after a poem like "The Dream of Mr Bulram's English" (Nagra, 2017: 36–37), which envisions English Literature as "This heartfelt World, evermore, this shared tongue" (Nagra, 2017: 36), you immediately provide a much more violent and troublesome literary world in "GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY" (Nagra, 2017: 38–40) where the persona vilifies the idea of making his poetry into "text-book samples | of the multicultural or the postcolonial" (Nagra, 2017: 40). This is language and literature at its most political — where it can become an act of ownership, and limitation and control. This brings us back to the question of voice — "white" voices, "brown" voices. Please could you talk about cultural reductionism and the problems of bringing those voices together?**

- DN:** The UK is a very plural and diverse place, and I think we need to have shorthand ways to know about its many, many cultures and regions. We need shorthands, but these come with the danger of reduction. One of the challenges facing a writer is how to break reductive “type”, but also to create a usable shorthand that a literary text can work with. Characters must come alive for the writer, but then have to be compressed back into the confines of the poem so they work for readers. I sometimes feel as if I’m being asked to provide sociological answers about “my people” — are they a nice people or are they a bad people? I don’t sit easily with that kind of discussion about people, or with the idea of being an insider representative. It’s dangerous to see people as politicized types; if we do that we lose the ability to see them properly.
- AG:** **That seems to relate to the position of the eponymous poet in “Booking Khan Singh Kumar” (Nagra, 2007: 6–7), who refers to himself as “a ghetto poet | Who discorded his kind as they couldn’t know it” (7). Could you say something about the relationship you suggest there between the poet and his or her kind. In what ways do cultural discords and the deliberate “discording” of language function in your poetry?**
- DN:** My strategy is to “brown up” in every poem, but then to escape being brown. Here I am, “brown”, and you’re expecting something exoticized, spiritualized, a cultural other — but I’m going to resist that, or I’m going to play around with the language in order to avoid reductive closure.
- AG:** **There’s something almost Bakhtinian about that. The carnival. A deliberate and dangerous playfulness.**
- DN:** Yes. It’s quite on the edge of discomfort, but I embrace and accept that. Making fun, creating discords, violating language. People like their literature and their language to be clean, but this is mucky and messy. I try to capture foreigners’ English where it doesn’t quite work. Throwing literatures and languages and cultures together forces hybridity — like musical chords that are exciting, but unsettling and sometimes dissonant.
- AG:** **Perhaps now we could talk about a particularly rich vein of reference in your work which is there from *Look We Have Coming to Dover!* right through to *British Museum*. That’s Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* (Shakespeare, 1998/1623). In “The Furtherance of Mr Bulram’s Education” (Nagra, 2007: 38–39), the speaker refers**

disparagingly to “these onion-breath Calibans” (Nagra, 2007: 39). The image of the island is repeated throughout *Tipoo Sultan’s Incredible White-Man-Eating Tiger Toy-Machine!!!* — “This Be the Pukka Verse” (Nagra, 2011: 16–17) and “DOH) FIRST CRUSH” (Nagra, 2011: 22) are two examples — and you allude explicitly to the play in “A Black History of the English-Speaking Peoples” (Nagra, 2011: 50–53) when you envisage that “The hey-day Globe incited brave new verse” (Nagra, 2011: 52), echoing Miranda. *The Tempest* also bookends *British Museum*. Prospero stands astride the collection; he is the first figure invoked in the opening poem “Broadcasting House” and the poem’s repeated imagery of ship and island inevitably recalls the play (Nagra, 2017: 6); then the final poem, “Meditations on the British Museum”, is a reflection on “our fair isle” (Nagra, 2017: 49) and we are left with an image of how “Prospero’s surveillance hoards our every scripted quip for the island | of our interrogation” (Nagra, 2017: 52). I’m interested in why this play is so resonant for you. I suppose I’m thinking here about the interconnecting roles and voices of Prospero, Caliban, Miranda, and Ariel.

DN:

One thing is the island they end up on, which is a testing ground and which in my head always feels like Britain. Prospero is important to me. Is he the King of England? Does he represent the hierarchy? And Miranda. Is she the kind of good, liberal child who likes the outsiders coming to the island? But she’s an immigrant to the island as well — a very stoic figure. So for me *The Tempest* tests a lot of things. And Caliban and Ariel. My Kabba and Mr Bulram? Kabba in Punjabi means stubborn, and I imagine him as very much a Caliban figure. Mr Bulram is something more elevated and ethereal — an Ariel maybe? The play has big ideas about those conflicts of culture.

AG:

**Caliban says: “you taught me language; and my profit on’t | Is, I know how to curse” (Shakespeare, 1998: 33). He becomes a kind of tortured embodiment of conflict; the force of language that’s bursting to come out, but that when it does is sometimes unacceptable to those around him. Lyricism and beauty on one hand, but crudity on the other.**

DN:

“GET OFF MY POEM WHITEY” (Nagra, 2017: 38–40) is full of contradictions and is intended to be vile and ugly and horrible; a Caliban-type rant. We don’t know what the voice is ranting at, and in the end it was an attempt to shame the

self. It ridicules. I was trying to write a kind of post-satirical attack on myself; something crude but with its own sophisticated wit as well.

**AG:** ***The Tempest* acknowledges and honours that kind of voice and gives it artistic credibility.**

**DN:** Yes. When I was looking for a publisher for my first book, I didn't think anyone would be interested in these sometimes ugly poems I was writing, but the British do find a place for them.

**AG:** **That also seems to relate to the images of conflict that occur regularly in your work — Oliver Cromwell, Caliban and Prospero, force-feeding, *Catch 22* (Heller, 2004/1961), the countless battles of the *Ramayana*. To what extent do you consider your work to be a site of conflict, and in what ways do you take joy in the battle?**

**DN:** I am working on *Mahabharata* at the moment, and ideas of battle and conflict are there in *Ramayana* as well. Do your work (whatever it is) with whole-hearted joy. That is one of the best virtues of the Indian tradition. Go into battle and fight the best you can, even enjoy it, because you're serving ideals and powers that are beyond you. I wanted to celebrate people performing hard duty. We don't really have that notion in the same way, I would say, in the West — honour and pride are understood, but not duty in the same way.

**AG:** **The Christian tradition has the idea of predestination and service.**

**DN:** That seems different to serving for Fate, even if that means embracing death. That's different to dying for honour — as in *Henry V* (Shakespeare, 1982/1600).

**AG:** **One of the things you say explicitly say in your version of *Ramayana* is that you're deliberately seeking to tell a diverse version, drawing upon multiple traditions. Why did you want to do that?**

**DN:** I'm really interested in global texts. Texts that speak to the world rather than just to specific communities which can seem like threatening, nationalistic projects. That's a danger with the *Ramayana*; people are very protective of their particular versions. They see them as "pure", but that can't possibly be true, because it was an oral story originally. I wanted to infuse my version with as many regional and genre traditions as I could. I wanted to take it as far away from a "pure" version as possible; to write an absolutely bastardized version that never really settles down on the page.

**AG:** **So going right back to beginning of our interview, it's transnational, transitional, transcultural. It also raises**

**all kinds of interesting ideas related to translation and what we might understand by that term. You are saying that *Ramayana* is a tale that has been widely “translated” to fit the needs of different times and places. Inevitably in that process some elements remain intact while others are reshaped to fit differing social, cultural, political and literary demands. Your version must, in a sense, be the same thing — the production of a *Ramayana* to fit your vision of the tale to fulfil the demands of a globalized world and a twenty-first century English literary reading public.**

**DN:**

Yes. But my version is a pluralistic vision of *Ramayana*. It’s supposed to challenge the idea that there is any “pure” version of the tale. We don’t live in that kind of world any more. I wanted to challenge ideas of “ownership” and to see the story as something bigger than that. At the same time, it’s supposed to be an honouring of all those traditions I’ve drawn on and the many ways a story can spread and mutate and bring love and enjoyment around the world. I wanted to show that there are amazing things in the Thai version, in the Burmese version of the tale. Bringing all of those different versions of *Ramayana* with their unique inflections together is the joy of writing and of reading. My *Ramayana* is not intended to be critical of specific regional versions of the tale; it’s an attempt to showcase the tale’s vibrancy and its evolution — the creativity of humanity in relation to a widely loved and shared tale. The unifying power of story and of literature. I hope that my *Ramayana* is a kind of literary metaphor for the importance of challenging cultures to see themselves in accepting relation to others, an exercise in harmony and peace through literary craftsmanship.

**AG:**

**That leads on to thinking about the ways in which individuals see themselves more broadly in relation to society and their cultural roots, and the extent to which they are prepared to challenge these. In “Vox Populi, Vox Dei” (Nagra, 2017: 4) you ask a fundamental question: “Who are we at root?” The word “root” is obviously full of ideas of where people come from, tradition, the source of personal growth. It also echoes Seamus Heaney’s use of roots in “Personal Helicon” (Heaney, 1966: 57). The word “root” and other words in the same family come up again and again throughout *British Museum* — “rootless” (“Cane”: Nagra, 2017: 11), “uproot” (“Naugaja”: Nagra, 2017: 13), “uprooted yet rooted” (“From the Ambient Source”: Nagra, 2017: 6);**

elsewhere you envision the poet Czeslaw Milosz “held by a vision at root” (“Sleeping in Lindau”: Nagra, 2017: 29), the “bloodline | at root barbarous” (“The Look of Love”: Nagra, 2017: 34), and the persona in “Meditations at the British Museum” is prepared to “uproot my nice day out” (Nagra, 2017: 51). Can you say more about this focus on rootedness, unrootedness, and uprootedness?

**DN:** It’s the agricultural image, the idea of working the ground; and what the earth conceals or reveals is important. It’s also R-O-U-T-E. That homophone is quite powerful to me as well in the collection, because I feel that everything is constantly on the move and that I’m capturing people in transition, whether it be from India to Britain or a transition within British identity itself. A lot of white British poets, like Philip Larkin, look backwards as if they’re trying to define their roots with reference to some kind of imagined past because they can’t face or articulate the multiculturalism and the dynamic shifting of Britishness. That seems to me to represent an ossification of British culture. Of course people need to understand their personal roots, but where roots are idealized and institutionalized to the extent that they can never be challenged: that’s a problem.

**AG:** **Like you were saying about *Ramayana*? It’s important to value but also to reconsider and to see what happens when we bring together different roots?**

**DN:** Yes. The joy of a multicultural society is being able to enjoy the wealth of everyone’s roots. That becomes the R-O-U-T-E.

**AG:** **There’s a conflict between those “roots” and “routes”. The essential difference between the fixedness implied in the one and the motion that is inherent in the other.**

**DN:** That’s a really exciting thing for me. When I think of the migrant community, they are the R-O-U-T-E and once they arrive at their destination, they try to re-root themselves.

**AG:** **In this process of re-rooting do they lose the R-O-U-T-E?**

**DN:** I’m not sure about that, because they haven’t really found themselves. Moving from place to place, or language to language, or skin to skin they’re caught in a tragic transitional moment. Their children are changing and they can’t keep up. And even if the children stay “traditional” it’s a different kind of tradition — a Westernized tradition. They remain somehow up-rooted and un-rooted. Going back to Heaney, he doesn’t really conceptualize rootedness in that way.

- AG:** In “Personal Helicon” (Heaney, 1966: 57) he talks about the roots that he’s pulling out of the mud of personal memory — a kind of unearthing of himself. And he goes further in *North* (Heaney, 1975) and creates a sort of reverse mythology through the bog bodies that have been discovered. He’s obsessed by them; they aren’t all Irish bog bodies and objects (an elk and an oak tree come to mind), but they are all claimed by or sacrificed to some nameless Earth goddess and Heaney appropriates them as somehow symbolic of a brutal Northern European tradition to which he can connect Ireland — a kind of “rooting” legitimization. How do you see that as different from your own work?
- DN:** I think for me it’s about an almost umbilical connection. I think that is what is not present in Heaney — that really physical connection with Mother Earth and the soil. While he undoubtedly feels connected to the earth it’s quite an abstracted connection. In *Ramayana* the idea of the mother and the soil are almost environmental, ecological. Heaney writes about his community from the inside, but as a British Asian, I’m neither insider nor outsider — my position is ambivalent. That makes me think about roots in quite a different way. Perhaps I’m seeking a different kind of definition.
- AG:** That’s interesting and ties into your latest collection, *British Museum*. In “Meditations on the British Museum” (Nagra, 2017: 49–52) you portray a building which is one of the great cultural storehouses of the world but is full of things that have been ripped from their roots. What about the cultural depredation and the historical-cultural violence that is represented by such an institution? How do you feel about that?
- DN:** It’s complicated. We only have to look at the contemporary Middle East. If we didn’t have these beautiful artefacts here, what would happen to them? Take the celebrations about the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in Afghanistan. We are now guardians, and the West needs to protect these things. I think that events in recent decades have led to a change in the argument. In the past Britain was guilty of appropriating things, but Britons are also incredible preservers. That’s become increasingly important. It’s too easy to say that artefacts should be returned to where they came from. I don’t think that’s always the case. I also think that the way the items are displayed in Western museums and the amount of people who come to see



them provides huge publicity for a wealth of cultures and communities. Appropriation is where it started, but now we have to be more pragmatic. Perhaps that helps cleanse the cultural politics.

**AG:** **“Broadcasting House” (Nagra, 2017: 6–10) takes on the whole gamut of British cultural icons, from Langland via Shakespeare, Betjeman, Lawrence, and Larkin to *The Archers*, *Only Fools and Horses*, and *Strictly Come Dancing*. Do you make a distinction in your own thinking between “high” and “popular” culture?**

**DN:** I’m caught between thinking I’m a mimic man — a mimic of British identity — and that I have something original to say. Have I become an Uncle Tom figure, or do I maintain my unique identity as a writer? The institution poems in *British Museum* release something in me; they take me back to an Augustan sensibility, like Pope and Dryden. Perhaps it’s showing off on one level, but it’s also drawing on the full range of cultural resources for thinking; a way of trying to find possible ways of understanding contemporary Britain. I look to literature to complicate and develop debate by referring freely and widely. I had no thoughts of *Piers Plowman* (Langland, 1992/1386) when I started writing “Broadcasting House” (Nagra, 2017: 6–10), and then it just came in as an image from the past — its images of the waves and water seemed appropriate. But ideas equally came from *Strictly Come Dancing*, so I used that too. I enjoy using both “high” and the “low” diction and references, because I believe that’s how we experience life. I want to question how we understand nationhood and its relation to globalization. If we have confidence in ourselves, then we can go elsewhere. But if we’re not open-minded, how can we embrace others?

**AG:** **That leads me to one final question. Britain stands on the verge of Brexit. There’s a strident political divide between those who want to celebrate diversity and the wealth that coming together brings and those who are looking for a new isolationism. I wonder if you feel there’s a shift in the importance and function of poetry at this point — in Britain or more broadly in the world?**

**DN:** I think that’s a really important question, and it’s a debate that should be occurring much more in contemporary poetry. I feel that people almost subconsciously are writing a poetry that is more overtly political, but that needs to be more explicit. I’m not talking about performance poetry, but page poetry which tends to be a bit more nuanced.

Maybe the sophisticated “race” poetry that’s being written in America — Terrance Hayes’ *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin* (2018), or Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2015) — should be inspiring us in Britain. The “Me Too” campaign that kicked off in the 1980s about being more sensitive to each other. Poetry can’t simply be metaphysical or introspective; it needs to be heard over what’s going on in the world. Poetry should be addressing the polarization and encouraging healing.

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