

The Indian National Anthem and the Sydney Writers' Festival

Thoughts on webs of song

Connections, once made, are almost impossible to unmake without leaving traces of absence and presence. Take, for example, the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, Katoomba, Australia, and the Science Auditorium at Goa University, India. Both spaces, in two different continents and two different cultures, embody the shininess of the twenty-first century, its promise of newness made good. For me these places are connected not just architecturally, but more numinously, by a web of song.

Last week I attended a lecture by the eminent Indian historian Romila Thapar, in the Science Auditorium at Goa University, packed to capacity with over 400 people. The beginning and the end of the lecture was marked with an enforced patriotism, as happens often in India at official functions, as we were all asked to stand for the national anthem. I had stood up on many such occasions, all through school and university, singing *Jana Gana Mana* as earnestly as the next person. But singing it last week, as a 'hyphenated Indian', with an Australian passport, owing allegiance to a different flag, was quite another matter.

Firstly, I couldn't stop the tears. The source of the tears could have been the famed guilt of the diasporic Indian, or a sentimental attachment to the place of one's birth finding an outlet through the anthem, or a tribute to the power of Tagore's poetry to move and affect, or perhaps an embodied reaction to the memory of those who resisted British and Portuguese colonization, and won us our freedom. Whatever it was, I stopped singing half-way through. I had not forgotten the words. I just could not apprehend them as I had done before.

Secondly, I realised that I was home. This was the home I had so often been asked about in Australia. The home that I had left, and the home in whose honour I was now singing. It made me think of my other home in Sydney, and more specifically of the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre.

Earlier this year, on Saturday May 18, 2013, I was privileged to be on a panel as part of the Varuna program of the Sydney Writers Festival, held in the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre. My co-panelists were the very accomplished writers Malla Nunn, Catherine Rey, and Hsu-Ming Teo, chaired by Ali Lemer. We were all contributors to *Joyful Strains: Making Australia Home*, an anthology of memoirs from writers who were born elsewhere and have now made Australia their home. This anthology, edited by Kent MacCarter and Ali Lemer, is a literary response to Australian immigration as the editors tell us, and gives readers a dual view, i.e. an outsider's view as seen from the inside, or an insider's view as seen from the

outside, depending on your vantage point. The space, like its Goan counterpart, twinkled with a capacity crowd who were gracious and generous, and laughed at all our jokes. All of us on the panel were asked, in varied ways, about the idea of home. The connection to place, to the sticky birth webs that are hard to shake off, is a powerful trope for us humans. We are like an old river, dammed in places, diverted in others, meandering when we must flow straight on, pushing against boulders and shining them to a sparkle, flowing in and out of countries and song lines, yet somehow yet somehow compelled to find real and metaphorical ways to go back to the old course. We want to talk about our own experiences of home, and we want to hear the home stories of others.

While *Joyful Strains: Making Australia Home* is a sparkling collection of memoirs by 27 different Australians who were not always Australian, it is a turning and holding up to the light of that jewel of a trope called home. Yet it is also a song of meditation that connects physical spaces in different ways. Last week for me, it connected two auditoriums through an embarrassingly tearful rendition of the Indian National Anthem. Next week it may be different. Such is the power of the idea of home. Of making homes. And of how the near impossibility of cleanly and comfortably unmaking homes too.

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