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HISTORICAL WEIGHTLESSNESS: WRITING *THE SECRET VINDALOO*

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ABSTRACT

I offer a personal essay on the formative influences of The Secret Vindaloo *(2014); why I wrote it, and the personal and literary issues that arose in a work of fiction that foregrounded Anglo-Indians. Not the least of the challenges that emerged was the sobering realisation that I, as an Anglo-Indian, had only a passing knowledge of my community, and by extension that, perhaps, Anglo-Indians, faultlessly, possess a cursory grasp of their history. 'Historical Weightlessness' is an organising metaphor I coined to reflect the sense of a collective inner historical gap and it's used to drive this essay which explores issues at the intersection of racial science, illegitimacy, marginality, stereotypes, and post-colonial theory. The heartbeat of The Secret Vindaloo, its voice, authorial position, genre, form, and strategies such as metaphors, appropriation and abrogation – are also commented upon. For the readers benefit I include a summary of the novel at the start of the essay and provide extracts from the work to illuminate points being made. Finally, noting Frank Anthony's 1943 observation that the teaching of Anglo-Indian history was being 'completely ignored' in our schools and that Anglo-Indian educationalists were 'utterly ignorant' of the subject (Charlton-Stevens, 2022, p. 112) and my sense that possibly nothing much since then has changed in the homeland, I wonder at the impact of cultural impoverishment on Anglo-Indians over time. As a result of all these reflections I plea for the prioritisation of a comprehensive Anglo-Indian course of studies starting with the Portuguese in the 15th Century up to India of the 21st Century – da Gama to Brahma – for the education of Anglo-Indians and others.*

THE NOVEL'S STORYLINE

The Secret Vindaloo is a postcolonial novel about the search for identity: individual, communal and national. It explores the British-Indian colonial encounter, marginalisation, cultural stereotypes, exodus, utopias and dystopias, diasporas, human displacement, and positive and negative discrimination.

Set in Prime Minister John Howard's Australia, *The Secret Vindaloo*, using magical realist techniques, follows the exploits of a hybrid Anglo-Indian, Puttla Marks, who, because of general deracination, is without a sense of history. This marginalisation causes him to feel historically weightless and manifests itself in him as a gravity defying lightness; Puttla can fly. Food is inextricably linked with Puttla's identity but authentic Anglo-Indian food in Australia is hard to come by. One day, believing he has finally found a genuine Vindaloo in a Food court Puttla sets down to relish it, but he soon realises it is just another fake. Unable to contain his food rage Puttla flies into the air. Subsequently arrested and tossed into a government facility for Citizenship Assessment Puttla has to apply for a visa to stay in Australia by playing Ozsophy, an iconic Board game, and posting a decent score.

The narrative uses food as a deep metaphor for the retrieval of history. Puttla's gastronomically invested responses to Australian icons document his alternative sense of personal and communal history against a verifiable, but little-known background of Indo-Australian connections. His stories, aimed at staving off deportation, selects various events and personalities from history and popular culture such as Caroline Chisholm and Governor General Sir Richard Casey. (Both Australians had significant Indian connections.) In its choice of examined events and celebrities, the novel constantly questions those mainstream constructions of writing that privilege Imperial Culture, Hindu fundamentalism, and even some self-representations of the community authored by Anglo-Indians.

PERSONAL ESSAY

If my Anglo-Indian head had a geography it would have been called Kashmir – the Gaza of the subcontinent. Like the past occupants of those fractious spaces whose claim to territory was contested by many, my head, too, was a historical repository of the beleaguered Anglo-Indian community, also known as Mestize, East Indian, Eurasian. The Kashmir-of-my-head was a sought-after space by Others; the Raj and India. Whilst I kept the duo at bay in my own life no one stopped Them in the past from measuring our heads, shoulders, knees and toes, and writing scholarly books on Anglo-Indian Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes, calling it racial science. The colonisers extended their fixation to other Anglo-Indian body parts; to wit, their

reproductive organs, (mentionable Calcutta Anglo-Indian euphemisms for body parts are arguably,‘ nunuu’, ‘duudduu’, ‘The Promised Land’). The petri dish of the times deducted that these body parts were Enthusiastic; the species was declared genetically degenerate and dangerous. Mixed-race females were regarded as promiscuous and the males louche. Their progeny was loathed and feared. And whilst Indian erotic sculptures at Khajuraho and Konarak looked on stonily as their supplicants adored elsewhere, the pejorative stereotypes for the mixed-race community flourished, nurturing salacious tales and misconceptions, evident even in the India of today.[1] This then was the beleaguerment Anglo-Indians and their forebears endured. As a consequence of being regarded variously as outcastes by the Raj and India, marginality and the lightness of being in societal terms became their endowment. Not that I knew it at the time but becoming historically weightless as it were, that feeling of not mattering, became the drive for the writing of *The Secret Vindaloo*.

In 1972 I broke out of the Kashmir redoubt and moved to Australia. The Land Down Under proved to be a demanding entity which took sole tenancy of my headspace; or was I, now, the tenant?

Australia roped me in as an Australian citizen and laid down a dinky-di cultural rubric; ditch the past, become Australian, do multiculturalism, be a successful migrant. And if I succeeded in all of this it meant I was a good tenant, and qualified for citizenship, a tick for government’s multicultural policies (D'Cruz, 2006, p. 207). It was the time of 30 pieces of silver; federal grants to produce writing, visual and performance arts that demonstrated Australia was a successful multicultural milieu. Many applied, few were rejected. For me, the act of becoming an Australian citizen was less about accepting local acculturation and more to do with securing a Down Under future. Ironically, whilst many travellers to India say they ‘found’ themselves there, I’d more than suggest that’s

[1] See, for example, senior journalist Karan Thapar’s clumsy *mea culpa*, “I, for one, didn’t know the Anglo-Indian community is not a product of happenstance and casual miscegenation” in https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/an-interesting-read-on-the-anglo-indian-community-101665839210804.html .

where I, and possibly my *jaati,*[2] went missing. Lost in full sight. Finding myself would happen elsewhere, slowly and not without consternation.

Gaining Australian citizenship was easy enough. Explaining who I was to my Australian teaching colleagues was another matter:

> You've got an English name but you changed it from Indian, haven't you?
> *No, I'm Anglo-Indian.*
> What's that?
> *British on dad's side and Indian on mum's.*
> But you're born in India, so you must be Indian mate.
> *Me thinking: "So if a kangaroo's born in a stable it's a horse?"*

I did try to explain who an Anglo-Indian was, or thought I did, to each and every teacher, each and every class, and then to parents on Meet the Teacher Day. It was an exhausting exercise, elsewhere described in terms of 'explanation fatigue' (Andrews & Raj, 2021, p. 189), but it's only later I realised I had given very superficial answers, mainly one liners about my identity; the definition contained in the Indian Constitution**,** the Brit dad Indian mum thing, or a surly "I'm not Indian". Apart from that I knew next to nothing about the history of our community. Other moments of self realisation would freight in.

Like the day I parked my car at Albert Park Lake, Melbourne. Armed with a biro and note pad I thought I'd devote the clear sky morning to starting my first novel from the Anglo-Indian point of view. I sat in the car, my capsule for writing, notebook on lap, pen at the ready, dust particles hanging in the sunlight like mini punctuation marks. Twenty minutes later I had two sentences about a kindly Irish Christian brother from St George's School, Bowbazar, site of my early education. I wondered what about it was Anglo-Indian. So, I wrote, "I am Anglo-Indian." I then read it aloud. It felt good, always does. There is no sucked in breath from onlookers, no fear of shallow buried ordnance about sacred caste and outcaste, just the tiniest echo of a nail being

[2] *jaati* (caste) is used ironically here, as it is by many Anglo-Indians of my generation to refer to their community.

hammered into a reformative chit on a Wittenberg church door. But describing one's identity is a political act, and it requires more than its declaration to make a story. A knowledge of Anglo-Indian history would have been handy. I knew a lot about Shakespeare and Siddhartha, but of our history I knew nix. I had never been offered a course entitled Anglo-Indian history at school, and I'd rather be horribly wrong than right, but it appears that no such course is available. How could I realise my writing ambition?

Help was at hand, an Elaborator sitting on a university library shelf looking down at me like a gnome. I pulled down Nirad C Chaudhuri's *The Continent of Circe (Chaudhuri, 1967)* and idly flicked through the pages and halted at a chapter, 'The half-caste minorities – genetic and cultural.' It focussed on Eurasians, a term Anglo-Indians were also known by. Some lines leaped out at me. My education on Anglo-Indians had started:

> Young Eurasians, both boys and girls, showed a weak and degenerate form of the English schoolboy and girl. (Chaudhuri, 1967, p. 260)
>
> To young Eurasian girls, more especially, the instability gave a deceptive beauty, like that of a rime-covered, but canker-eaten moss rose. (Chaudhuri, 1967, p. 260)
>
> It was the women of this class that mostly supplied prostitutes for the White Man in India. (Chaudhuri, 1967, p. 261)
>
> They were either lifeless wax dolls without a mind …but very volatile, essence of sensuality. (Chaudhuri, 1967, p. 269)
>
> As it happens, the very figure of these girls has become a sort of emblem of their destiny. they have a characteristic physical appearance…top heavy, …even when not plump…full upper limbs, equally full nether limbs down to the calves, a thinness from the calves to the ankle…the gazelle-like effect by wearing high heeled shoes they seem to be always on the point of toppling over. (Chaudhuri, 1967, p. 264)

I admit to blushing and looking around as I read. Was this part of our history? Why weren't we taught it? Did I know differently? I hid the book deep in the bowels of the library. I'd say *The Secret Vindaloo* started marinating in my head then.

There is thin air between Utopias and Dystopias and now I was caught in its vortex. My parents, like many other Anglo-Indian parents, had made emigration for my sister and me their Crusade. For entire generations leaving India for England, Australia or New Zealand was never an 'if' but 'when'. My mum, a devout Catholic, prayed continuously for me to emigrate and to me it sounded like, "Hail Mary, full of Grace, send my son to a foreign place" (Butler, 2014, p. 237). The means to travel was also another prayer, "Holy Mary, mother of care, help me get his air fare" (Butler, 2014, p. 237). It seemed, to my wonderful mum especially, that her prayers had been answered. We received our 'papers' to Australia but the experience down under soon turned sour. Not the least racist plum of immigrating to Australia was that although the White Australia policy had been officially abolished by 1973, many in the street did not seem to notice that overturn. Labour leader Arthur Calwell's cheap call – Two Wongs don't make a White – was still in the air. Stereotypes of Asians abounded, and Melbourne, in the early 70s, felt raw. In the popular imagination, India was thought of as a monolithic entity, no space was reserved for ethnicities such as Anglo-Indians. This was not the Utopia my mother had envisaged for her son.

And then I received another lesson on being Anglo-Indian by yet another Elaborator, this time an Antipodean. When a vacancy appeared for a teaching post in a Melbourne private school operating in the image of, say an Eton, I applied. I suspected that stating I was Anglo-Indian could be problematic for an English principal so what else could I edge into my application? Mention my British subject passport? So, I did. We Brits needed to hang together. The next afternoon a very English voice called my landline. It was the Master of the school I had applied to. He congratulated me on the excellence of my application, bemoaning the standard of the ones sent by the 'locals.' He gave me an interview time, mentioning it was only a formality, "One has to abide by rules, doesn't one." The next day I arrived at the school, walked past a bell tower, cricket grounds, ivy covered walls, and was shown into the Master's office. He, fair in complexion, of large girth, and wearing a tweed coat, looked askance at me. Did he not expect a pencil thin darkish person, with black curly locks wearing a body shirt, thin tie, drainpipe trousers, thin belt, and Cuban heel shoes? I really can't recall him offering a handshake, or even a chair. He seemed to just stare, conversation was at a minimum. A short time later I found myself outside the office, wondering just how I had

lost a sure-fire job. I felt it was a race issue, but I had declared I was Anglo- Indian. I held this view about latent discrimination for decades and it's only when I wrote this article that an explanation offered itself. Had the Master expected a different type of Anglo-Indian, the Britisher living in the subcontinent whom I didn't know existed as a category? Anglo-Indian to me always meant the mixed-race version. Such was my ignorance.

Caught between the legacy of pejorative stereotyping and ambiguous reception by Australian society I began to feel as though I was back in India, again a *firinghee.* The sense of displacement and alienation grew. I mattered not. I had 'found myself': a somewhat historically weightless entity. The existential question I then faced, extrapolating from Rushdie's' *Imaginary Homelands* was how was I to live in the world? (1992, p. 18).

I had to write myself into being. Write as an Anglo-Indian. Surely, words would fill me up. But before I could attempt that there was a ladder of writerly questions to be scaled. For instance, what kind of English would I write in? Having been educated in Calcutta by missionaries and in Anglo-Indian schools I was taught an English with Britain as its template. That canon now seemed inadequate. What was, to borrow Arundhati Roy's phrase, "the morally appropriate language" (2018) for me to think and write in? I don't know that I pondered long over the choice. I wrote the way I spoke, and that English echoed my geographical locations and hybridity. Importantly, I could use the variant our community was derided for in colonial times – chi chi English – akin to our Anglo-Indian patois, because I was a thack Anglo, men, *usli* not *nukl*i. Illegitimacy rules. Rushdie put it as only Rushdie can: "Melange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that, is how newness enters the world" (1992, p. 394).

For all of that, living in the diaspora can be a gritty experience. For me, there's a sense of being unplugged, in free fall. I miss the herd, the collective of solidarity, the ritual of dance (the jive, of course), using our patois – 'dol', 'bad word' curry, and please God, Vindaloo pronounced properly. At work and play I'm really not beyond eavesdropping on conversations. I've had luck with one person saying 'dol', referring to the red lentil soupy curry, to someone across the room from me. I sidled up to her. We are now

friends. She invites me over for bad word (ball) curry and Devil's chutney, calls me 'brother' and I refer to her as 'sas'. We bring the Anglo-Indian lobby to two in our fair city of 80,000. Pucca.

Another writerly question I faced was what genre was I going to use? During my course of studies at Melbourne University I encountered the Augustans: Dryden, Pope and especially the satirist Jonathan Swift. I tried my hand at the theatre of the absurd and *blanche* (Butler, 1998) was my first published work in Australia.

But the major challenge for me was how to foreground Anglo-Indians in a narrative when I was largely ignorant of their history? It seemed like trying to make *kul kuls* without a mold. Inspirers appeared on book shelves: Sealy's *The Trotter-nama* (1998), where Eugene Trotter recounts the history of his Anglo-Indian family, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* with the narrator, Saleem Sinai, "technically an Anglo-Indian" (D'Cruz, 2006, p. 167) Desani's, *All about H Hatterr,* its eponymous Eurasian, "fifty-fifty of the species" (Desani, 1948, p. 31), Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) for affectionate parody and, later, Aristotle, "Midway between the unintelligible and the commonplace, it's metaphor that produces most knowledge" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 50). Ashcroft's *The Empire Writes Back* (2002) gave me the final prompt for the embracing of "marginality as the fabric of social experience" (Ashcroft et al., 2002, p. 103). It jettisoned me to write my story, turn stereotypes on their head, such as the trope of Anglo-Indian 'illegitimacy'. Why limit that canard to one set of parents in my novel, why not have a commune of surrogates? From different historical times. Thus, I appropriated into the novel, James Shepherd of 1857 Mutiny fame; the legendary boy poet Henry Luis Vivian Derozio from the 1840s, and then went mad, got myself a rabid dog, ensuring he was a half-caste.

And what of the authorial voice? I couldn't go past the picaresque, *mastaan*, likeable rogue, the joker. Baroque the stereotype, take the racial science nonsense, fatten it up so it collapses upon its own weight, reductio ad absurdism, ad nauseam, *fattafat* prose, swirl, twirl, dervishwrite the opus bogus.

“Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are” (Brillat-Savarin, 1825, quoted by Butler, 2014) suggested itself as the appropriate epigram for the novel**.** I don’t mind admitting I have more than a passing penchant for vindaloo, hunting the ingredients down in the local Indian grocery, marinating the meat, cooking, smelling, eating, sharing, heating leftovers to have with dol and rice, placing warmed up vinegary gobbets of ‘leftovers’ down the spine of a paratha to make a vindaloo kati roll. Did I pick vindaloo as the deep metaphor for the novel or did it seek me out? The novel starts with that obsession in mind. Here in the Prologue, my alter ego, Puttla Marks:

> …plunged through to the food court. Spying the joint he had come for, he swaggered to the counter and surveyed the chalkboard menu. Minutes later he feverishly scribbled.
>
> Mama, so much to tell you. Urgent urgent. Real, real vindaloo (not as good as yours, though) has come to Melbourne! I’m sitting here at Neoteric Curries in Chadstone food court. Guess who is the cook? Pamperelle Furtado! (Butler, 2014, prologue)

And later:

> Mama, is your old gunnysack of spices still under the bed? Ms. Furtado consults a curry app on her smartphone for quantities; not like what you do, Mama—a handful of this, pinch of that. She spoons out garlic and ginger granules, some hydrogenated cumin, coriander in a tube, hydroponically nurtured mint, and organic chili. Remember when your chili powder tin overturned and the flakes bounced off the floor because merchant wallah had put in crushed red brick to increase the weight? Ms. Furtado puts the condiments in- to the neon blender. She touches the pulse button and the masala flies! You collect your secret spices onto a grinding stone, crack and pound the turmeric root with the end of your stone roller, and the stain spreads over the pitted tablet into grooves like secret writing. With the edge of your hand you sweep a ridge of spices under your grinder. You grip your roller with both hands as you kneel over the tablet, Mama. No wonder when you whacked me for not doing my homework it hurt. You press down. The garlic pods spurt vin d’alu—wine of the garlic. You flick more water over it, add more seeds, the

> sweat dripping off your brow—Mama, I've seen that happen. Then more scoops, more grinding, and then, funtoosh, the seeds crack, spices become masala, the aroma is inside our nostrils, your eyes still, other worlds explode inside you. It is done! You are my mother, Vin d'alu Queen! Pukka! (ibid)

In the same section, Marks, disappointed with taste testing yet another fake vindaloo, works himself into a rage and in a moment of Anglo-Indian magical realism, flies up into the air and moonwalks. This foreshadows the novel's ending which features an Anglo-Indian dog, a mongrel, a half-caste, a pariah, a personification for obvious purposes. Arthur, an exceptional Anglo-Indian educated dog of the 1960's, knows things:

> (Dogs in Australia eat) Pals Meaty bites, Chomp dogs Chow. No Vindaloo? (In Australia) freedom for canines was restricted. Over there he couldn't run around at will and threaten to bite people occasionally, to intimidate them with threats of Rabies. Arthur knew how Indians were terrified of Rabies and misnamed the deadly infection as hydrophobia. [In India] He quite enjoyed eyeballing people from time to time, steaming up a mad look in his eye and a few induced bubbles of froth at the sides of his mouth. Onlookers then took to their legs. But this didn't wouldn't work in Australia. There were strict Council laws over there and under certain circumstances hounds faced capital punishment! Barbaric. (Butler, 2014, p. 234)

In this final chapter Henry Lawson's, 'The Loaded Dog' is appropriated in time and space from 1920's Australian bush to the metropolis of modern Melbourne. For those who are not familiar with 'The Loaded Dog', it's a humorous short story by the Australian writer Henry Lawson. The plot concerns three gold miners and their dog Tommy, and the farcical consequences of leaving a bomb cartridge unattended for Tommy to grab, somehow ignite, and scamper around the camp causing mayhem. Arthur's story parodies this, when drunk on Anglo-Indian punch, and frothing at the mouth playfully chases reunion participants who then scamper thinking he has 'hydrophobia'. Arthur, at the end of this chapter, in another moment of magical realism,

Anglo-Indian oeuvre, is transported into the air and watches the world from above. This brings the novel to a close.

But I can't close the lid on this box featuring the formative influences of *The Secret Vindaloo* and walk away, job done. Because another job needs to be started dealing with, an uncomfortable truth: we Anglo-Indians do not really know our history. Throw a pebble into India and it'll land on a person of ancient culture, knowledgeable about their heritage, be it Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Parsi. What if the pebble bounced off an Anglo-Indian? There will be the sound of emptiness. We walk hollowly.

What may have caused this lack of knowledge about ourselves? What price have we paid, as a community, for the impoverishment of our selfhood? What are the consequences for our youth being denied an education about their heritage? Is it possible to lead full lives when you don't know your history? As far back as 1943, Frank Anthony, founding father of the post-constitution community, was observing that "the teaching of Anglo-Indian history which should form the first and basic ingredient of the curriculum, has been completely ignored" in Anglo-Indian schools. "Not only European but Anglo-Indian educationalists are utterly ignorant of the history and achievements' of the community" (Charlton-Stevens, 2022, p. 112). Have things changed since then? Is there now a properly constructed course of studies covering the first European trader to land in India to modern times – da Gama to Brahma – on Anglo-Indians? I suspect there isn't. No matter. We need to look to the immediate future. Given that there is currently no lack of resources on the subject – journals, books, articles, creative media presentations – is it time to educate our youth with a course of studies at school level answering the questions of who they are, where they come from, where they are going?

In conclusion, I have attempted to present the history of writing *The Secret Vindaloo,* why I felt compelled to compose it, and what factors influenced the composition. Writing this essay has been a journey of discovery, not without moments of personal realisation. Before I commenced the novel I faced a sobering problem; reflecting on a history of which I had scant knowledge. Authors, notably Sealy, Rushdie and Desani, provided inspiration.Postcolonial theory carried the writing ambition to fruition. *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft et al., 2002) particularly provided the justification, rationale and strategies for the telling of marginalised histories. Other decisions I had

to make either prior to the writing or discovered during the process revolved on the 'moral choice of language' for me to use as an Anglo-Indian, genre, authorial position, and voice. I, mostly, found my way. In addition, I expressed a personal anxiety about the apparent lack of a comprehensive Anglo-Indian course of studies – da Gama to Brahma – in the homeland and its impact on the community. I make a plea for restoration, for the inception of an educational course of Anglo-Indian studies.

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