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Thinking Out of the Story Box: Creative Writing and Narrative Culture in South Asia

Abstract:

How are the oral repertoires of cultures reconstituted by their acts of writing? Writing, this paper argues, is a sort of 'box' that serves to contain the creative productions of script cultures. Like a box, it stores and preserves the legends and stories, the quotidian speech acts of greeting, declaring, promising or ordering as well as the fundamental scientific conjectures and dreams that animate all speech communities. Unlike a run-of-the-mill box, however, writing also acts upon and redesigns the cognitive materials that it holds, formatting inchoate information into 'knowledge packets' that can be efficiently transmitted across time and space. In this unique characteristic lies its almost unlimited power over the human imagination. Yet it is worth noting that writing is a relatively recent linguistic invention which experts calculate is no more than eight or nine thousand years old at most. To put things in perspective, written scripts came along at least 40,000 years after humans began to talk and exchange meanings.

This paper will attempt to explore some of the cognitive and cultural issues involved in using the powerful but still evolving medium of written scripts for 'creative' purposes in a region like Asia that comprises half the illiterate population of the world. It will do so by looking at a device commonly known as a *kavad* or 'story-box' in India. The *kavad* is used to illustrate and amplify oral performances of storytelling. In contrast to the metaphorical 'writing-box' that I have invented for the specific purposes of this paper, it is a longstanding and integral part of material culture in northern India and in particular the state of Rajasthan. It has a tangible presence and can be handled, opened, closed, broken, mended, reassembled and even carried on one's shoulders. Most importantly, it is a shared narrative resource and a reservoir of emotional empathy. The paper seeks to show how individual acts of creative writing in South Asia, not to mention creative writing courses, can benefit enormously from paying greater attention to the sophisticated modes of oral storytelling exemplified by inventions like the *kavad*. This narrative heritage and the rich participative culture that it engenders is at once identifiably 'Asian' and indubitably universal: consequently, the relevance of the 'story-box' in the age of the comic-book, the graphic novel and interactive computer story-games should not be underestimated.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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Introduction: The Myth of Asia

Any discussion of 'creative writing in Asia' must begin by paying some heed to what we might mean by the catch-all term 'Asia'. The first reference to this proper noun is generally held to occur in Herodotus' copious *Histories* circa 440 BCE, but of course we are quite clueless as to how long the word 'Asia' existed in *oral* parlance before 'the Father of History' took an interest in it. It is exactly this gap between longstanding oral knowledge and the written text as the 'box' designed for the passing on of this knowledge that we shall be exploring throughout this paper. In this respect, the 5th century BCE date for the first mention of 'Asia' suggests that the notion of Asia, like writing, is a fairly recent invention.

Herodotus wrote in an era when the Athenian city-state was at the height of its powers, the intellectual hub of the Greek world where debates of all kinds flourished. For example, Socrates had more or less contemporaneously opined that the invention of writing was likely to encourage 'forgetfulness in men's souls'. Yet 'Asia' was still at this time only a name for the world's eastward boundary on Greek maps. Herodotus himself was not all that interested in Asia and most certainly not in Asians; he just felt he had to strongly make the point that the Greeks and Ionians had got their geography wrong. The Greeks divided the world into just three parts: Europa, Libya (Africa) and Asia; but Herodotus had in mind a fourth unit—Egypt—and favoured the view that Egypt began where Asia ended, with the Nile as a natural boundary (Herodotus 1924 edition: 121). The point of rehearsing this ancient history is not only because it is prescient happenstance that Egypt and Libya have today captured the imagination of the world with their peoples' uprisings but also because Herodotus astonishingly argued for Europe, Libya, Egypt and Asia as separate cultural spaces even as he

believed they belonged to a single geographical land mass. The Greeks were different in their looks, customs, language and beliefs from the Libyans and Egyptians and each culture had to be assigned its own territory. As for Asia, it was simply the realm that lay 'beyond'.

For Herodotus and the ancient Greeks, Asia ended with India. That is why Alexander, battling his way eastwards from Asia Minor a century or two after Herodotus, thought he had attained world dominion when he won the battle against King Porus of India. Indeed, this representational strain from the Alexandrian conquest on seemed to be so dominant that by the European Middle Ages Asia seemed to have become a kind of Chinese box, containing a plethora of 'Asias'. Even the accidental discovery of America and the 'New World' was a direct consequence of this cognitive engagement with the at once over-imagined and under-attested entity 'Asia'. All through the early modern period, those tireless voyages in search of the fabulous wealth of the Indies fostered the idea of an inexhaustible Asian cornucopia strikingly different in flora, fauna and social mores from the familiar environment of 'the West'. Etymological scholars have also noted there could be an earlier root for the word 'Asia' deriving from the general Akkadian/Assyrian/Sumerian word *asu* or *asa* for 'the East' as opposed to 'the West'.

Whatever the truth, there is little doubt that 'Asia' as a cultural, political and geographical term has played a significant part in both homogenizing several extremely diverse cultures (the Chinese, the Indian, the Arab and so forth) and in the attribution to the region of multitudinous forms of 'the Beyond'. Postcolonial theorists have of course dwelt on this characterisation of Asia, recognizing its implications for an analysis of colonial trespasses. Homi Bhabha, for instance, avers that there is always "a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond'" (Bhabha 1994: 1).

In this essay, I suggest that the disorienting notion of the 'beyond' in Asia today can be categorised in three ways as far as 'creative writing' is concerned: first, the idea of the 'beyond' can be taken to refer to the myriad languages of Asia that lie outside the ken of the English language and English language writing; second, the word 'beyond' can serve as a bridge between the cultures traditionally assigned to the 'Asian' ambit and those of the Pacific Rim; third and most crucially for the argument of this paper, 'beyond' can help reference oral genres of creative expression that are not captured in a written form. For writers who see themselves as belonging to 'Asia' it could be not just an ethical but a stimulating obligation to explore these 'out of the box' forms of the 'beyond'. As has long been recognised (Said 1979; Young 1990; Nair 2002), the boundaries established by the connotative meaning associated with signifiers like 'Asia' are mental fences demarcating cultural space; and if these invisible lines continue to limit us today when we attempt to grapple with the inevitable questions of identity and identity-formation that crop up in discussions of creativity and writing in an Asian context, then it is up to us to renegotiate these myths of differences and to break out of our designated boxes.

To summarize, the utopian challenge before creative writers who write out of Asia at a time of rapid and rampant globalisation, is to cultivate a critical awareness of the complex representational history of 'Asia' but not to be boxed in by it, to imagine the

region as a hospitable home for *all* members of the species *homo sapiens* whether they come from Herodotus' Europa or Libya or Egypt and to reinvent 'Asia' as narrative headspace that has the capacity to resist its own labelling. This is a task that is likely to require considerable cooperation as well as linguistic ingenuity. The theme of the next section of this essay is how we came to be so oddly creative with language and why the simple ability to tell stories may underpin all our most advanced mental capacities.

The Evolution of Narrative

Linguistic creativity has been described as the ability to produce infinite numbers of new sentences on the basis of a finite number of rules (Humboldt 1836; Chomsky 1965; Hauser *et al* 2002). This sort of creativity is held to be the universal inheritance of every human child, whether born to parents in swish upper Manhattan or raised in the impoverished slums of greater Mumbai, whether struggling with dyslexia in an unfriendly classroom or merrily winning spelling bees in school competitions. All human beings, it is believed, are 'programmed' for language and consequently have the potential to be creative in this medium just as fish, for example, possess both the physical wherewithal and the natural instinct to slice through water. Steven Pinker, the psychologist, has called this peculiarly human capacity to navigate the world using words and sentences 'the language instinct' (1990).

The cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett (1991) adds that members of the human species are not just 'wired' to invent words and produce new sentences; they are also born to tell stories. Humans, he assures us, have evolved to tell stories as naturally as birds build nests and beavers build dams. In short, we need language interchange and narrative activity to fashion our cognitive environments as much as we need food, security, shelter and sleep for physical survival. In my own work (Nair 2002, 2010), I have suggested some reasons for this apparently insatiable appetite we have for stories, which in turn ensures creative writers and oral storytellers a place in every society, Asian, European or 'beyond'.

What narratives do, I suggest, is to provide us with relatively low-cost lessons in basic survival. They are like flight simulators—a virtual means of learning about dangerous situations and taking grave mental risks without coming to serious bodily harm. Consider, for example, our physiological reactions when we read or listen to a stirring ghost-story or consume romantic fiction. Our palms sweat, our pulse-rates shoot up and our throats go dry, even as we 'know' that the words on the page are *pure make-believe*. We don't actually have to go and climb that cliff or love that boulder in order to realize the seductions, dangers and aches and inherent in these situations. Alexander travelled just once to Asia but the thrill of his adventure has been repeated endlessly in Asia, Europe and elsewhere because of countless narrative crossings across cultures.

Narratives are biological empathy machines. By enabling us to step into each others' heads, these structures promote, most crucially, the interactive growth of the emotions and thus lay the foundations for community-building. If are to re-imagine 'Asia' in new and exciting ways, therefore, it is to our story-tellers in both written and oral

modes that we must turn. Stories, that is, simultaneously enable community-internal identifications ('we are what we are') as well as stretch our imaginative faculties to wondrously include people, species and even imaginative constructions such as Martians, monsters and machines ('we are what we are not'). This is an important socio-biological function of narrative.

By reason of their strong, linear ABCDE ... *ad infinitum* linear structure that parallels and builds on the similar recursive structure of sentences, narratives in my view do more, however, than promote empathy and train us in cultural navigation. They are also coherence machines, tutoring us in sense-making. Whether or not cultures have formal institutions that promote reasoning and questioning through disciplinary formations such as the 'arts' and 'sciences', *all* cultures, literate or illiterate, tell stories. These stories provide explanatory accounts: why the leopard got its spots (Rudyard Kipling), why the sea is blue (the Indian scientist, Chandrashekhara Venkat Raman got the Nobel Prize for asking and answering this simple question); why Alexander turned back at the edge of the Indus (Plutarch, Indian folk myth) This irresistibly speculative aspect of narrative is what justifies us in thinking of it as proto-theory. Human beings, I imagine, would find it practically impossible to manage their lives without storing and reliving their salient experiences in the way of such proto-theoretical accounts.

Ordinary everyday stories perform, in this respect, a function not dissimilar to the cultural 'work' done by, say, Darwinian theory for biology, Marxist theory for political science, Christianity for ethics or Platonic theory for aesthetics. That is, they present particular hypotheses about phenomena in the world and present a paradigm to explain them. Some of the most exquisite examples of this explanatory function of stories are to be found in the Indian epics the *Ramayana*¹ and the *Mahabharata*², which are imbibed across India by children from literate as well as wholly illiterate families. Both these texts, for instance, self-referentially make it a point to narrate their origins; they insist on telling their audience *why* they came to be composed.

Two stories: The sage Valmiki confesses that he was moved to write the *Ramayana* because he wanted to bear witness to the grief of a *krauncha pakshi* (a saurus crane) whose mate has been killed by a hunter's arrow.¹ Shocked at the hunter's heedless cruelty, Valmiki curses him, but no sooner are the words out of his mouth than he realises that he has in fact spoken in metre. This special metre (the 32 syllable *anustubha*) he calls a *shloka* because it reminds him of the word *shoka* or 'grief' in Sanskrit. The birth of the poetic impulse, the need for a fitting metrical technique, punning wordplay, a 'triggering' chance event, ethical indignation and emotional empathy for a bird who is the victim of a wanton killing thus combine to causally account for Valmiki's volunteering to tell the story of Rama, which comprises another extended narrative of loss and separation. Making even the most elementary sense of these complex premises, I'd contend, demands of any audience a great deal of acumen; it compels them (in India, as quite young children) to recognize that linguistic skill, an emotional response to the sorrow of 'the other' even if this other belongs to another species and narrative creativity are inextricably interconnected. That these tales are by and large orally transmitted seems to make little difference to the degree of perspicacity required to decode them.

Likewise, the sage Vyasa ‘writes’ the *Mahabharata* as an autobiographical and expiatory exercise.² He feels compelled to tell the self destructive, fratricidal tale of a dynasty that he has himself fathered, of the epic battle between Kauravas and the Pandavas, but he realises he cannot do this on his own. He will need a skilled scribe to take it all down. At this stage, the god Ganesha offers Vyasa his services but on one condition: Vyasa must never pause in his dictation; Vyasa agrees but imposes his own condition which is that Ganesha must understand what he is writing before he transcribes it. This arrangement satisfies both the human composer and his divine secretary and the *Mahabharata* finally comes to be written down. Once again, we find in this story of origins the negotiation between oral telling and its re-enactment in writing, between semantic understanding and the flow of thought. The story implies that cooperation between gods and men is essential to sustain such creative inspiration. Above all, the audience is forced to acknowledge that the emotional need to tell one’s story and explain one’s role as an initiator of unanticipated events troubles even the greatest of sages.

For some of these complicated reasons, writers are never ‘just writers’; they are our first, restless theorists. This basic propensity for theory took a long time to evolve of course but it is today an ability equally shared by oral and literate cultures. Archaeological studies suggest that language evolved over perhaps 200,000 years. It took most of this long *durée* for nature to put in place just the basic hardware for speech—for the larynx to evolve its unique shape, for the hyoid bone to push downwards into the throat, for the brain to cool down and become bigger so that the human species could migrate out of Africa walking upright and, literally, talking upfront as our eyes slid to the front of our faces and fixated on a far horizon.

Then, maybe, 40,000 years ago came what is sometimes called the first ‘cultural explosion’ by evolutionary theorists (Carstairs-McCarthy 2004). Around this period, human beings discovered the attractions of symbolic language and simultaneously began to enjoy each others’ company socially (Holden 2004). Taking this hypothesis further, I would argue that this would also very likely be a phase that marked humans’ increasing delight in verbal interactions, in chatting, arguing, gossiping, complaining, pontificating etc. I’d contend further that a few fundamental discourse capabilities would have to be augmented at this stage. These would include the capacities for *conversation* with its infinitely recursive alternating ABABAB structure; for making analogies or comparisons through *metaphor* with its strong A is to B as C is to D structure; for *narrative* with its infinitely linear ABCDE looping structure; and, finally, for repetitive *poetic* structures accompanied by clapping, foot-tapping and other instinctive forms of body language. All these four or five key features of language use would have needed to have become robust and necessary features sustaining a certain quality of mental life amongst human communities everywhere or they would not still be thriving in the 21st century.

The major genres of ‘Creative Writing’ today—such as drama, fiction and lyric poetry—derive, I suggest, from these basic oral structures of discourse whose function it is to make cognitive space for sustained engagement with others. Writing culture, as I see it, draws on such oral forms and has much to learn from them even today. Conversation, for example, constitutes the dialogic core of the theatrical text;

phonological rhythm, assonance and rhyme the centre of the poetic text, and narrative movement is the driving force that propels the fictional text. Oral performances, rich in metaphor and locally indexed references, often combine all these genres with startling felicity as we shall see when the Indian *kavad* or story-box performances of India are described in greater detail later; my next section, however, returns to a main theme of this paper which is to describe further the complex structure of the ‘writing-box’.

A Dextrous Grip

Despite its simplicity—all it requires is the delicate thumb and forefinger hold which humans have but their nearest cousins the apes and chimpanzees do not—writing, as has been mentioned, was a very late arrival in linguistic terms. Why? The simple answer to this question is that writing requires leisure; as I have argued earlier (Nair, 2009), it is possible to talk while holding a baby or stirring a pot but it is impossible to *write* while doing these things. Writing needed settled agrarian societies where it was possible to release some part of the population from the daily grind of labour for survival and/or from reproductive labour so that they could have exclusive swathes of ‘silence and slow time’ to devote to the lonely business of writing. Inevitably, this meant that writing was associated with hierarchy and gender dominance, wondrously liberating some minds but severely ‘boxing in’ many more. This is a conclusion that is supported not only by current statistics showing that women are consistently less likely to be literate in almost all cultures but also by the history of literacy practices in the past when scribes everywhere overwhelmingly belonged to male religious orders.

In the Indian case, the sociologist Jack Goody (1987) has argued that the Brahminical or priestly caste-hold over literacy meant that education in India was never ‘democratized’ as it was in Europe through the Gutenberg revolution. If Goody is even partly right, then an obvious question arises: is writing a democratic medium in the first place and if so how can its democratic impulses be released? And can creative writers help this process along? So far, I have argued that narrative activity is essentially democratizing because all human beings seem to be ‘wired’ to exchange stories. Children are educated and culturally member-shipped via stories and they do not have to learn to read and write to gain from such activity. It is, however, less clear that writing as a material act is either as natural to us or as ‘democratic’ as story-telling. The evidence for this conjecture comes from a variety of sources.

Dyslexia and dysgraphia theorists, for example, have pointed out that the relative youth of writing as a cognitive system means that it has not exerted much evolutionary ‘force’ on humans, since the movement to achieve universal literacy is only a hundred or so years old. Consequently significant numbers amongst the population have learning difficulties when it comes to mastering script even if they have no problems at all with talking or other hand-eye coordination tasks (Dalby 1986). The stigma of dyslexia, it follows, is a result of ideological preferences in societies that have come to value writing skills more highly than other performative skills. It is also apparent that writing requires immense cognitive effort. Just think of the number of years of schooling it takes to inculcate literacy: twelve years (not

counting pre-school) to acquire a high school certificate, three further years to get a Bachelor's degree, two years towards a Master's and about six years on average to earn a Ph.D. That adds up to twenty-three years to climb up to the top of the educational ladder. This is a lot of social investment. If writing skills came so naturally to us, would so much concerted effort be required to teach and maintain it?

Creative writing presupposes the ability to write, but the lessons of South Asia cannot be forgotten in this regard. As it happens, most of the world's literacy-deprived live on the Indian subcontinent. Rough figures: about 23% of the world's population is South Asian and the average literary rate in the region is approximately 50%.

In my view, we cannot even begin to talk about 'Creative Writing' in Asia without taking into account the paradox generated by this situation. Writing, after all, is a bit like America—mighty, dominant but alarmingly young. As a technology, its youth and its intimate compact with power is evidenced by the fact that basic literacy hasn't yet reached more than half the world's population. For this reason, it is important to reiterate that literacy is by no means a skill that is evenly distributed or easily gained. Like many, I believe that literacy should be a universal good. India finally introduced a 'Right to Education Act' in 2009 and I am a passionate supporter of it. Thus, listening to a lecture by the Indian Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen, chaired by the Prime-Minister and attended by many intellectual luminaries recently (3 August 2010), I found myself applauding Sen's advocacy of 'The Centrality of Literacy' from my backbench as loudly as anyone. Yet, some uncomfortable questions remain to be faced about literacy access in South Asia. Our primal need for stories, for poetic metaphors and heartbeat rhythms, for emotional jolts and excitements is, I am confident, likely to remain stable for a long time to come; however, combining this appetite with the very high maintenance demands of writing seems a challenge. I wish to argue that these difficulties might be mitigated if we train ourselves to view orality not as the opposite of literacy and but as complementary to it.

Given the youth of writing as a creative art and technology as well as the very youthful population in South Asia (average age below 25, comprising 65% of the population), some of whom are unbelievably tech-savvy, we also need to bear in mind that the 'partnership agreements' that writing might have to sign with other modes of telling stories may change dramatically over the next half century. As reading habits change, our conceptions 'orality', 'literacy' and 'creative writing' are likely to follow suit since our latest technological inventions have ensured that even the elementary level of skill—the dextrous grip—first required by early writers isn't needed today. Typing permits us to use all our fingers and voice recognition devices can transcribe our spoken words into writing and vice versa. Television and phones are ubiquitous, allowing us to place far less reliance on writing as a source of information. Perhaps the pendulum is swinging back once more towards what might be called 'mass illiteracy societies' but not necessarily less knowledgeable cultures. So a fundamental question arises: should we necessarily be linking literary creativity with the written word in the 21st century?

South Asia has a very sophisticated population of listeners and viewers—who are able to take in Bollywood films, syncretic Sufi texts and performance epics like the

Mahabharata with enormous élan—and yet a huge number of them are formally and functionally illiterate. Hence the urgent need to conjure up ‘creative’ ways in which we might harness the great and youthful invention of writing so that it becomes more inclusive and frees the imagination rather than trammels our minds within a coercive, ‘scripted’ system of endless examinations. And here we must recall that Asia has had two of the world’s oldest, most established ‘writing cultures’. India and China developed between them some of the great universities of antiquity as well as massive coercive bureaucracies. China created a vast examination system and India exported its Brahmi script to Indonesia, Thailand and other places all over East Asia.

Today, in the first decade of the 21st century, India remains the greatest script repository in the world, yet the mordant irony is that, as a result, each of us in India, all one billion plus of us, are quite literally, illiterate. This is because India has least *12 major scripts* in living use by millions (Google has online ‘transliteration’ version of many of these scripts). Whereas most continents have reduced their script usage to two or three main writing systems: Arabic and Roman in Africa; Roman in the Americas; Roman in Australia; Roman, Cyrillic and Greek in Europe, the situation on the Indian subcontinent is strikingly different. In India, one’s cultural identity is indissolubly linked not only the languages but to the scripts that one commands. Consequently, even if one can read and write in four or five different scripts, one is ‘illiterate’ in many more.

This pervasive sense of simultaneous illiteracy deprivation and script creativity, I argue, places us in India in a very piquant and unusual situation when we pronounce on ‘Creative Writing’ and its ‘liberating role’ in our universities. For, every single classroom situation, from the highly technologized to the most basic, as well as every single social environment in India, constantly forces us to reconsider the role of orality versus literacy in our culture (and, by extension, all contemporary cultures).

We return here to a point eloquently made by Jon Cook of the University of East Anglia, namely that ‘creative writing is a critical method’ (2005). As writers and academics, I believe we need today to deploy this method of creative writing to understand how the pleasures of literature and the demands of universal literacy can be brought together in a space like South Asia. To my mind, the great intellectual revolutions of the 21st century on this subcontinent are likely to arise out of the struggles of various disadvantaged groups and communities to enter the literacy stakes and insert their own texts, and even more excitingly, their orality-based theories of text into the canons of ‘World Literature’ and ‘English Literature’. Indeed, the role of English as the foremost postcolonial language, organizing and producing the most dominant forms of literary discourse in Asia is particularly troubling in this regard.

English, as we know, has been a flourishing academic subject in many Asian universities for the best part of a century; during this time, Asia produced a long line of first-rate writers in English. Despite this, there are few, if any, full-fledged Creative Writing courses in a country like India. Part of the reason for this hesitation in initiating Creative Writing courses in our universities is that it is assumed that the medium of instruction on such courses will be English and the work produced will be written in the English script for a potentially ‘international’ readership. It seems so

perverse, on the face of it, to choose English, which is read for pleasure by less than 10% of the population, as the main medium for teaching Creative Writing courses in a country as multilingual as India, that the concomitant reluctance to up this Pandora's box is understandable.

Clearly, English will have to radically change its image if Creative Writing courses are to be conducted in it in India. It will have to be de-pedestalized; it will have to be transformed by the plural and multicultural contexts within which it operates. Such a drastic change in the hegemonic role that English has always played on the Indian subcontinent is hard to envisage. Informed sources, however, believe that the transformation is not 'beyond' the bounds of possibility. In a special issue of the journal *Science* on the 'Evolution of Language', for instance, the Editors surprisingly remark that 'English may be waning in dominance and pondering a mixed multilingual future' (Cullota & Hanson 2004: 1315).

Can Asian writers lead a revolution in the way we approach the very act of reading and writing in such a 'mixed multilingual future', where English is only one amongst many other languages? How can we as writers, readers and academics learn from vital oral traditions of knowledge and performance when conceptualising creative courses in Asia? These questions will concern us in the next section.

Reincarnations

One description of the *kavad* is a 'portable shrine'³. The stories that tumble out of the story box, that is, are intended to be a path to divine revelation, a bit like the pilgrimage of the *Canterbury Tales*, if you will, but in three dimensions. Here is our first anticipatory glimpse of the *kavad*, folded tightly shut:

We notice several things about the *kavad* box in this closed or sleeping state.

Perched right on top of the box is Surya the all-seeing sun-god sporting an impressive pair of moustaches. At the base of the box is a small, blue god asleep. If one is culturally clued up, one recognises that this is the playful and romantic god Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, Preserver of the World. Here he is, closer-up:

We also notice, right below the sleeping Krishna, at the absolute base of the box, an animated team of cows or oxen who are obviously going places. Inference: the story-box is indeed ‘portable’. It transports us imaginatively.

Later when the box opens, we will have the chance to see Krishna again. Where will he be then? Suspense! At the moment, though, we are still on the outside of the ‘portable shrine’, moving round to its back, where we find a single, frisky cow, with a tree in the background—or perhaps it’s growing out of the cow’s back.

Either way, one knows this is no ordinary tree. It is the *kalpa-taru* or ‘imagination-

tree' (from the Sanskrit *kalpana* or imagination + *taru*, which is a cognate of the English word 'tree'). One begins to remember other cultural info as well, such as the fact that the cow is no mere workaday beast but a legendary creature known as *kamadhenu* (the granter of all desires). So now one surmises that the skittish cow under the tree is no ordinary cow either. Its demure, understated presence at the back of the *kavad* indicates that one has come to the secret place where one may attain one's heart's desire; ah, here's a destination for imagination junkies. Not bad! One also recalls that the god Krishna is actually a cowherd by profession, so the whole ensemble begins to hang together nicely. Krishna has always been an outdoors sort of god, frolicking tirelessly with Radha and her companions in woodland glades, so perhaps he's tired out and found a place under a ledge of the story-box to rest for a bit. Or perhaps he's dreaming and it's his dream we are entering, as the *kavad bhat* (the master of the story-box) opens up the first flap of the box and begins his story.

The story the *kavad-bhat* tells is the story of Rama (hero of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, whom we encountered briefly in Section II of this essay). In this part of the story, Rama is in his father, King Dasharatha's court, about to be banished with his long-suffering wife Sita to the Dandakaranya forest where he will encounter fearsome dangers. In fact, if you look closely you can catch a glimpse of a rather threatening, toothy beast about to pounce in the lower left panel.

Okay, you think disloyally, this is childish, adults are not thrown off their feed by fairy tales. On the other hand, here's the *kavad-bhat* regaling you with meta-theory. He's explaining that these tales are metaphors for the trials of existence; they are conversations about the fears and dreams we all have. The box is not just a story-generator; it is a store-house of knowledge about nature. For example, he says, I'm

opening the left flap now, which is associated with the waxing moon (Sanskrit, *shukla paksh*); if the moon had been waning (Sanskrit, *krishna paksh*), I would have opened the right flap. *What's inside the box is also outside*. And the *kavad-bhat* opens another door.

Magic! I forget my adult objections, for here's the god Krishna whom I saw sleeping peacefully outside the box just moments ago now inside it. *How* did he get there? I realize with a start that this is iterative narrative technique at its most sophisticated. We could apply a whole Barthesian analysis of indices, catalysers and what-have-you to the unfolding of this amateur-looking box and not find it wanting; we could import Labov's categories of narrative abstract, orientation, evaluation, complicating actions, resolution and coda and they would all fit in exactly with the snug structure of the *kavad*, every panel ending with a resolution and every hinge acting as a coda to the next story, until we reach the inner sanctum where there are four unblinking pairs of eyes to be confronted, the Sun-god's and three others—thus:

Revelation! But what exactly is revealed? Somehow, I feel that this final throwing open of the inner recesses of the *kavad* box has accomplished a fine cognitive reversal, a sort of ‘disorienting’ psychological trick *a la* Homi Bhabha. This, after all, is the long-awaited end-point of my pilgrimage, where I am supposed to fix my worshipful eyes on the deities within and feel cleansed. Instead, the opposite happens. It is I who am subjected to the clear, unbiased gaze of four pairs of eyes—and I do not feel cleansed. I feel exposed, vulnerable—in the same way that a first-rate piece of creative writing would make me feel. Following the first dictum of creative writing, I realize I have been shown something about myself, not told.

As the *kavad-bhat* dismantles the box, I also understand that the relation of the parts of the box to the whole incorporates a narrative moral, a worldview on the oneness of things, What you see is shaped by all the narratives you have heard: *what’s inside the box is also outside it*.

I glance out my window in this first week of August, 2010. There’s a milling throng outside dressed in saffron, carrying all sorts of sharp-edged objects that appear dangerously pinned to their bodies. I know almost without looking who they are.

These are the *kavadiyas* or *kanwariyas*, worshippers of Shiva, who’ve been on a pilgrimage to the holy city of Haridwar, carrying penitential *kavads*. Their lot is hard. They are not supposed to lay down their pots or ‘portable shrines’ filled with water from the Ganges till they get home. It’s a bit of a coincidence, though, that this particular festival should happen just as I am completing my paper on the *kavad* for TEXT—almost ‘beyond belief’. In self-defence, I hereby submit a newspaper report in support of my claim:

New Delhi, Aug 7 (IANS) Orange-robed men on the streets, roadside camps for them

to rest, high decibel cries of ‘Har Har Mahadev’. Delhi is witnessing the intoxicating fervour in one of the biggest annual religious events of northern India... This year the festival was organised between July 25-Aug 8. (*Indian Associated News* 7 August 2010).

Organised just for me by my wish-granting ‘story-box’, it appears. Here’s divinity come to my aid. Need I speak further about the relevance of oral narrative traditions to creative writing in Asia? I think not. To end then, apropos of nothing, I offer some unsolicited advice:

Coda: Ten Impractical Tips for ‘Asian’ Creative Writers

1. As you chew morosely on your fingernails, staring at a blank screen and being slavishly obedient to the dictum ‘chew, don’t tell’, meditate on the fact that you never know *where* you are in Asia. What is inside the ‘Asian’ box is also outside it. It follows that being ‘Asian’ doesn’t actually do one single thing to make your writing better or worse—so put your mantle of Asian-ness away while writing. If you are indeed Asian, it’ll show up in your writing, whether you like it or not.
2. And please, please resist the temptation to think about Asian texts as primarily sociological documents rather than literary texts. Literature is *not* sociology; so being praised for making it *easier* for people to read you or your society does not amount to high praise.
3. Literature is not polemics either. Despite what I say above about illiteracy etc., the writer’s evolutionary role is to hone the mind. Marching in the streets for just causes helps save the world but just as surely, so does preserving intricate delight in language and thought. Therefore, be as difficult and obscure as you must be; remember, being a difficult writer is not the same as being a difficult person. Even if some old boffins think you are getting above your station in life and your books ‘don’t sell’, please do not sell out or be boxed in. Writing is not about being pandering to images of Asian poverty, hunger and dirt. If these are what interest you, then write about them, but not for ‘the West’—write for *everybody*, all humans, even if they happen to be able not to read you.
4. By the way, if you write in English, please feel free to preserve ‘immigrant unintelligibility’ *a la* Junot Diaz, not to mention intellectual estrangement *a la* Derrida or, more obscurely, as a general rule: ‘Ju not do what di as’ you to do’ (decode that now!). In short, write in your own glorious brand of English and never mind the Queen. She lives very far away, plus we’re not all queens anyway (we may be Jacks-in-the-box, though).
5. Share your bilingualism and especially your bilingual jokes without fear or favour. This is a great sly way to let people into your discourse (read ‘writing-box’) *without* letting them all in, so to speak (for example, Salman Rushdie’s names for a cohort of Pakistani generals in *Shame* are Raddi, Phisaddi and Bekaar—meaning Garbage, Laggard and Useless, but only Hindi-Urdu readers double up at this).

6. If you *don't* write in English, refrain from vilely cursing people who do or breathlessly explaining how 'inauthentic' they are. Ask yourself instead: is it your envy of the 'glamour' they attract—in your view, undeserved—that prompts these angry chauvinist thoughts? Perhaps it's true that these English-using writers are pretentious/snobbish/on the make, but that's not the same as inauthentic (whatever this means), nor is it the same as being a bad writer.
7. Never be intimidated into thinking Shakespeare and Dickens belong to 'them' and Li Po and Tagore belong to 'us'. Intellectual inheritance comes from all over the place and, in any case, no one owns authors (except, these days, their agents). We, poor souls, only own their books and if we are the 'borrowing' sort, we don't even do that, so enjoy your Penelope Fitzgerald without guilt!
8. Have the courage to admit those who are formally illiterate into the great box of the Asian academy, not necessarily as learners only but as *teachers*. If anything at all defines 'Asia' it is pluralism, so strive to privilege orality (story-telling, poems, wordplay) but don't delude yourself: bad writing remains bad writing even when it appeals to 'popular culture'.
9. And do not allow China and India to take up all the available representational space in the popular imagination of the global world when the concept of 'Asia' is being discussed. 'Asia' consisted of 47 countries at the last count (*minus* Hong Kong and the Coco and Christmas Islands!), so it is important not to be obsessively focussed on dragons and elephants if we are to re-imagine 'Asia' as a contemporary cultural silk-route.
10. Most important of all, take the message of the *kavad* or Indian 'story-box' seriously—do not dismiss it as a child's toy or primitive remnant—because what the *kavad* does is essentially to caution us against being boxed into any confining notion of 'Asianness'. It requires us to reject the familiar fallacy that the texts of 'the West' are universal and global while those of Asia are alternative and local. Whereas in fact, says the *kavad*, a text by Bhartrhari on language or Bharata on the *rasa* theory (a theory of emotional representation) is quite as sophisticated as anything by Plato or Aristotle. So we must take *all* the old masters seriously, whichever civilisation they happen to have sprung from. As you have witnessed, a *kavad* presents us with a 'garden of forking paths' every bit as conceptually multidimensional as anything in Borges or on the Internet. It is up to us now to decode the implications of its ancient-modern 'Asian' messages. *See below*—is the enigmatic thing holding out its arms to embrace us, do you think—or are we just being taken in?

Notes

1. Valmiki, *Ramayana* is dated variously from 500 BC to 100 BC
2. *Mahabharata*: authorship traditionally attributed to Vyasa. The earliest parts of the text are believed to date to 400 BC, with the text reaching its 'final' form around the early 4th Century.
3. Portable wooden shrines, sometimes called 'god-boxes', are produced in several regions of India. The Rajasthani version, called a *kavad*, is one of the most famous. At Bassi (near Chittorgarh, in southern Rajasthan), a group of hereditary craftsmen construct these boxes, male and female artisans working together in family workshops. *Kavads* are commissioned by traditional storytellers (*kavariya bhats*), who specify what is to be depicted on the shrine. The box consists of an elaborate series of painted hinged panels. Most *kavads* follow the same general format: illustrations from the great epic, the *Ramayana*, on the left series of panels and scenes from the life on Krishna on the right, with references to local myths and patrons towards the end. The story-teller opens them in sequence with the events in his narration. After the story is finished, the audience is asked to place a donation in a small drawer at the bottom. Like much of Rajasthan's traditional folk art, *kavads* are now made for sale. (see, the Hearst Museum, http://hearstmuseum.berkeley.edu/exhibitions/rajasthan/portable_shrine.html)

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