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Why I Write

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Why I Write

Abstract

In the year E.M. Forster published *A Passage to India*, my father was enduring an opposite voyage. The wind blew colder by degrees on his face, the sea tossed irritably beneath the ship in the Bay of Biscay. Although the sun paled visibly my father, looking up and ahead, discerned a glow behind clouds that seemed brighter than any in India. He was on his way to England to study medicine.



Meira Chand was born and educated in London. Her mother is Swiss and her father is Indian. She is married to an Indian businessman and they have lived in Japan since 1962, as well as in India. Meira Chand is the author of *The Gossamer Fly*, *Last Quadrant*, *The Bonsai Tree*, *The Painted Cage* and *House of the Sun*. *House of the Sun* was adapted for the stage and presented in London by Tamasha at Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1990. It was the first Asian play with an all-Asian cast and production team to be staged in London. It was voted Critic's Choice by *Time Out*, London's main entertainment guide. *The Gossamer Fly* is to be made into a major film.

MEIRA CHAND

Why I Write

In the year E.M. Forster published *A Passage to India*, my father was enduring an opposite voyage. The wind blew colder by degrees on his face, the sea tossed irritably beneath the ship in the Bay of Biscay. Although the sun paled visibly my father, looking up and ahead, discerned a glow behind clouds that seemed brighter than any in India. He was on his way to England to study medicine.

When he arrived in England in 1919 he had to travel ten miles across town to seek out the only other Indian he knew. The London of that far away time was not the multiracial place of today. He met prejudice in that monocultural society, although he spoke more of the kindness received. He met and married my mother who, although of Swiss parentage, had grown up in England. He stayed for a lifetime and did well for himself, and gave back to his foster society as much as he took. It was not a bad cultural relationship. Yet, as much as he wished it not to be so, its undercurrents and duality came down to me.

Each year our family went for summer holidays to Devon, in the south west of England. I was four, maybe five that summer. I remember standing on the beach near the sea, alone. I remember a strange Englishman coming to talk to me. He pressed a half crown coin into my hand and asked me where I was from. I remember nothing of what he looked like, except that he was tall. But I at four was near the ground and everyone was tall. Nothing of a dubious nature took place because my father, some distance away in a deck chair, had seen the encounter and came rushing up.

The next fragment of memory I have is of my father towering above me, angry and muscular in a red woollen swimming suit. He shouted at me when the man was gone, demanding to know all that was said. The conversation with the man had not progressed far. I was pleased with the silver coin and had only been asked where I was from.

'And what did you reply?' yelled my father.

'I said I came from India,' I answered.

To give this answer I must, in my childish identity, have felt a natural affinity with my father and his country, although I had no conscious association with the place. I had never been to India. I knew only my home in London, the beach in Devon and few Indians other than my

father. My father seemed then to draw himself up to full height, which was well over six foot.

'Never tell *anyone* you are Indian. Say you are English,' he ordered.

We both then turned to look back on the beach to where my mother slept in a deck chair, pale eyes closed, pale hair stirred by the breeze, unaware. Although nothing was said I knew immediately, this was to be a secret between us.

My father took the coin the man had given me and threw it far out to sea. He seemed so large and powerful. I remember the great shadow of him still in his red woollen swimsuit, straps crossed upon his dark back. I remember the sky as grey and the wind as cold and sharp. I remember the bright coin in the palm of my hand before it was taken from me. The moment never left me.

To my father, as an immigrant in an alien land, the word survival had a special meaning. He applied it to me on the beach that day. As a parent now I understand only too well my father's fears when he saw me approached by a strange man. I understand too, knowing his battle for acceptance in a discriminating world, his deeper anxiety as I stood on that beach, dark-eyed, dark-haired, dark-skinned like himself, vulnerable before a world he knew too well and without the tools for survival. In his panic he gave me the first that came into his head. He told me quite literally to turn brown into white. He ordered me to deny him and so to deny a whole half of myself. The very identity he had given me and that only moments before I had voiced so easily on that beach, he told me to reject. The confusion grew in me and filled me for life. If already my cultural fragmentation was not enough, I had now been spliced through the root.

Many, many years later, living then in Japan, a sentence came into my head. It appeared to come from nowhere. It would not leave until I wrote it down. The sentence became a paragraph and the paragraph a page about a child I did not know. Eventually the page became a book. I wrote until I felt I had got to the end. And I seemed to know instinctively where that end was. The tale the book told was pure fantasy, in no way autobiographical. Yet, the child I wrote about seemed to carry a pain similar to the pain I had carried as a child. Cultural duality and spiritual isolation afflicted her. Stranger still the child had crossed cultures and seas and had become Japanese. The transformation was empowering, and placed objectivity upon experience. For the first time since that long ago day on the beach, I was free of an inhibiting, obsolete skin. Through writing a process of healing was begun. Almost unconsciously, I had written my first book.