One Life is Not Enough

Keynote address
2015 Dhahan Prize for Punjabi literature, Vancouver.

In the days when butter was hand-churned and cream-colored, my grandmother's eldest sister Vade Masiji called me Mukkhan, meaning butter. One day she held my arms with hands twisted from arthritis, and asked, "Mukkhan, what does "Bore" mean? How do you be Bore?"

I told her it was an uninterested state of mind, one I'd experienced while reading the *Oxford History of India*.[1]

The next evening, Vade Masiji informed me she had tried very hard, but had been unable to accomplish Bore. Maybe, like the rest in the Partition generation, she had been too busy striving, caregiving and feeding us to have time for it. Maybe she never expected a constant stream of entertainment. But no matter how boring was the *Oxford History*, Vade Masiji could not have attained Bore or Boredom even with that tome. She was always interested in other people.

Close your eyes and imagine a world without people. Can you? That would be a world without stories. Today, even Corporations, those fictional characters created by business people, have biographies. Corporations tell their stories every day in ads, press releases, web sites, law suits, and tweets, just as we do. Animals and plants have stories, buildings have stories, objects have stories. Our genes have a story… anything with a name has a story.

We tell, read and watch stories in every language because we wonder how it must feel to be someone else, to have that person's point of view. We tell, read and watch stories to find out how others might deal with arrivals, departures and journeys, how they have solved problems that seem intractable, insurmountable, how they beat the system. Stories are the first virtual reality.

We -- and anyone we create -- are nothing but stories. At the end of our lives we will be measured by the love we leave behind, and our stories. Each will have nourished the other.

I once lost my Indian edition of the *Discovery of India* by Jawaharlal Nehru, so I requested a US library copy. By the time it arrived, I found my 2002 Indian edition. The US edition seemed a bit lighter in weight, yet it wasn't labeled "Abridged." I began comparing.

Nehru's references to the famine of 1943 were excised in the 1960 US edition.[2] His criticisms of Churchill for causing the starvation deaths of 3.5 million Indians were removed. Perhaps today's Americans revere Churchill and sleep lighter because they are ignorant of the excisions.

A multilingual person grows up intensely aware of tales half-told, tales in which the glass is depicted half-empty rather than half-full -- and likely un-refillable. We read, hear and watch tales told without love for people who look like us, tales in which we cannot recognize anyone remotely like ourselves. We experience the world with double or triple vision, learning what can be discussed in English (and with whom) and what can only be expressed in another language.

Along the way, we learn and tell a few stories. The usual ones. But the stories we need to tell are those we're still trying to understand, the ones excised from official histories, and the ones haunting the shadows.

The privileging of Colonist narratives in English has meant that publishers believed that without European or American characters, there could be no story. At least, not one that could be *sold*. Online publishing is overcoming this legacy of print publishing, but English, the language armed with its own army, navy and the infamous Macaulay's *Minute*, retains the advantage over languages like Punjabi.[3]

But it's not just publishing that has omitted our stories. South Asian journalists have often asked why I needed to write a novel about the 1947 Partition of India – weren't there enough books on the subject, they asked? They mentioned Bhisham Shahni's *Tamas*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Bapsi Sidkwa's *Cracking India* and Collins and Lapierre's *Freedom at Midnight.*[4] I explained that seventeen million people were displaced by the Partition, that each had a story, that every person was different, that we honor the dead and the survivors and their descendents by telling their stories. I could see they were never quite persuaded by my arguments. Today there are several more books about the Partition, but when you consider that the Library of Congress catalogs 9,067 books about America's Civil War, the power imbalance becomes evident.

Are we South Asians so easily satisfied with a few versions of events? Do we really still believe there's a single objective truth out there? Are we slow to embrace the idea of multiple truths, many points of view, so many that one life is not enough to experience them? So many of us believe in many gods and reincarnation -- surely postmodernism is a corollary?

Today, fine fiction as they are, we don't consider Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* or Paul Scott's *Jewel in the Crown* the last word on the Raj.[5] By the same token, Alex Haley's *Roots* and Toni Morrison's *Sula* are important novels, but not the final word on slavery.[6] Each story reveals a facet of experience; each is an experience in itself.

The more we encounter ourselves in a story, the more deeply we understand our origins. Stories seep into our bodies to help us do zikr, the remembering from a deeper self. We learn to know ourselves in the collective as well as within larger stories -- of a national history, a world history of settlement, colonization, indenture and migration. A history of being human.

This is why the past must be continuously interrogated and reinterpreted.

Writing fiction, we step on a moving walkway, a stream of conversations in progress. Each new text interrogates and challenges texts that came before. To be original and for intellectual rigor, we must drink deeply from that stream by reading widely. Every day there's more history, new information for storytellers to absorb.

An archivist in Delhi's National Archives told me several old people came to the archives between 1992-97, at the expiry of the 50-year Term of Concealment under Britain's Official Secrets Act. They asked her if some record of their incarcerated or disappeared loved ones had been released. Their relatives had been freedom fighters rounded up for participation in the Quit India movement, sent without trial to the penal colony of the British India, the Andaman Islands. In that concentration camp before the word was invented, we can speculate they had been tortured, or simply killed for protesting. The archivist could only show them the indexes -- shelves upon shelves of leather bound ledgers listing documents, documents Britain never transferred to the Govt of India, despite agreements.

I still wonder what happened to those people, their stories.

A few years ago, novelist and playwright Anosh Irani and I were on a panel discussion in Montreal. A professor complimented us from the audience, saying how important it was that we represent our culture.

My smile began to fray. Anosh responded, "I don't know about representation. I just wrote a story about a man who lost his arm."

Our eyes met -- and we burst out laughing. That poor professor is probably still wondering about our sanity.

Unlike politicians, a writer's role is not to represent the aspirations of many. Rather, a writer says to him or herself, "I think it might be interesting to write a story about a guy who lost his arm." And after much wrestling with words, produces *The Cripple and His Talismans*[7] a gem of a novel that made readers laugh in recognition -- and reach for a box of tissues. Or a novel in Punjabi such as Dhahan prize winner *Lota*.

That said, we multilinguals feel a gap *in every language* where Indigenous, South Asian, African, Caribbean and Latino stories should be. We know that what's normal, cool, cliché, or outrageous in one language is not always so in another. Multilinguals know that symbols change character in different languages: the wise owl in English turns stupid in Punjabi, Hindi, Gujarati and Bengali. The Devilish trickster snake in Europe turns benign and protective in South Asia. Our interpretation of the motives of other people, our sympathies and politics often depend on the language with which events are described – that is, the language of our stories.

The founders of the Dhahan Prize[8] pondered this problem for Punjabi, the third most spoken language in Canada. With 430,705 speakers[9] (thanks to the efforts of the Punjabi Language Education Associations across Canada and our Punjabi-speaking grandparents and writers), Punjabi is no longer on life support as our parents' secret language, as kitchen vocabulary, or the language of long speeches by male elders. It's a language in which we dream and remember, buy and sell blueberries, wheat and donuts, and most importantly express Desire, the engine of story. The founders of this prize believe it will act like water, embracing what we love, coaxing Punjabi to grow, transform itself and give voice to our stories.

I imagine a huge cave-like void where our untold stories gather in bewildered, waiting silence. These untold stories are born translated from the unseen, born without nationality, born to roam without borders. As Amrita Pritam put it, if we just listen to the shadows of words, "those shadows are turning into the protagonists of a plot."[10] And so we will learn about each other, from each other. We could take advantage of vicarious experience and prevent problems; we could reflect ourselves to our selves.

Think of it – East finally connecting with West, North finally encountering South. Punjab, India; Punjab, Pakistan; Punjab, Caribbean; Punjab, British Columbia; Punjab, Australia; Punjab, Europe; Punjab-Africa – exchanging ideas in the virtual space of the reader's mind.

If our untold stories were brought out of that void, we could be sure no one story, no pre-endorsed, official story, no conventional wisdom can ever again be called the Truth. Most stories will entertain us, and a few will choose storytellers who can also bring about understanding, empathy or social change.

True artists aspire to challenge the betrayals normalized in a culture. Down the centuries, many writers have reframed views – think of Premchand's *Godan*, Mulkraj Anand's *The Untouchable*, Kamala

Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*.[11] After reading them, decent people could no longer consider horrific betrayals of human rights normal. And if the untold stories of our betrayals of human rights were brought to light, one life would not be enough to experience them.

The writers we honor this evening have taken a few lonely, forgotten and untold stories, and led them into sound and light in Punjabi, that sweet, most personal of languages, the language we use to croon love, commit the harshest insults, display the essence of altruism or brazen narcissism. Their names join a growing roster of Punjabi writers who play with the language, enjoy it, create new Punjabi words for scientific concepts, rebuild it for greater gender equity, while telling stories about Punjabis and non-Punjabis to show how we see the world.

Because I never want to be bored, I recently downloaded a course that offered me a book a day. The professor began by informing me that I wouldn't have to read the novels or stories he was discussing. He would summarize them, review them and tell me what they "meant."

He was offering me fast food when fine dining is available; commercial art when I can feast on visual art; offering to sell me a derivative in place of a share in the profits. I abandoned the course.

Fiction is experiential. Good fiction touches every sense, beginning with the mind's eye. If the writers we are honoring today wanted us to read them in review, abstract, abridgement or summary, would they have taken years to explore their characters predicaments in whole books? They have framed the narratives and offer us an unfolding of experience. As Flannery O'Connor said, "A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is."[12]

We now know we all originated from Mitochondrial Eve in East Africa, and we know we can only prevent extinction by adapting and changing. Stories show us how to overcome obstacles, how to live in the face of suffering, tyranny, illness, loss or grief and what we can become. So we need them.

Writing fiction requires systems thinking, uniting reason with imagination. Our computers cannot be tasked to write fiction, at present, because most adults don't need the same story generated over and over with different place names and other variables. And because our computers don't know enough about us to tell our stories.

In the so-called developed countries and the air-conditioned pockets of South Asia, we find few great difficulties besides illness and grief. Which is not to diminish illness or grief, for they test our endurance and fortitude, but to point out that these are not moral choices, dilemmas and paradoxes so many face in the rest of the world. Fiction helps us distinguish between our first world problems and the rest. It asks, What would I do in other circumstances? Good fiction will not allow you to close a book

without learning again that no one is totally good, no one totally bad. Excellent fiction helps us understand how we too may be perpetrators, and how we can deal with suffering.

Art complexifies.

Sardar Darshan Singh, you are being honored today as the second recipient of the Annual Dhahan Prize. But you must have known complete aloneness when inside yourself, writing your story, never knowing who might read it or indeed if anyone would. You must have wrestled with insufficiency and mundaneness, often you must have doubted your ability to grow larger than the story to tell it. But you knew we need to compare the real world with the one you describe.

You and your fellow prizewinners -- Nain Sukhji, and Harjeet Atwalji -- have attended the ultimate language class, finding words for all we thought inexpressible, dancing with word choices, improvising. You had to know when your characters could do more, and push them to *be* more. You have experienced the tragedy of those who choose to do the minimum to get by, those who take, or those who use others. Like all novelists, you ask that we slip our skin and walk in other lives. And you offer your books in hope of being Difference-makers.

These Punjabi writers offer a point of view never experienced. They offer their vision and guidance in their created worlds. Their insights reveal themselves like morning dew glimmering on a spider web. Like you, I'm looking forward to enjoying their gifts by relaxing in a comfy reading chair and reading from cover to cover.

Drink deeply of their work. If you're bilingual, help a monolingual by translating and championing these stories. Let these writers reunite you with our long tradition of story-telling, then take you forward into the exciting new Punjabi they are forging. Let each story prepare you to interpret the next.

May these novels move us from reading to action. When we close these books, may we go further -- find out how the problems we have read about are being addressed; may we ask what is there in the world begging for our creativity and initiative, for us to become Difference-makers too.

Then like my Vade masiji, we will be unable to feel either "Bore" or Boredom. In fact, we'll strongly agree: one life is not enough.

Thank you!

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