

After the deluge...

The strange thing about childhood is that afterwards, you remember not only the things you got when you were there, but with equal clarity and yearning, the things you didn't. Today, I look back on this slice of memory because it has a poignant link to something that the whole world has watched in recent times with a deep sense of loss and shared sorrow.

At middle school in Shillong, on Saturday afternoons after the weekly test papers were handed over, there was a pleasant slackening, an easing of our tedious study routine, and much eagerness to make funny faces, giggle and share girly confidences. All this was carried out during the library period. Now this library period was nothing much to speak of. Instead of being taken to an elegant wood-panelled hall of books, we simply continued to sit in our classes. The headgirl carried in a pile of rather shabby dog-eared books which were distributed randomly, without the slightest consideration for our reading tastes. Among that jumble were fifteen books, each devoted to a particular country. They were beautiful illustrated books about countries as diverse as Holland and Mexico. Once or twice, the book on Japan fell into my hands. I would stare entranced at the glossy cover of the lofty, snow-clad Mount Fujiyama, an airy pagoda, cherry blossoms against a cerulean blue sky and on exquisite kimono clad girl shyly fanning herself. There was a stillness and peace that spoke like the comforting whisper of a loved one. Inside were more delights – pictures of lily ponds and landscaped gardens, gracious tea ceremonies, delicate calligraphy... so much refinement and artistry...

But all too soon, the library hour was over and the books rudely snatched from our hands. Many weeks passed by, the book on Japan continued to be circulated among us. I would wait for it to fall into my hands and would anxiously trace its unpredictable journey from one girl to another. It never came back to my hands again. I moved on, we moved on, to the next class, and then the next. Today, even my children are far older than the girl I then was. And on that terrible March day this year, when I saw Japan's sun on the eclipse, and the implacable wall of water change its history forever, my mind, as if seeking to escape from the horror of the present, reached to the farthest recesses of memory. And like the comforting whisper of a loved one, the images came back – the airy pagoda, the cherry trees, the shy kimono-clad girl. That is how I would always like to remember that great country, and that is how I wait for it to come back again.

There were other childhood associations with that island country and its hardy, artistic and sometimes enigmatic people. One of these was a little item of great fascination for any little girl preening before the mirror, conscious of the idea that perhaps she was pretty after all. The Love in Tokyo. This was something a little more than a rubber band – a rubber band with two entwined plastic roses. You tied your hair with it in a pony tail, and the roses added just the right feminine and aesthetic touch. Today, I doubt if it was indeed made by the Japanese, because the name Love in Tokyo is no doubt derived from the eponymous hit Bollywood film of 1966, showing the average Indian family's wariness about accepting an exotic bride, and a Japanese one at that. The song *Sayonara* from that film echoed through many afternoons of *Fauji Bhai* and *Vividh Bharati*, in radios across our sleepy town. It was, therefore, hard to imagine that this nation, shown on screen in its visual splendour and a fluttery lashed Asha Parekh at her fan-waving, flirtatious best, also had its dark, sinister side. In March 1944, during World War II, the Japanese began their offensive into India. They tried to destroy the main British and Indian forces at Imphal, resulting in some of the most ferocious fighting of the war. In Shillong, a little boy and his siblings were suddenly plucked out of school, and the large, unwieldy family, with hurriedly packed luggage and dismayed backward looks at the beloved house they were so rudely uprooted from, descended the hills and put up with relatives as far away as Goalpara. That little boy, suddenly free of parental supervision, due to the adults' anxious preoccupation with the war, fell into the spirit of adventure like Huck Finn, hitching rides in army trucks of Allied soldiers, accepting their chocolates and generally running wild. The danger abated, the family ascended the hills with sighs of relief, the little boy became my father, and his fund of stories of those eventful years had us hooked. Evacuation was not a scary word for us at all, and for a little boy on the lookout for escape, it opened up some swell opportunities. Something Japanese also brought much joy to our lives as children. This was the Hitachi tape-recorder and player my youngest uncle lugged all the way from San Francisco on his annual trip home. More fascinating than the music of Tony Bennet, Andy Williams and the Carpenters was the sound of our own childish voices singing as the tape unspooled, and it was the closest I got to the feeling I had a doppelganger. I am glad we did not have television then, for the mushroom clouds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not cast their shadow upon us, and we were innocent of the ways of human depravity.

Meanwhile, the varied and subtle influences of that invisible and exotic country continued. At annual horticultural shows in town, Ikebana, the Japanese art of formal flower arrangement, with its quiet fusion of balance, harmony and form, seemed so much more sophisticated than the profusion of chrysanthemums bursting out of homely pots. Someone told me that a Japanese man could tell at once what mood his wife was when he came home and checked out her Ikebana floral arrangement in the sitting room. But the art of self-expression had macabre forms too. The ritual disembowelling of oneself to uphold one's honour was something that stayed in my mind for years, with a morbid curiosity to know what went on in the mind of a Samurai preparing for this ritual of harakiri.

Somehow, the idea of Japan as a land of not only cherry blossoms, but also of deep melancholy continued to abide. This was driven home all the more piercingly by the story of *Madame Butterfly*, an opera based on a true story by John Luther Long. A fragile young geisha, Madame Butterfly, starts a new life as the wife of Lieutenant Pinkerton, who converts her to Christianity and isolates her from her kin. Pinkerton leaves her in Nagasaki, promising to return soon. Butterfly gives birth to a son she names Joy. Pinkerton returns with his American wife Adelaide, who demands to have the child. Madame Butterfly chooses to kill herself, as she has lost everything that she has cherished in life. To me, this story seemed to put across powerfully how

vulnerable we are when in love, and how great is the possibility of being betrayed and broken. It has been made into an opera, a film and the doomed heroine is a figure which has captured the popular imagination.

And then, scribbling on endless sheets of paper, the pen trying to keep pace with the galloping stallions of a fevered imagination, the distilled *haikus* of Basho showed how a few words, a single, tenuous strand of thought, could be a glistening dewdrop of immortality – *An old pond!/A frog jumps in/The sound of water.* Or this – *Won't you come and see loneliness? Just one leaf from the Kiri tree...*

I never outgrew Basho – but there were other, equally fascinating literary voices to read – Ishiguro, Murakami, Banana Yoshimoto... And it is by a strange coincidence that I was actually reading a Murakami story when something caught my attention on TV – boats, cars and houses afloat in a surging tide of grey water, taking in its wake entire lives, ending stories, leaving holes in families. As I watched, stunned, Murakami's words took on an eerie significance – "Sometimes fate is like a small sandstorm that keeps changing directions. You change direction but the sandstorm chases you. Over and over you play out, like some ominous dance of death before dawn. "But Murakami is not speaking of the tsunami, the tragic fate of his people. It is not about the storm that blew in from far away." The storm is inside of you," he says. "And you have to make it through that violent, metaphysical symbolic storm." And when I silently watched the visuals coming in from Japan, and saw an old man stumbling dazedly among the rubble of his home, trying to retrieve at least a photograph of his lost family, I knew the storm had come for this man – both from the sea and the depths of his soul. The final battle of Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* is brought in a violent outpour of rain, the foes slithering in mind. These hardy people are today pitched in an epic battle to live when Nature has conspired against them. And like their *haiku*, their *ikebana*, their choice of death rather than dishonour, the harmony of their lily – pooled gardens, their survival in these chaotic times is what the rest of the world can draw inspiration from.

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