

# All fall down!

When I last turned my gaze on the little island that had once been a mighty empire, things had looked pretty hunky dory. A gawky prince with a toothy smile was at the altar with his radiant bride, the ceremonial guards were out in full strength, fairy tale carriages were rolling, the hymns soared up the vaulted cathedral ceiling and best of all, the loyal subjects were in their best behaviour, lining the streets, waving soppy, sentimental placards and blowing their red noses after the all too public display of affection for their beloved royals. For a world lurching from fiscal debt to famine, phone hacking to a fanatical Norwegian killer spraying young people with bullets, Ye Olde England seemed, till a few weeks back, the Neverland that would never change, never mind her shrinking size and being way past her finest hour.

That is why, as the first images of orange flames, smashed shop windows, hoodlums hurling stones, brandishing hockey sticks and hapless Bobbies with shields and water cannon were beamed into our living rooms, this chaos and anarchy seemed to suit every other city but London. As if that was not surprising enough, the rest of that country erupted as well, and like Hamlet, we all came to the gloomy conclusion that something indeed was rotten in this state too.

I have no pretensions to being a political analyst. The whys and wherefores of these riots, so alien to the principles of British justice, fairplay and fellow feeling, will be best debated upon by those in the know of things. As an aside, I am tempted to point out that while the denizens of that country were roughing up innocent people, plundering stores, burning property and making off with television sets, i-pads and jewellery, the common Indian citizen is at this very moment joining hands in a heroic stand against corruption. It is a movement unprecedented in the history of post Independent India. This massive crusade by the *Aam Janta*, the common man proves without doubt that there is in us the pulsebeat of *Bapu's* ideals. Here we are, in the August sunshine, all of us equal, fired with the vision of a clean system, a society ruled by values of truth, justice and uprightness. At this moment of time, we cannot help but tread a moral high ground.

The bleak landscape of Britain today seems to sadden some among us more than the others. We are those who belong to a tribe that lays claim to an invisible citizenship of that country; a sense of entitlement pervades our consciousness. I speak here on behalf of all those who have studied English literature at college and university. Our understanding of our colonial masters and their homeland has always been derived from the novels, the plays, the poetry that have seeped into our consciousness, fashioning for us an England frozen in time, a country of abstractions, an England that is a state of mind, rather than a tangible, prosaic and fluid, evolving reality. In a sense, much as I feel uncomfortable admitting to it, our band of Eng Lit acolytes have still not let the sun set on the British Empire. We continue to bask in its tender afterglow and willingly put on blinkers so that we do not see the smoke and fire, the rage and the rubble of today.

One Englishwoman single-handedly colonised readers in fair flung corners of the globe, leading us all like a Pied Piper to a country that we could hereafter never ever bid goodbye. Enid Blyton's books have sold 400 million copies and her addictive fiction lulled us to a state of soporific bliss, wafting us to a world where freckled kids eternally rode bicycles along country roads flanked by bushes of honeysuckle, said, "By Jove!" and "Gosh!," tucked into hot buttered scones, jam tarts and meat pies, lived in quaint places like Haycock Heath and Sheepridge. The crimes they solve are never too gruesome, even the policeman has his cute Bobby tag, and life is a round of picnics, midnight treats and fireside *bon hommie*. In the heat and dust of our tropical existence, among malarial mosquitos and outstretched begging bowls, I know many of us are guilty of wishing to be in Blyton's kingdom by the sea. Anointing oneself as an Eng Lit student meant moving a step closer to that utopia. I speak for many when I say I am guilty of being more acquainted with Keats than with Kalidasa. When I read the poems of Neruda today, they have an immediacy and passion that move me more than Wordsworth wringing his hands rather helplessly on the human predicament. And yet, Mahfouz and Chinua Achebe, Toni Morrison and Kazuo Ishiguro, Llosa and Tagore were denied to us, and we were made to believe that our former masters' creative legacy was the only one worth knowing. So we waded through a long river that stretched from Chaucer to Virginia Woolf. But, on hindsight, it does appear that many a time English authors gave away secrets of the actual England and its peoples with their works. Elizabethan dramas were rife with violence and intrigue. The greed of the nouveau riche, a suffocating feudal order, the mindless pleasures of the aristocrats, the dysfunctional family, the pitiable working conditions of miners, the abuse and neglect of orphans have all been revealed through the written word.

In as much as we Eng Lit types are still hung up on our own imagined Britain, the prize for the most diehard loyalist must certainly go to the irascible Nirad C Chaudhuri (he of the *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian fame*. In the dedication to his book published in 1951, he wrote a passage that ended with the words "Because all that was good and living within us/was made, shaped and quickened by the same British rule." Chaudhuri had to pay dearly for this. It touched a raw nerve among many in the political and bureaucratic establishment of a newly independent India. He was hounded out of government service, deprived of his pension, blacklisted as a writer in India and fired from his job in AIR. Though he claimed his dedication was actually a piece of mock imperial rhetoric, he could not live down this controversy. In his Oxford years, he continued to be a quaint sight, a brown *sahib* in top-hat, pin-striped trousers and polished walking

stick, trotting along the streets, a little sparrow of a man who wore immaculate *dhoti kurtas* of the Bengali *bhadralok* at home and loved his fried brinjal and *shukto*.

For us, the younger generation, it is easy to idolise the country that gave us the Beatles and Alfred Hitchcock, fish and chips and Dylan Thomas, classy beauties like Audrey Hepburn and dreamboats like Laurence Olivier, Richard Burton and Michael Caine. A cigar chomping Churchill stirring the Brits to rally against the Third Reich is the stuff of legend. The giddy headed Asian girl's idea of an English boyfriend would definitely be a Hugh Grantish fellow – full rakish charm and that adorable clipped accent. Jack the Ripper would certainly not qualify. The English men we know and chuckle over are P.G. Woodhouse's immortal Bertie Wooster and the factoun Jeeves, the high strung John Cleese of Fawly Towers, and the hilarious gang of Monty Python.

The English riots may have been quelled, but their shadow is bound to linger over a society that claims to enjoy a vibrant multi-culturalism. Our *tikka masala* and *bhangra* rap may have won hearts there, and hip-hop may be a hit at parties, but Brits are yet to stomach the idea of the immigrant being equal, being British, being successful and standing on their own feet. The welfare system has bred a class of idle, doped-out, no good bunch of hooligans who think it more macho to let loose gang warfare than lay bricks, mend pipes or man the convenience store. The death of one man in the hands of the police made it very convenient for them to rob and plunder under the guise of expressing solidarity. Worse, affluent, educated people with jobs took part in this free for all, as if breaking the law was the new cool quotient, a new way of belonging, enjoy a delusion of being in the middle of a Quentin Tarantino movie. It will certainly need more than a generous swig of ginger ale for the Brit to cheer up after this national disgrace. Maybe it would be a good idea for Prince Harry to wed. Me thinks it would be the perfect way to cover up an imperfect country.

*indrani.raimedhi@gmail.com*