9/1/2023: LANGUAGES ON THE FAULT LINES

As metaphor and as reality, in our ever-more-hybrid world, translation and polylinguality are now ubiquitous. Languages live side by side, commingle, influence each other. Do you too live, create, think, on a linguistic fault line?

1. Mary ROKONADRAVU (Fiji)

As a writer, I have never before been called upon to examine and discuss language, and my positionality in terms of creative production and writing. This is the first time I have lent considerable thought to language – or languages I have been immersed in since birth, including the deeper and more powerful currents bypassing me in larger global flows. This is also the first time I have accepted the task of examining my life of writing on and from fault lines.

My continent, Oceania, possesses 23% of languages spoken today. We have more than 1,600 languages. Excluding the First Nations People of Australia, more than 1,400 are spoken by Pacific Islanders, including those in the indigenous Fijian repertoire. It makes Oceania one of the most linguistically complex regions in the world. It is one of the richest for intangible cultural heritage. It also makes it one of the poorest, one of the most challenging for politics, and most vulnerable because investments under capitalist models of financing do not make economic sense for minorities, particularly for language inventorying, preservation, transmission, and translation. This is without even factoring literary production and translation, this is with zero attention to literature.

Lifting it a notch higher, Indigenous Peoples comprise about 5% of the global population but they own more than 82% of sustainably managed global lands in pristine condition, and they are owners and bearers of more than 95% of global cultural heritage. Language is the technology that gives life to, and sustains, these indigenous worlds but these languages are being lost at alarming rates. In every space and instance where a language is lost, it has been, is, and will be replaced by either English, Spanish, or Chinese.

In my body runs the blood of the indigenous Fijian, of the settler English or European, and of the Indian indentured labourer. Given the geographical and cultural places of my upbringing, even though I was adopted and raised by Indo-Fijians of South Indian origin, a triad of Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu origins, I was since birth a dialogist and translator between languages – Fijian (Vosa Vakaviti), Fiji Hindi (Hindi), Kailoma 'Creole,' and English. I am the product of an English education system that shamed me for my first languages, instilled corporal punishment on my body and mind for the speaking of my first languages in school, and taught me shame for my language and hybrid identity. Today, I am considerably handicapped in my first three in terms of writing. While the English coloniser may have appropriated me, I choose to appropriate the coloniser's language for convenience and as stratagem to make the invisible visible. I write poetry, fiction, and essays to make sense of things. To make stories, poems, and essays is to steady myself in a fast-spinning history that disorients, unravels, and scatters me in multiple directions. To write is to connect to a central force that steadies me in this eddy – the way perhaps a swirling Dervish connects to the Divine. Perhaps what saves me in the act of writing is my equal

attention to the vagaries of the indescribable and to form – the latter, not for conformity, but for elasticity.

As a writer living on the language fault lines unique to my historical, social and cultural space, I now recognise that I am constantly any one of these things: a botanical graft struggling to survive; a shapeshifter, an imposter, a jester or joker, and a witness whose impending fate is obliteration or disappearance.

How am I a botanical graft? Writer and translator Jhumpa Lahiri speaks of botanical grafting, in Italian 'innesto' – how the physical joining of a foreign cutting is made to a plant or tree in order to induce fruiting or production. At the core of a successful grafting lies the need for a good binding and sealing agent that sits between the two species. To bleed from one's language and reattach oneself in a new language is to heal the initial blood loss – translation can both be a violent and healing or redeeming act – to carry oneself across a language to create beauty. I was a translator before I became a writer – translating for my mother, my grandmother, and my father.

How am I a shapeshifter? I am able to shift into four language modes in speech or thought to harvest what I need for writing. Often, this leaves me with feelings of being an imposter – never fully part of any ethnic group or language, but with a master key of sorts to enter and take the needful. In Fiji, the shark god Dakuwaqa (whose phosphorescence was used by warring canoes to navigate dark waters on enemy raids) shapeshifts into Daucina (the Torch-bearer or Light-bearer) where he becomes a handsome man, 'Seducer of Women.' In his latter form, he was the patron of adulterers. Often times, as a writer, this fluidity between identities as both shapeshifter and imposter is tangible and this mythological analogy is relevant in context.

Sometimes I see my role as writer as court jester or joker. In my writing I have been able to cover difficult and sometimes 'testy' themes such as our military coups; extractive industries; racism; religious fundamentalism; headline position in global per capita rates of paedophilia, violence against women and girls, homophobia, intimate partner violence; through writing – however it is not purposeful – these themes are simply the reality of the cultural and social landscape of Fiji; thus, they seep into my stories and poems. In Pacific cultures, there are elves, gnomes, little people, who are tricksters – mischief-makerssuch as the kakamora (Makira, SI), menehune (Hawai'i), han mane'ak su (Rotuma) and the trickster god who gave firewalking as a power to the Sawau clan in Fiji's Beqa island. We as writers possess this jesting as well.

Finally, sometimes I consider my position on the fault line as being that of witness. This comes sharper in focus when I contemplate the lives of my characters as mere pawns in the larger worlds they inhabit – where things are beyond their control, where they live out their lives in relative insignificance, obscurity, and sometimes total invisibility. The best analogy I can offer is that of the 'bokola' – in Fijian history stemming from cannibalism where clans or households could be stripped of their class and kept alive for human consumption. One could be born into this class and consumed or killed at the launch of huge war canoes, as foundation of post holes for huge architectural structures such as meeting houses or temples, and the third group comprised prisoners of war. Gender or age was not a factor.

In conclusion, I can share from the words of the Osage Woman's Initiation Song: that I, and we as writers can say: "I have made a footprint, a sacred one. I have made a footprint; I live in the light of day."