

2. GURU LADAKHI (India)

*..Romario, the illegal immigrant retires for the day.
He takes me to a shack and says,
'This is my home', I notice he has few possessions.
On one wall are framed photographs of his family.
He points out some members
who are missing like fingers from his hand.
When I ask how, he offers a sigh,
"Knocked down by treacherous journeys on train roofs,
the killer desert, and many dark rivers along the border.
Others are dead in a forgotten country
drowned in the faded blue margins of a map
a million years ago.*

In the autumn of 2016, I was on the Bourbon trail of Kentucky. This was during the political rise of Donald Trump. The atmosphere was vitiated by fear, distrust, and prejudice - largely against Mexicans and Muslims. This political novice had broken all rules of political engagement, and yet he remained the frontrunner of the Republican party - as he continues to be even today - despite an insurrection and many indictments.

But what is a migrant, who is he? Or are we using this word interchangeably with 'immigrant' and 'refugee'? Strictly speaking, migration is a seasonal event and a migrant returns to his or her home base for some period of the year. In large countries like the US, China, and India, migrants don't need to cross borders. Migrants in fact fulfil a certain economic function in agriculture and horticultural sectors like those found in California: perhaps it's the farm owners who ought to be grateful.

However, if we are using the words 'migrant' and 'immigrant' (legal or illegal), interchangeably, we are confronted by many moral, ethical, economic and political challenges. As regards refugees, the matter is already in a state of crisis and the help required is urgent, desperate: a matter of life and death.

In the poem "Home" by Warsan Shire, it is evident that no one wants to leave their homeland unless they have to. She writes,

*no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well..*

It is not as if people didn't have a life of their own with their family and friends doing ordinary things, important things, or fun things, before they were chased out of their homes in a smash-and-grab action. Let me read you a stanza from my poem "Gompo Tashi's Sorrow":

*...Yesterday, they were ordinary people
living ordinary lives beyond these mountain ranges,
today they live in an alien land,
with "Refugee" written all over their faces,
eking out a living building roads in another country,
gods have no answers to their plight.*

and he puts the children to sleep with lies.

I reference here the plight of Tibetan refugees following the brutal occupation of Tibet in the early 1960s (and which continues to the present day) who were employed by the Indian Government as road construction laborers in the high Himalayas. The biggest regret of the character Tashi Gompo is that every day, for over sixty years, he yearns to return to his village in Tibet as a free man, but is unable to fulfil his dream.

Should Gompo Tashi be grateful to India and Indians, living as he does in a refugee camp? I am sure he is grateful in his heart but does he need to wear a head band that says "I am grateful"? Does Romario who has entered the United States illegally need to be both grateful and elusive even as he slogs like a dog for the basic necessities of life? This is a loaded question with a different answer depending on which side of the border you are on. Can an immigrant enjoy and express the full range of human emotions, or is he or she to be faulted every time for lack of gratitude? Is the search for a better life built into the human DNA? Does the desire to provide for his kith and kin surpass the narrow confines of political borders, ideology, and faith?

What propelled the long trek of mankind more than seventy thousand years ago from the shores of Africa to every corner of the habitable earth? Was it abundance of wild game or the innovation of agriculture that demanded ideal ecosystems or the desertification brought on by a sudden climate change or just the need of early homo sapiens to explore newer pastures? When did political borders and separate identities arise to fence ourselves within narrow walls into different tribes?

As we march toward the second quarter of the 21st century, we observe the unstoppable locomotion of people, goods and services across the globe; mass migration of people is not only inevitable but a reality and necessity: we are far more interconnected than we allow ourselves to believe.

As the world shrinks further, we realise we are not only interconnected but also interdependent. Some of us may be familiar with an ancient African concept of "Ubuntu" which means "I am what I am because of who we all are". It brings us back to the reality of interdependence as it aims to foster a sense of humanity and compassion towards others.

In the grand scheme of the cosmos, our earth remains a very insignificant planet, but it is the only one we know. Our prejudices, fears, selfishness, mistrusts in our little world seem ever more petty and irrelevant when we consider carefully their positive alternatives. Let me end here with a quote from Carl Sagan who was inspired by an image taken from Voyager 1 in 1990 as it crossed the fringes of the solar system,

"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every 'superstar', every 'supreme leader', every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."