

India is my country but the world is my home: Transculturality through literature

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Over the last decade and more, among the various buzz-words used, misused and abused in academia are those related to culture, cultural studies and its variants. While one agrees that cultural studies is indispensable in today's world, there is no denying that there is little unanimity in the definition of what comprises culture and what is inter- or cross- or transculturality. Theories abound in plenty between the covers of erudite anthologies, literary, historical and anthropological studies, encyclopedias and dictionaries, but much needs to be done in practical terms so that these black-and-white ideas are taken out of the printed page and transformed into practice.

Dealing with the notion of transculturality as distinguished from interculturality, I am concerned with the erasure of borders, the breaking up of boundaries and the formation of global networks. This, as I will illustrate in my presentation, is not simply an armchair concern but one that I have lived in action and still actively continue to practice. With Thomas Friedman, I believe that we are today living in a flat world where the playing field is so leveled that everyone has the chance to get on it and play. At the same time, rules of the game have to be followed or else one is likely to be edged off the field. In times that have acquired a distinguished character thanks to the twin forces of globalization and information technology, it is no longer possible to live in isolation. Although located in fixed spatio-temporal specificities, one is inescapably a part of the global village that Marshall McLuhan spoke of. Other forces like economic realities, terrorism and Security issues cut across national borders and contribute towards the shrinking of a world that was once perceived as fragmented and disjointed.

My paper falls into three main divisions: the first, quoting from reputed critics and thinkers, outlines the forces that contribute towards a creation of unified world. Secondly, I highlight the inadequacies of critical theories and approaches that have dominated academia of late – theories which divide the world into categories, nation-states and fixed ethnic groups. The third part of my presentation highlights the work I am engaged in (i) as a teacher / scholar working in an Indian university, (ii) as the head of a state-run body that promotes literature and culture, and (iii) as the head of an organization that annually brings together scholars and researchers from across the globe to debate upon topics of common concern.

In conclusion I speak of the concept of cosmopolitanism or, as in Indian philosophy, *vasudhaiva kuttambakam*: "the world is my home". This is an idea I not only subscribe to but one that I practice in my private and professional life. My field is literature, so my views are literature-oriented. I draw examples from literary texts, highlighting

connections and interconnections between works produced by writers from different cultural / geographical locations. My audience may be a heterogeneous one from different disciplines, but my endeavor is to cut across disciplines and reach out, thus reinforcing the ideal of "One world, one dream!"

I

"For the times they are a-changin'. Come writers and critics who prophesize with your pen. And keep your eyes wide open. The chance won't come again...."

When Bob Dylan first crooned this all-time favorite in 1964, did he know that his words would one day become a convenient slogan in favor of the constant transformations – political and ideological – that take place in our world? In 1964, the world which inspired Bob Dylan, which was then blowin' in the wind, has long since blown away and been replaced by new worlds, new people, new times and generations that are forever a-changing.

The subject of this paper is not the soulful renderings of country or folk music but literary and cultural studies and the change that they have undergone over the years. Over the last decade and more, in this unceasingly changing world, among the ideas that have persisted, among the various buzz-words used, misused and abused in the academia, are those related to literature, society and culture, cultural studies and its variants. Multiculturalism, too, had its day only to be edged out gently by concepts like cross-culturalism and transculturalism. While one agrees that the study of culture and society is indispensable in today's world, there is no denying that there is little unanimity in the definition of precisely what comprises culture and what is inter- or trans-culturalism. Theories abound in plenty between the covers of erudite anthologies, literary, historical and anthropological studies, encyclopedias and dictionaries, but how do we take these black-and-white ideas out of the printed page and put them into practice? That is the question.

My paper deals with the concept of transculturalism which attempts to go beyond interculturalism. I am concerned with the erasure of borders, the breaking up of boundaries and the formation of global networks. This, as I will illustrate, is not simply am

armchair concern but one that I have lived in action and still actively continue to practice.

Let me begin with Thomas Friedman who believes that we are today living in a flat world where the playing fields are leveled so that everyone has the chance to get on it and play. At the same time, rules of the game have to be followed or else one is likely to be edged off the field. In times that have acquired a distinguished character, thanks to the twin forces of globalization and information technology, it is no longer possible to live in isolation. You and I may, no doubt, be located in fixed spatio-temporal specificities, but you and I are inescapably a part of the global village that Marshall McLuhan popularized. Other forces that bind us together include historic and political realities, terrorism, economic recession and security issues, all of which cut across national and geo-political borders and contribute towards the cohesiveness of a shrinking world that was once perceived as diffuse, unwieldy, fragmented and disjointed.

This paper falls into three main divisions: the first, leaning on critical opinions of reputed critics and thinkers, outlines the forces that have contributed towards making this world one large foot-ball ground where anyone and everyone has the right to grab the opportunity and kick the ball. Beginning on this note, I next focus on the inadequacies of theories and approaches that have dominated the academic world of late – theories which divide the world into well-defined categories, nation-states and fixed ethnic groups. These theories have by now outlived their utility and I wish to draw attention to the need for fresh parameters for understanding a changed world. The conclusion of my presentation highlights the work that I am engaged in (a) as a teacher / scholar working in an Indian university, (b) as the head of a state-run body that promotes literature and culture, and (c) as the chief functionary of an academic organization that annually brings together scholars and researchers from across the globe to debate upon topics of common concern.

Relating transculturalism to the concept of cosmopolitanism, I refer to the notion of Vasudhaiva Kuttambakam¹ in Indian philosophy, which means “the world is my home”. This is an idea I not only subscribe to but one that I live and practice in my private and professional life. My field is literature, so my views are primarily literature-oriented. I like to

cite examples from literary texts, bringing out connections and interconnections between works produced by writers from different cultural / geographical locations. I am aware that my audience is a heterogeneous one drawn from different disciplines and my endeavor is to cut across disciplines and reach out across chronotopic boundaries, thus reinforcing the tenets of transculturalism.

II

Let me begin with the idea of multiculturalism which has been around for some time and which is, by now generally accepted as part of our critical terminology. Multiculturalism and multicultural policies have been aggressively pursued in several western countries to (a) focus attention on the culture and traditions of marginalized ethnic groups, and (b) as an attempt to ensure the representation of all, regardless of race, class or gender. Its tow multiculturalism brings in the idea of the salad bowl as against the melting pot. However, multicultural approaches are in a way counter-productive as they lead to ghettoism, identifying each culture as a separate unit isolated from other units. Even when these isolated units are put together in a salad bowl or in a patchwork quilt, each piece stands out and asserts a different identity from the rest, claiming independent attention – like a landscape dotted with signboards pointing every which way, much to the utter confusion of the traveler seeking direction. On the contrary, transculturalism is a more pluralistic approach, better suited to the present times, involving greater participation of and interaction between different cultural groups. It is an egalitarian methodology that does not privilege one set of people over another. Au contraire, it places different bodies on the same pedestal and encourages connections and cross-connections between them. Cross-culturalism, although it has its limitations, was an earlier term which has now been replaced by transculturalism.

When we do cultural studies among the various terms we encounter are intra- and inter- culturalism used for the dynamics of exchange within a single culture and within different cultures respectively. In the present context, I use the term transculturality as a variant of transculturalism or transculturation (the way the latter term was first used in the 1940s by Fernando Ortiz Fernandez to denote the notion of converging cultures). The term may be confused with interculturalism or cross-culturalism, terms which are often used interchangeably. Transculturation, as Ortiz Fernandez understood it, goes beyond these concepts, leading to what he visualizes as “ethnoconvergence”.

¹ In Sanskrit: “Ayam nijjha paro veti gananan laghuchetasaam. / vishal hridayanam tu vasydhaiva kuttumbakam.” (Petty minds distinguish between this is mine and that yours. / For a large-hearted person the world is his home.)

Ortiz Fernandez was primarily concerned with Afro-Cuban culture but his concepts may be applied successfully to cultures located elsewhere, too. What he meant by transculturalism involved the need to change with the times, to give up obsolete ideas and seek new yardsticks more suited to the present. He argued, in the first place, in favor of the need for a de-culturation of the past, and second, a re-invention, or re-definition of fresh cultures based on the new realities of the world in flux. Identity, according to him, is "not strictly one-dimensional... but... recognized in rapport with the other." It is not singular but multiple. "Each person is a mosaic..." "Transculturation takes place at all levels of geography, ie, national, local and increasingly virtual."

Instead of remaining narcissistically focused on one's own culture, transculturalism actually encourages moving beyond culture. Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, tells us that "[i]t is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond." "Beyond" meaning not outside of culture but in an in-between space between cultures. It does not mean that we leave culture behind but that we return to it to "reinscribe our human, historic commonality." [Bhabha 1994: 7]

Let me briefly digress and bring in a whiff of poetry. In "Easter 1916" W.B. Yeats speaks of a world that is never static:

"the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute..." (Yeats)

Yeats is here drawing our attention to an unignorable fact – that we live in a world that is ever-changing. In this changing world it is not just individuals but societies and cultures too that grow and perish. In relationships between various groups of people across the world, as we are aware, there is an ebb and flow, ranging from mutual cooperation on the one hand to insurmountable differences and bitter clashes on the other. With the spread of awareness and the expansion of horizons came the need for the study and then the acceptance of diverse cultures, a process that culminated in the emergence of multiculturalism, an approach that seemed to serve its purpose for a while before its practitioners realized the advantages of moving on to newer ideas. This is where transculturalism comes in.

Take a quote from Derrida:

It is necessary "to *transform* concepts, to *displace* them, to *turn* them against their presuppositions, to

reinscribe them in other chains, and little by little to *modify* the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations...." (1981:24) (italics mine)

Another quote, this time from my part of the world: UG Krishnamurti, in one of his talks that were later compiled into a thought provoking book, *The Mystique of Enlightenment*, speaking in favor of new solutions for the problems, rejects the premise that nation, as an avowed unit of the world, can be helpful in any way in this direction. He says:

"So it is up to the individual. He has to free himself from the entire past, the heritage ... only then it is possible for him to come out with the solutions for the problems with which man is confronted today." (89)

Breaking free from the past does not mean it giving up completely but not allowing it to place shackles on the mind. In other words, U G Krishnamurti advocates an approach unfettered by any nation or culture or heritage – or, what we may call a transnational, transcultural perspective.

To put it very simply, the term transculturalism points to the human tendency to adjust, to adapt, to find solutions for working together instead of coming into conflict with each other. It is a positive approach that seeks to resolve conflict and promote mutual cooperation. Hand in hand with transculturation comes the term "ethnoconvergence". This term (ethnoconvergence), like transculturality and transculturalism, may not be found in traditional dictionaries but has been used in cultural studies lately. Convergence, in this context, is distinguished from divergence which denotes difference and disagreement. It is not to be mistaken for homogenization and assimilation: what ethnoconvergence conveys (at least to me), literally, is a flexibility which enables a culture to retain its own identity even as it interacts in harmony with other cultures and at the same time, as it converges and blends, it evolves into something new, more appropriate to the changing times.

This brings me to another unignorable fact: that we are today living in a world in which it is impossible to remain cloistered in ivory towers. We simply have to communicate with our environment. Whether it is the beep of a pager or the click of a mouse or the ring-tone of a cell-phone, we are never ever left to ourselves. Even if we are placed amid jarring elements we are forced to reckon with them and adjust. This is how the idea of convergence operates, enabling us to give some and take some from the environs in which we find ourselves. I am reminded of what Wallace Stevens says in his *Harmonium* where the title refers to a happy cooperation between

diverse elements: harmony, implying a smooth blending of disparate objects, a comfortable co-existence of opposites. This is what one desires in a world that otherwise comprises loose fragments likely to fall apart any time. Harmonium, as Wallace Stevens uses the phrase, is the harmony of the spheres, the sweet universal music that makes the world a bearable place. In the present context it would be a mutual cooperation, not conflict, between cultures, cutting across all boundaries of race, nation, caste, or creed.

Societies today are neither monolithic nor static. They have multiple free-flowing layers and textures. There is greater mobility and flexibility among people and communities. Consequently, the notion of home and belonging has been turned on its head many times over in recent times. Individual existence has become more cosmopolitan, less insular. Which is our culture and which is theirs? We are never really sure. Big Mac in India becomes a Desi Big Mac as it encounters local taste. Chinese invariably acquire a Punjabi flavor as they are seasoned with *haldi* and *jeera tadka*. We have hybrid, plural identities, influenced by culture waves that travel to us from other worlds via the television and internet, through the many serials we are hooked on to, through the IPL, through international celebrities and their life-styles. There is cultural exchange going on at every moment, leading to new cultural formations. As a result of these culture dynamics, the boundaries between the centre and the edges get blurred and in this shifting scenario we are never really sure where we are placed.

III

What, one may ask, are these forces that have brought different peoples together? Coca-Cola and Big Mac, yes. But what else? Thomas L. Friedman, in his celebrated book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century*, recounts how Nandan Nilekani told him some years ago that “the global economic playing field is being leveled” – a statement that influenced him so much that it triggered off thoughts on the changes brought about by the new global economy, making him realize that globalization has “leveled competitive playing fields between industrial and emerging market countries.” Among the ten “flatteners” he lists the internet, the web, uploading, outsourcing, insourcing, etc, all factors which have produced the “dotcom boom” and the “wired world”. In such a tightly connected world what is important is the collective struggle for economic and technological progress in which all nations across the world are engaged. The focus, thus, changes and it seems passé to talk about nation-states and cultural purity or about margins and

centers. This is a time when the dotcom impact is the most important phenomenon governing contemporary life, a time when one is in constant touch, through the clicking of his mouse, with people and places dispersed in space. Globalization, as Friedman tells us, has “accidentally made Beijing, Bangalore and Bethesda next-door neighbors.”

Thomas Friedman’s “flatteners” are actually binders which bring different worlds closer. In this shared world inhabited by living creatures with shared human concerns, there are common goals, whether they relate to saving the planet from ecological or economic or terrorist disasters, whether they pertain to enhancing the quality of life or providing basic human rights for all. In his 1999 book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Friedman speaks of the “New International Information Order,” based on rapid technological advances made, which is re-shaping the cultural order of the world. In the age of globalization there is a constant tension between the global versus the local.

“Globalization involves the inexorable integration of markets, nation states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before.” (1999)

There are other cultural binders too, including music, dance, and cinema. Especially cinema, keeping in view the immense popularity of Bombay cinema that has managed to break across all national, geographical and cultural barriers. The exchange of customs and traditions which goes into the formation of culture is concomitant with economic trade relations – the exchange of goods across national frontiers. This is, strictly speaking, not a new phenomenon. Even in olden pre-technology days, there were those wandering merchants, nomadic tribes and story-tellers who became transmitters of culture from one location to another. However, now, in the twenty-first century, the methods used for dissemination are techno-based and the scale at which cultural information is being exchanged is unprecedented, all of which goes towards a re-defining of our lives and times like never before. We live in a “cross-cultural, cross-national, wired world” (Randy Kluver, “Globalization, Informatization, and Intercultural Communication” <http://www.acjournal.org/holdings/vol3/Iss3/spec1/kluver.htm>] in which cross-cultural, cross-national, transcultural interaction is unavoidable. There is constant mediation between the local and the global being carried on at different levels. What is the nature of this mediation and how does interaction take place between the various cultural forces of the world? What is the connection between local and global forces? An answer to these questions could

very well help us understand and accept the realities of our world today.

IV

Going “beyond” one’s culture, or transculturalism, may be related to the concept of cosmopolitanism, a philosophy that espouses the loyalty of a person not to a particular region, area or town but to the whole world. Max Hildebert Boehm defines cosmopolitanism as follows: “Cosmopolitanism signifies a mental attitude prompting the individual to substitute for his attachments to his more immediate homeland an analogous relationship towards the whole world, which he comes to regard as a greater and higher fatherland” (457).

In other words, cosmopolitanism is a doctrine that advocates the transcendence of parochial and narrow nationalistic considerations for the sake of the larger interests of mankind. The etymology of ‘cosmopolitan’ takes us to the Greek word ‘kosmopolites’ which mean ‘citizen of the world’. According to Pauline Kleingeld and others, “The nebulous core shared by all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliations, do (or at least can) belong to a single community, and that this community should be cultivated” (Kleingeld et al.)

I would like to relate the ideology of cosmopolitanism to the Indian concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakkam which envisages the world as a single family, ruling out all borders and divisions. It advocates tolerance and empathy for one and all. Both, cosmopolitanism and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakkam share common concerns with internationalism (which upholds the idea of nation-states) and globalization (which primarily focuses on the marketplace). In this context it may be pertinent to quote P. Parameshwaran, the President of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial at Kanya Kumari who, in his essay, “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, not Globalization” makes a clear-cut distinction between the two, pointing out that while the two concepts are often used as synonyms, they are in reality different from each other: “They denote two basically different attitudes and approaches. Globalization is the outcome of scientific and technological advancement. It has facilitated an industrial civilization and flourishing world of trade and commerce.... Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam is essentially a cultural and spiritual concept. It looks upon the whole world as one’s own family. Love and harmony, cooperation and mutual support are the basic ingredients here, as in a family.” (233-234)

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakkam, thus, is a peace-loving philosophy that attempts to transcend national borders. Another take on transculturalism, this is what we need in literary and cultural studies today. It is also akin to the African notion of ‘ubuntu’ which, as explained by Nelson Mandela, refers to an open society (as against a small, enclosed one) and relates to the essence of being human and working for the benefit of a larger community.

V

Finally after talking about transculturality and the inevitability of its application in the study of literature, culture and society today, I would – at the risk of sounding narcissistic – briefly like to outline my own contribution towards this approach. After all, any discussion of transculturality need not be solely devoted to armchair ruminations on culture but should rest on “applied interculturality” which focuses on actual, lived experience, the contribution of an individual or a group of individuals towards transculturation, towards cosmopolitanism, towards the establishment of a Vasudhaiva Kutumbakkam.

Having majored in English, with a postdoctoral degree in Literature, I have been teaching graduate and postgraduate classes in India for the last thirty-six years and more. You would probably say that literature would not provide much scope for transculturation or for transcultural studies, but I would like to disagree. Life has many twists and turns; even if you begin with literature you can never be sure where the road will lead. As a teacher, yes, I began with the teaching of literature and language to degree classes and for the first decade or so there was little culture involved in the teaching. Not surprising, because when you are on the first rung of the ladder the ground is still very close and you cannot see very far. With the passage of time came more responsibilities, administrative and organizational along with teaching. There was greater exposure to different fields, diverse groups of people.

The Fulbright experience was the first break – a turning point in my career, marking a Before and After. Working on the popular sources of T.S. Eliot, I moved from literature into popular culture, attended the MLA and the Popular Culture Conference in the US, and absorbed whatever I encountered. My approach changed with time, becoming more interdisciplinary, and my lectures evolved into a combination of textual analysis with criticism, culture, history, the arts – films, in particular – and contemporary issues.

The Fulbright Foundation likes to see its awardees as cultural ambassadors, a role that I constantly kept in

mind during my first visit abroad. The work culture of US academia is what I brought back with me to India – the manner in which research is conducted in the US, how conferences and seminars are organized, ideas exchanged, networks established – all this I imbibed and took home with me. Transculturation at a small, individual level! The exposure has taken me back to the US time and again as Visiting Professor at different universities, speaking on diverse topics, ranging from the academic (focused on specific writers and their works) to the cultural and the popular. Among the popular topics are those related to Bollywood and cross-over cinema, to women's issues in India, and Indian literature, culture and society. These topics have been greatly appreciated in the UK, too, where I have lectured at several universities, including Oxford. What I particularly appreciate is the eagerness with which the western world is keen on discovering India and its culture. I have tried fulfilling their expectations, each time taking a bit of my country and my culture with me, presenting it on foreign shores in a manner they can relate to, drawing comparisons, bringing out cultural similarities despite the apparent strangeness. Again, at the risk of sounding pompous, I like to think of myself as a 'gypsy scholar' somewhat like Samuel Beckett, hopping from place to place on academic assignments, conferencing, teaching, lecturing or researching. Apart from the US and the UK, the countries I have lectured at include Austria, Italy, Germany, China and Bangla Desh. I have been part of international academic organizations like the Modern Languages Association, the Popular Culture Association and the International American Studies Association.

At a somewhat different, more collective, level, the US experience also led to the formation of MELUS-India. While in the US, I was introduced to MELUS and became aware of multi-ethnic groups in America. Professional acquaintances there encouraged me to float the India chapter of MELUS in 1997. MELUS-India (The India Chapter of MELUS, the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the USA) began with a handful of us, faculty members of the English Department of Panjab University, Chandigarh. MELUS-India was the second MELUS Chapter set up outside the USA (the first being MELUS-Europe, now called MESEA). Part of an international chain, MELUS-India expressed the collective desire of students and scholars from India to form a global network for mutual interaction. It encouraged the pursuit of art, literature and culture across barriers of race, class, gender and nationality. Within the first three years, the membership ran into hundreds. Meetings were held every year over successful well-attended national and international conferences.

The aim, while providing a common forum for intellectual exchange, was to expand the canon of literature, cut across boundaries, de-center given parameters, and establish an international network of scholars who share mutual interests. At the same time, one of its goals was to encourage comparative perspectives and turn to multi-ethnic literatures of India with a keener interest. So, on the one hand, while the Society looked outward, establishing connections with the wide world outside, it also focused on Indian literatures, placing them in a global context. The local plus the global.

Although the activities of MELUS-India were very satisfying, the feeling steadily grew that doing multi-ethnic literatures of the US was not enough, so MELUS-India opened up its frontiers, included mainstream American literature and also invited papers on Canadian literature, and literatures from South America. But the desire to reach out farther, across all borders was great and the horizon unbounded. After a lot of deliberations a parallel organization was floated, called MELOW (Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the World) to co-exist with MELUS-India, both comprising the same members and office-bearers, holding conferences on compatible themes. January 2006 saw their first combined conference in Hyderabad. The main theme of the Conference was "Dialog Across Cultures". In March 2007 the twin Societies met again in Chandigarh for another International Conference, this time on "Literature in Times of Violence." In November 2008 the Annual Conference was held in Shantiniketan, W. Bengal. The association continued to grow. The theme of the last conference, held in February 2010, was "Contemporary Issues: Literature and Culture since 1980".

That was how MELUS-India gradually morphed into MELOW. MELUS-India and MELOW today have established their credibility as responsible, world-class academic organizations with links with other international organizations across the globe. Their members stay in contact with leading university departments in India and abroad. News and information is exchanged and circulated on a regular basis. One can, with justification, say that MELUS-India and MELOW have achieved its target of establish a worldwide network of scholars. The net continues to spread wider, drawing more like-minded scholars into its meshes, all of them happy to be a part of this vibrant, growing family, this kutumb. To date, in the ten International conferences held, MELUS-MELOW has hosted an average of two hundred and fifty participants each time, of which at least ten percent are from outside India. There is an international advisory board and all activities are announced widely over internet

websites. We have come a long way over the last thirteen years and as the founder-president (now the chief functionary) of this organization I have a sense of satisfaction with what we have accomplished. We may have begun with a limited field (American Literature) but we have moved on to World Literatures and Cultures. There is still, however, a lot to be done. Many worlds to conquer.

And finally, I need to speak about the work I am engaged in as the head of the Chandigarh Sahitya Akademi (roughly translatable as the Chandigarh Academy of Letters) which is a state-sponsored body for the promotion of literature and culture in the region. Our operations are three-pronged: we work at the local level, at the national and the international level. Our job includes promotion of creative talent, publications, awards, organizing seminars, symposia, book releases, and whatever relates to literature and culture. I have been heading this Akademi for about two years now and my attempt has been to involve the maximum possible people from diverse groups. Chandigarh is not a big city; it is fairly new, just over half a century old and it has yet to develop its distinctive culture. I consider myself fortunate that I have a chance to contribute towards the creation of a literary atmosphere in the city. In these two years we have held, on an average, two or three activities every month. The last major activity was a three-day LitFest-cum-International conference in which more than 250 people participated. Such an event has not been held in our city before and we actually made history. Since then there are regular queries asking us for information on our future activities. We are on Facebook. We have a blog. We have a steadily expanding list of 'friends' as they are called, all of them tuned in to our activities. It appears as though we have indeed made a difference to the cultural ambience of our city.

As a teacher, as a scholar, as the head of an academic organization and a state-owned literary body – I think I am contributing my mite towards bringing peoples and cultures together, providing a forum for an exchange of ideas, a platform where intellectual as well as cultural exchange can take place. It is a small contribution in a world that is big, really big. But it gives me a sense of satisfaction when in our events people initially meet as strangers and depart as friends. They come back again. And yet again. All this goes to prove that we have a shared humanity in which there should be no room for xenophobia, distrust of the unfamiliar and the unknown.

Does this sound too idealistic? Do I sound like a dreamer? Perhaps yes. But, as WB Yeats once said, "In dreams begins responsibility." Without dreaming of an ideal you cannot work towards a target. If you have a dream, a vision, you have a goal. And if you

have a goal, you have something to aim at, something to strive for, and something you may be able to accomplish.

I have a dream, a vision, an idea that may not be fully transformed into actuality but it gives me something to work towards. I dream of a unified world where like-minded people – scholars, critics, creative writers, intellectuals – come together to form a network that spreads across the globe, a network neither deterred nor daunted by differences of race or language or cultures, a community that gains as much strength from the diversity of its components as from its commonality. One wide-spread network, holding within its meshes all varieties of people scattered far and wide across the face of the earth.

"One World, One Dream" – this was the Beijing 2008 slogan of the Olympic Games, etched prominently, high on the hills surrounding the Great Wall of China on which I walked just a few months ago along with scholars of fifteen different countries. "'One World, One Dream' fully reflects the essence and the universal values of the Olympic spirit -- Unity, Friendship, Progress, Harmony, Participation and Dream. It expresses the common wishes of people all over the world, inspired by the Olympic ideals, to strive for a bright future of Mankind. In spite of the differences in colors, languages and races, we share the charm and joy of the Olympic Games, and together we seek for the ideal of Mankind for peace. We belong to the same world and we share the same aspirations and dreams." (<http://en.beijing2008.cn/spirit/beijing2008/graphic/n214068253.shtml>)

It dawned on me at that point, walking atop the Great Wall, that I was not the only one to dream this dream. There are others too, who shared my beliefs, individuals who transcend culture and reach out to other cultural groups, nurturing hopes of interconnected human beings forming a linked chain across nations and continents, beyond all man-made barriers, social, political or cultural. There are others, too, who think with me in terms of "One World, One Dream." Knowing that I do not dream alone, I continue to dream!

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