



Alice Albinia

The Writer as Outsider

TO WRITE DOWN ANY experience, intimate or strange, is to externalise the internal. A character with whom one shares neither culture nor gender nor country; a personal memory now atemporal; a description of home, which, in the act of writing, becomes a foreign city, or little-trodden country lane. If each of us sometimes acts, or speaks, in ways we later find inexplicable, then it follows that we are strangers, even to ourselves — not to mention to our loved-ones, friends, or much-followed celebrities and world leaders. Most human perception is probably lucky guesswork. To be truly an outsider, therefore, brings this disadvantage to the fore, in ways that can be fruitful. I found, when researching books in India and Pakistan, that because I knew nothing, I was always in a questioning state. Hence, I asked questions. Hence, I was given answers. *Why is this like that? Why has this thing always been done in this way? Why is that new thing being done now at this time?* Not recognising the nature of the thing, I sought actively to understand it. Even communicating with people in a tongue not my own, could be helpful. It slowed down my mental processes; it stopped me taking things for granted. ‘Safar khaali’, a fisherman in the Indus Delta told me, recently. Literally, this means, ‘journey’ (‘safar’) ‘empty’ (‘khaali’). Which one would translate it as: ‘The journey was fruitless.’ (Ie, he caught no fish.) That word, ‘khaali’, which means ‘emptiness’, is etymologically distinct from the word for ‘black’, ‘kala’. But since, not being a native speaker of Urdu, I don’t hear the aspirated ‘k’ in ‘khaali’, for me, the word for emptiness contains a lot of blackness. For Hindus, to leave India by travelling across the ocean was to traverse the dreaded kalapani, the black water, and hence to lose



caste. Having lived for several years beside the Yamuna River in Delhi (within reach of its stink), I still think of it as the ultimate kalapani of the modern world; a river black and bereft with pollution, empty of fish and life, a desecrated goddess. The mishearing has been fruitful. ‘You know nothing’, my aged neighbour in Delhi used to tell me, when I got in from work in the evenings. He had been a diplomat in Pakistan once, with a flag on his car. He spent all day watching cable news, and hence was well informed about the horrors of the world. His knowledge made him thin. He used to list the terrible things that might happen to me, that very evening, or at least by the following morning, as a naïve and ignorant foreigner in India. He was definitely right that I knew nothing. I set out to discover something new, and wrote two books; but the longer I spent in South Asia, the greater my ignorance of home, by contrast, began to assail me. To know nothing is to be aware of all there is to learn. I came back to Britain determined to see the place where I grew up with the ignorant, efficacious eyes of an outsider, and in doing so, to learn something, from the outside-in.