‘Finding a Place for Falstaff’ at the MCG – the theme and the location both have a creative resonance in my life. The first Shakespearean play I read in my first year English Honours class at Delhi University was Henry IV, Part I. No Indian or Australian writer was ever mentioned by the lecturers, who then thought English Literature was what was written in England only. Writers like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Nirad Chaudhuri had written quite a lot, as had their political leaders, Gandhi and Nehru. Indian academics had a huge literary complex, if not a cultural cringe.

Imperial England had a profound impact on the Indian psyche despite the fact that the epic struggle for Indian independence lasted almost a hundred years: from 1857 to 1947. Even the vivisected sub-continent – the great imperial crime – did not weaken Macaulay’s minute men and women from the literary productions of England. It takes longer to decolonise our mind and imagination – longer than colonial encounters of the closest kind.

So we read that literature and played the most colonial game of all – cricket. And thereby hangs many a tale and thwarted centuries. And I’d gone from Nadi to New Delhi, still in my teens, crossing both the Pacific and Indian oceans.

I, therefore, wish to confine my presentation to my knowledge of India in ‘Reading Asia’, the vast and varied continent with all the bluff and bluster of Falstaff. Reading Asia is possible; but understanding Asia is well-nigh impossible. But according to Adidas, which presumably gets its shoes made in Asia, Impossible is Nothing.

Australia, fortunately, has advantages: its location, its geography and history, its openness now to new ideas and its unique position as a bridge between the philosophy that shaped Europe and North America’s democratic institutions, including the education systems, and the passions of Asia. Despite the fact of the tyranny of distance, coupled with the tyranny of difference, the Indian Ocean touched the shores of the island continent. Contemporary Australia is very different from the Australia I touched on my way to New Delhi via Sydney from Nadi.

One of the first significant realisations of this settler colony was that it is geography more than history that is likely to determine the national destiny; second, that in Australia culture and consciousness had to undergo not only a sea-change, but a hemispheric transformation; North America did not undergo such cataclysmic climatic change.

Asia, as we know, is the most multiplex concept: it contains two-thirds of the seven billion people on our planet; its philosophical and religious foundations are ancient and myriad; India alone has more religions, people, voters, philosophies, customs, fashions, languages, cuisines than perhaps the combined complexity of Europe, the US, and Australia. And if Aravind Adiga, who studied in Australia, is to...
be believed in *The White Tiger*, Balram Halawai has to kiss 36 million Hindu gods plus three Christian and one Muslim god. He is naturally overwhelmed and finally finds his salvation in the murder of his employer. Divine multiplicity is the truth; not the monolith of monotheism. There are, as Hamlet says, more things in heaven and earth than in your philosophy.

No nation, I think, is more ‘democratic’ than independent India: where else would you have a bullock cart on the same road as your latest four-wheel drive; or could one man’s fasting force a Prime Minister to recall parliament. In this ‘functioning anarchy’ for an outsider, there’s an intricate pattern of relationship behind palimpsest veils; there’s also the abject poverty, the extravaganza of Bollywood, the vulgarity of the rich. It is also democratic in the sense that in a nation of sacredness – from cows to rivers – there’s hardly anything that is genuinely sacred; and corruption is spread like gravy on the tablecloth: as Orwell puts it: ‘Even the millionaire suffers from a vague sense of guilt, like a dog eating a stolen leg of mutton’. ¹ Mawkish, monkish religiosity should not be mistaken for spirituality: Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and her collections of essays strike at the roots of this reality.

So how does one introduce *Reading Asia*, with India in mind? We can begin with texts in English Literature: E.M. Forster – *A Passage to India* is still my favourite novel on India; George Orwell, who deplored poverty and hated privilege, wrote *Burmese Days* and his essays ‘Shooting an Elephant’ or ‘A Hanging’ could offer an opening; Rudyard Kipling and even Paul Scott have possibilities.

Another way is to see in Australian writing the presence of India. Many Australian writers have journeyed into the interior landscapes of India through their writing: Patrick White’s *Happy Valley* (1939) has an epigraph from Gandhi, *The Tree of Man* has a lot of the Hindu view of life in it; *The Solid Mandalas* is more seeped in the *Gita* than T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. Janette Turner Hospital’s *The Ivory Swing*, Christopher Koch’s novel, *Across the Sea Wall*, journals like *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Westerly* and *Transnational Literature*; editors and scholars such as Bruce Bennett, Dennis Haskell, Syd Harrell and Vijay Mishra; Alison Bronowski’s two remarkable books, *The Yellow Lady* and *About Face*; David Walker’s *Anxious Nation*; Nicholas Jose; and David Malouf all take us into other landscapes beyond India.

And the most powerful and accessible way of ‘Reading Asia’ (read India here) is to read the Australian diasporic writers who write in Australia while their imagination and experience is often tethered to their memory of the land of their ancestors, who migrated to Australia from war-torn societies: from Bangladesh, Vietnam, China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines: there’s literature here born out of brutal and brutalising regimes. And they traverse more than two worlds of generational griefs and human glory, including wars: Brain Castro, Melinda Bobis, Adib Khan and several new and exciting voices enriching the Australian variousness.

In ‘Reading Asia’ it’s not only the genre of fiction but travelogues and life-writing that make a fascinating reading. Apart from the autobiographies of Gandhi

¹ George Orwell, ‘Charles Dickens’, *George Orwell Web Ring*. Online.  
and Nehru, there’s Dom Moraes’ *My Father’s Son* and *Never at Home*; V.S. Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization* and his Islamic journeys in *Beyond Belief*; Salman Rushdie’s striking essays in *Imaginary Homelands* and *Step Across This Line*. These books are written with contemporary cosmopolitan imagination by writers who have lived and loved both in the East and the West. And they are writers who appeal to readers for their style and substance and emerging structures of reality, and their imaginative power to make us live in worlds beyond our immediate selves: to seek out the writer in the writing, to rediscover the truth of the land in its fictions.

Often I tell my students: you should know at least one national writer and one from another nation; rather, get to know your country and at least one more. This is one way of mapping and reading a country different from one’s country of birth. And crossing boundaries. Ideas, unlike refugees, cannot be kept out and the imagination of a nation is shaped by the multitudinous verisimilitude of living.

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My own journey into Australia bears out, for me, at least what literature can do. It is a personal journey: I crave your indulgence. My first journey outside Viti Levu, the island of my birth, was five decades ago to Sydney by Pan Am; from Sydney to Bombay by a P&O Liner, *Strathmayer*. My destination then was Delhi. I was still in my teens.

Earlier, Patrick White had travelled to London by the P&O liner *Strathmore*, but had returned to Sydney at the age of forty-six to write fiction. In April 1958, White published his remarkably personal and passionate essay ‘The Prodigal Son’. And it is the thinking in that essay that I wish to intertwine with my thoughts here.

White had written: ‘the reasons why anybody is an expatriate, or why another chooses to return home, are such personal ones that the question can only be answered in a personal way.’ White had returned, to the scenes of his childhood, to the stimulus of time remembered. By 1958 he’d crafted in Australia two classic novels: *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*.

In December 1987, aged around forty-six, with my wife Jyoti, I was leaving Fiji for Canberra with two coupes behind me, two suitcases in front, and $200 in my pocket. My two daughters were with me. I was going to see Rohan, my son, at the ANU. White says he was brought up on the maxim: ‘Only the British can be right’. I grew up on the dictum: Fiji was our one and only home. Then suddenly to become homeless in your homeland.

I spent 18 years in Canberra, that often derided national capital. There was a Great Emptiness in my heart, not in the landscape which White had made me love despite the sometimes sordid and cruel experiences of White Australia written on the bark of the ghostly gum trees and between the blue waves of the Pacific.

I had some extraordinary advantages: I’d spent my most formative student years in Delhi. I’d fallen in love and married my college sweetheart. I’d taught in two

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famous public schools: the Delhi Public and Doon, also in Delhi. Vikram Seth survived my teaching during 1963-4. A brief stint as a trainee journalist on the The Statesman in New Delhi gave me a lifelong desire to be a scribe of sorts. And, of course, I’d been lucky enough to study for my doctoral degree Patrick White’s fiction in Canberra, from May 1974. The Vivisector remains my favourite fiction on the life of an artist.

Because of these two experiences of love in New Delhi and Canberra, I was able to survive the holocaust of my heart in May 1987. The fall of island politicians is rather compellingly described in V.S. Naipaul’s The Mimic Men. I could have gone to New Delhi and become, as White says of London, an intellectual, that most sterile of beings, leading a parasitic and pointless existence. Or like Ralph Singh in The Mimic Men, in his forties living in a quaint hotel in a London suburb, hiding behind a pillar to look at Lady Stella.

During the Blitz White experienced the first sensations of rootlessness. I was born around the time of the London Blitz. But I had no idea of the banality of evil. The two Fijian coups in 1987 almost fifty years later were, for me, the first sign of ethnic evil. I was deeply, deeply affected by this betrayal by more than the Colonel of the Royal Military Forces of Fiji, with special connections at Duntroon. Even the Queen of Fiji didn’t care for us – she was persuaded not to see the ousted Prime Minister Dr Timoci Bavadra. And he had taken his oath of allegiance in Her Majesty’s name. My friend, the Vuniwai-healer, died betrayed and broken. The Colonel got the twenty-one gun salute in the Australian Federal Parliament and a round of golf with our Gareth Evans.

Luckily I came to Canberra. The city gave me a new life – the life of the mind – teaching and healing, reading and writing, hoeing my own garden. My family grew up; often I walked by Lake Burley Griffin. Griffin is buried in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh; from the ancient vicinity of that most multicultural city, my maternal and paternal grandparents had migrated to the Fiji Islands. They had never seen a sea-wave or a ship. For generations they had not gone beyond a few miles from their habitus of mud and mythology. They had been transported to Fiji, under the indenture system, to work on the sugar plantations owned by the CSR Company of Australia.

Today my son is married to a young lady from near Tamworth – her ancestors came in the First Fleet. Jyoti and I have three grandchildren: Hannah Maya, Arjun Sebastian, and Kallan Akash. What would their identities be? Their destinations? Their transit visas? What roots will clutch at their hearts? What fragments will they shore against their sorrows? What texts will they be taught? As teachers we have to ask these questions, for therein lie the richest journeys we make. Patrick White’s writings gave me the resilience and strength of spirit in exile.

The final point I wish to make is what Martha C. Nussbaum explores in her book Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life. The aim of ‘Reading Asia’ is not being Asian literate; it is far more exciting and exhilarating: to be able to understand ‘what is involved in imagining the situation of someone different from..."
oneself,' to be concerned with the good of other people, this is the most creative challenge in the classroom; but it cannot be for pragmatic reasons alone. It has to develop in our own society a compassionate, empathetic literary imagination for the greater common good, not simply for manufactured goods.

Literature and Literary Imagination, as Mr Gradgrind in Dickens *Hard Times* realises, are subversive. It is disturbing in a way other subjects are not. It disturbs and deconstructs conventional pieties and confronts one’s own thoughts and values. In any society where utilitarian values have a hold on the political, intellectual and moral life, where benefits and cost analysis dominate, the complex and inscrutable forces that shape our lives are often not given equal value. Literature deals with the lethal ordinariness of life but sometimes shows the extraordinary – how our thoughts are formed and deformed by our obsession with race, religion, gender and ideology; but it can suddenly sharpen our vision of justice and happiness.

‘Finding a Place for Falstaff’, I feel, is to know something of the humanity of Shakespeare; and once you are touched by that magic you’ll understand that Shakespeare was not a little Englander: his imagination was open to stories from all over and he opened our imaginations to other worlds. Perhaps today no nation offers more meaningful opportunities than this island continent, of Falstaffian proportions with a sense of abundance and abandon.

If I had to choose between Falstaff and King Henry V, I would choose Falstaff!

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