



the nowhere man

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ABSTRACT

*The essay, 'the nowhere man' begins by addressing a question a curious reader asked about how long Peppin took to write his novel, *The Nowhere Man* (2020). As well as answering the question, that it took a lifetime, he introduces the main protagonist, Joshua Pearse, and some details of the plot without giving too much away. The essay moves on to exploring why he writes, and also addresses issues he feels strongly about as an Anglo-Indian living in contemporary India, from the loss of political representation and their uncertain future to his firm stance about being Indian, and India being his country.*

“How long did it take you to write this book?” was the very first question that one of my very few readers put to me. I was floored. I didn’t have a ready-made response. She accepted my reply with equanimity, but it took me a long time, thereafter, to come up with an honest answer.

The truth? *The Nowhere Man* (2022) has taken me a lifetime.

The protagonist of my latest novel, Joshua Pearse, takes almost seventy years to realize that no-one cares a whit. Just as in the song by The Beatles, Joshua makes all his nowhere plans for nobody. But unlike the guy in the song, Joshua Pearse has a point-of-view and, when the chance comes his way, he says what he has to say, in just the way he wants to. Again, co-incidentally, no one listens, but Joshua does declare—somewhere in the book—that he may still be that still, small voice, appealing to the rest to prepare for the worst.

Joshua Pearse was born to be a leader – of sorts. The date of his birth adds up to the mark of the Beast and the portent is magnified by the munificence of the stars the night he was born – not just a single bright one for him. He is supposed to be like the Biblical Joshua, the son of Nun (None?), the one who, long ago, led his people to the promised land; that too was denied to Joshua Pearse, when he felt that his country had let him down. He was already aware that his community had dumped him. Undoubtedly, he was pierced (Pearse-d?) to the quick, but even he knew that a prophet is not without honour...

Another pertinently impertinent question that is frequently asked by the hoi-polloi is— "Why write?" Can there be a specific answer? I will try to attempt one.

At the World Anglo-Indian Reunion of 2019, held in Chennai, at what was termed a 'Literary Banquet', I stated clearly and unabashedly that I write for myself. To say that a writer is quite consumed with himself is putting it mildly, but in my own defence, I write (and speak) about things that I know and have experienced, or, at least, I write (and speak) about things that I think I know, (as many would like to believe). My speech at the Reunion went down—as most speeches do—without comment, though the people gathered there murmured quietly and politely among themselves. I'm sure no one noticed that I was deliberately trying to add some 'foogath' (a word extremely well-known and generously used on a daily basis by Anglo-Indians everywhere in the south of the country, but, curiously, not mentioned even in *The Concise Hobson-Jobson: An Anglo-Indian Dictionary*, or any of the umpteen other such books that I possess) to the sumptuous—as well as global—spread that was there, right before our eyes! I do like my vegetables and fruit, so there.

The same question (in my book) is put to his students by the young Joshua—"why write?" And the self-same answer comes along: it is the writer's karma; he is born to write what he writes, because no-one else can say the things he says in the way he says them. It may take just a moment, or many moments, of stimulation, or it may take a life-time: the work will emerge only when it reaches the fullness of body and soul. The writer may well be more than a medium, but ultimately, the work dictates itself. This has been my experience every time I produce a piece. I also know that the joy of

creation is enhanced when I re-read and enjoy my own writing (though nothing would be better than passing on that joy to others).

Does the Anglo-Indian writer have a unique relationship to and with the language in which he or she writes? Is such a relationship outside the ken of other writers in English? The answer to both questions is 'yes'. I do not use any adjectives here, because one strident view still making the rounds is that Anglo-Indians do not know their own language. This is again neither here nor there, for no one can claim absolute mastery of any language. The language that the Anglo-Indian speaks (very few actually write) is often uniquely indecipherable, but it is still his. Other things may be snatched away, but no one can take away that right. If anyone is truly interested in the Anglo-Indian way, let them forsake the world in search of the truth. Wild imaginings and phoney assumptions and fabricated fantasies just will not do. And the truth can only be found in one country—India.

In my book I use colloquial terms and expressions as and when the script demands them, not just to give it that special flavour. Many of them are obsolete in Anglo-Indian jargon, but I have heard such terms used by other communities. I mention this because it may be a case of reverse assimilation and that strengthens the argument that the Anglo-Indian (their language and quaint way of using it and their mannerisms and choice of apparel, and warmth and general love of life and come-what-may attitude and so much more) is still relevant in India today. In some parts of this great land, Anglo-Indians are lauded and feted, in other parts allowed to be themselves, but when it comes to the administration of the country at large, the Centre (i.e., Central Government) discovers ways and means to erase this colourful community and its proud history.

It conjures up an antiquated Census (compiled by a previous Government to which it is openly at loggerheads), justifies its actions quoting those absurd Census figures, rushes to push through its pre-determined course of action and completes the same with the bravado and bluster of a vainglorious oaf. The Centre decides that 296 humans are irrelevant to the plurality that is India; it further decides that most of these specifically-targeted, genetically-different people have already abandoned the country and therefore do not deserve any concessions on a number of counts, including the

one that suggests that the remaining few are now sufficiently integrated with their fellow-Indians. It is indeed a win-win situation for the Government: identify a hapless, helpless community, isolate them from the mainstream, brand them as being not totally Indian, denigrate their eagerness to escape the clutches of the country, marginalize and minimize them to the point of extinction and finally declare that the community once known as 'Anglo-Indian' no longer exists—at least in its records. All this because someone is still peeved that the purity quotient of the population of the country is sullied by this obnoxious, abhorrent group. This house-cleaning exercise has been going on ever since the birth of the first Anglo-Indian, for the purity brigades on both sides were, and even today are, hell-bent on a pogrom. Somehow, phoenix-like, the Anglo-Indian survived, still survives and will continue to survive because—as I say in my book—the heart of India—**My Country**—is pure.

These observations lead seamlessly to the next question that needs to be answered: who does the writer represent and what does he expect from his writing? I believe that the writer (especially this Anglo-Indian one) writes not just for himself but for all people. He does not—ideally—project himself, but he is certainly the voice of the people, or at least his people, or at the very least the people he thinks are his people. The Anglo-Indian writer may not be representative of his kind of people, but again, as I say in my book, “what is good and honest and true for the Man must be true for the multitude also” (p.37). Extrapolating, the Anglo-Indian writer is a spokesperson for all the marginalized, the ostracized, the looked-down-upon peoples of the world. The majority may not even take notice, but the word 'conscience' is not only given great importance in India, but also practised in spirit and in truth.

Along with the question “Why write?” comes the corollary: “What can be gained by writing and publishing?” In answering the facile question regarding why a person climb a mountain, the essayist says simply: “Because it is there.” I guess it's the same with writing: the words, the ideas, the form, the structure and so many other facets are waiting for the writer to give them substance, to give them wholeness. Not just any writer but I, me, myself. Together with some satisfaction of the ego, the writer, if he is honest to himself, is also hoping that his bank balance will improve. Surely, he is hoping to make an impact, yearning that people will—finally—recognize and lionize him, for even criticism is a form of recognition! To think that a writer is there for the

profit alone is particularly demeaning, just as when a writer has to retract, fearing repercussions. A writer simply writes and there's an end to it; to scratch around for why and what and when and which and where and so on and so forth seems to be the methodology, the means and the ends, of the modern-day researcher.

What about politics? Is an Anglo-Indian writer politically motivated when he/she decides to write? Is it insolent for an Anglo-Indian writer to write about India? Does the Anglo-Indian writer have to justify writing about India? Who are to be the judges to these questions and what gives them the authority to sit in judgement? When will the debate ever stop?

Everything, *mon ami/e*, is politics. I did not ask to be born into an Anglo-Indian household—it just happened. I do not want to be drawn into a war of words, because that is the domain of the critics. I just want to assert my right to express myself in my own language, even if the rest of the country says English is not an Indian tongue. The hollowness and hypocrisy of such a point-of-view is visible to everyone with even an inkling of political acumen, but politicians often rush in where angels fear to tread. Who can deny me the right to express my views on India, especially after knowing that I am an Aadhar-holding, voter ID-linked citizen of the greatest democratic country in the world? So much for the nothing-but-the-truth slogan: “*sabke saath, sabke vikas, sabke viswas*” (“everyone's support, everyone's development, everyone's trust”). If my India, especially my modern India, can unequivocally say that we are all one, this would be heaven on earth! Knowing very clearly that this is not so makes my writing politically and emotionally charged, as with all other Anglo-Indian writing, factual or fictional.

I would like to stress the point again. I am an **INDIAN** and I have every right to say what I have to say, not just because it is my truth, but also because, ultimately, the truth cannot be hidden. This is not the only place where I have aired my opinions; all this and more can be found in *The Nowhere Man*. I do not spare my own community, for, as they say, what is good for the goose is good for the gander too. To go further, I do not even spare the protagonist of my book, Joshua Pearse, for he has so many traits that are common to the human species: pride and prejudice, anger and malice, loathing and petty hatred, alongside sense and sensibility and sensitivity, passion and

practicality, desire and loads and loads of longing, of belonging, of hope that he will, at last, be allowed to be a simple man with a simple dream. Is that too much to ask?

I have also categorically stated in *The Nowhere Man*—and perhaps in other places too—that the Anglo-Indian is an Indian. That means he is of-the-soil, just like the billion and more other Indians. Governments may try to suppress the community—and we are not the first to be so minimalized—but, as I say in my book, with the strongest conviction I can muster, “a child of India will never die” (p.177). A “child of India”, I must stress, for we are brought up in the tradition of ‘Mother India’ and we know, deep down, in the ‘rag-and-bone shop of the heart’, that Our Mother will never let us down.

What more (or less) can I say about the global diaspora? I have, I hope, made my stand clear; I even predict, in my book, that sometime in the future, Mother India will gather all her prodigal children into her all-encompassing arms once more.

I have been referring to my book, time and time again. This is not only because I believe in what I have written, but also to convince as many readers as possible to acquire copies for themselves. Only when a writer gets some response from their readership can they assess their impact (if any). Even criticism for the sake of criticism is acknowledgement enough, however pejorative or personal it is. Let me say it again: I take great pride in my books, I read and re-read them all the time and still find joy and satisfaction and pleasure.

Enough of all this, I think. Let me now concentrate on the book, since it now represents me and, willy-nilly, all the people who share a common history with my kind of people. The protagonist, Joshua Pearse, leads, to all intents, a normal, unspectacular, early life. He breezes through the teenage years with girls on his mind, but he is careful enough to keep up with his education. A job in the city takes him away from the insularity of home and into the wider world. He knows he is different; he doesn't mind being different and this openness to his personality brings him recognition from his peers and his students. Marriage brings with it joy and sacrifice and pain and suffering, but the happiness percentage always balances out. The real agony comes when he finds himself isolated, often misunderstood and ridiculed, but with this knowledge comes resignation and acceptance: the world, his world, or what he thought was his

world, has no need for him or his ideas or his vision. By the end of the book, Joshua Pearse is ready and willing to die in his own squalid sty (by and by).

Any creative writer must acknowledge and accept the contribution of the past. He/she must realize that he/she is just another voice, craving to be heard and appreciated, before going into the 'cloud' of oblivion where all works of art—to use modern terminology—reside. Even a cursory glance at my book will tell the reader—astute or random—that I use the Bible profusely. I also depend heavily on my personal reading choices and, because in real life I was a teacher, what I tried to teach and pass on to my students—the hundreds of thousands of them who passed through my hands. I also rely a great deal on my personal experience, which I try to embed in my work as a whole. Further, I react to what I see in real life, what I read about and see in the media and what comes to me in the course of casual conversation. All this, and more, needs to be churned and filtered and refined before the finished product comes into existence, especially for me, for I do not claim to be a seer or a visionary. The glorious transformation that occurs when commonality is celebrated for just what it is, is something that most writers strive to achieve; the success of such a piece again depends on its acceptance by the reader, who is the real critic, not swayed by theories and assumptions and even pomposity.

Recent events in the evolving history of India, particularly those that have affected my community, have brought pain and anguish, anger and resentment, astonishment and disbelief to the great many Anglo-Indians who know and think of no other place as home. I include myself in this very large group, though I am sure I am not one of the chosen few that the Census of 2011 listed. To say, with absolute gumption, that the fortunate (?) 296 still left in the country are sufficiently integrated into the gargantuan cauldron that comprises the population of India, to reiterate that such a small number is not worthy of concessions, or does not merit any representation in the Constitution of India, is to negate the very fundamentals of human rights that seek to protect the minorities, linguistic, religious, or any other category there may be. Let me make a comparison: To import 8 cheetahs—at what cost, is anybody's guess—from Namibia, gives the country a wider outlook regarding wild-life, but the scything away of guarantees for an already battered and broken Indian community, is to inadvertently confess that some animals are more equal than even the human Anglo-Indian. The

cheetahs now have their own reservation, where they can roam and breed freely, just like the lucky tigers and rhinos, with hardly a thought about extinction. The list is enlarged when the slender loris, another exotic species, finds a secure home in the south of the country.

And finally, quite recently, a writer, indulging in some wishful thinking, says the Anglo-Indian community could well have been apportioned a tract of land—a little Goa or Sikkim. How jejune—when we have the whole country as our eternal abode, why be relegated to a black hole?

Even the American-Indians have moved on from the old Reservations, though, perhaps, some still stay on; but they still proudly preserve and present their cultural and social uniqueness to the entire world. That the Anglo-Indian community came into being through the inter-action of the West and the East is a fact; many writers have described this coming together in very many ways, most often derogatorily, but the unspoken truth is that the Anglo-Indian has fought valiantly to survive the onslaughts of two cultures, has remarkably come out unscathed and has set an example for his fellows. It was the late Indira Gandhi who described us as the first citizens of modern India and taking pride in such a glowing tribute, we should still set our light on the hilltop so that others may see our good works and glorify the 'Mother' of us all.

India is a land of many countries and cultures, all miraculously coalesced into one. But ask some of them and they will describe themselves as Tamilians, or Bengalis, or Gujaratis, or even Kashmiris; only after that do they identify themselves as Indians. The witch-hunting that continues to be a part of Anglo-Indian life may stem from another debated fact: that the Anglo-Indian is the only citizen to proudly parade his pan-Indian identity. Whatever anyone may say, we are Indian and will always remain so, even after the Spartan-like figure of 296 has vanished.

I hope, *mon frere*, that you will see that I have laboured to answer all the questions that many people want answers for. I have, I think, not strayed away, like a lost sheep. I have, I think, upheld my belief that I am as Indian as any other fellow-Indian. What if I am a little different? What if I am vastly different? Can we not celebrate my sameness-with-difference? Can't you, too? Try, please, please try.

In a democratic set-up, even the one facing the heat is given a chance to defend themselves. I have just one question. But before that may I express my view that this sort of questioning reminds me of the Inquisition, the Salem witch-hunting trials, the now-forgotten concentration camps of the Nazis. If history is indeed a record of factual data, more people were sinned against than sinning in most of those instances. Does any writer—especially the Anglo-Indian one—have to wear his colours on his sleeves always? Why target just one type of writer? He uses the same words, often the same expressions, most always with the same intent: to make himself heard; to make the world sit up and take notice; even, in the smallest way, to make his world a better place. Give him at least that much freedom. Allow him say, with faith and hope and love: “I am that I am”.

To sum up, I wish to revert to a song—which I quoted in my Abstract—by the legendary Jim Reeves, himself a great icon of the Anglo-India of yore; I use his words to document my feelings, not about human love and rejection, but about my personal devastation at what is happening in my beloved India:

I've been accused, convicted and condemned,
The trial's over and now I face the end;
Is this Your way of telling me You're true
When all I'm guilty of is loving [My India] You?

As the famous (infamous?) telegram of old indicated, in a different context:

‘Peccavi?’

Jai Hind.

Bryan Peppin was born in 1952 and lived in Trichy, Tamilnadu, India, till it was time to launch out on his own. A job took him to Madras and he spent the next 28 years as an English teacher in a reputed College. Fate carried him to the Gulf as a teacher and administrator. He retired in 2012, but his writing career had already begun. His latest book is an exploration of the Anglo-Indian identity through the eyes of his protagonist, even as it mourns the passing of so many uniquely Anglo-Indian mores and institutions and structures and traditions. He may be contacted at: peppin.bryan@gmail.com