

A Garden of Identities: Multiple Selves and Other Futures

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I close my eyes and think of a future world. A visionary world, thirty, forty years from today. A world not of new humanity but a plethora of old and new humanities. A world where more than one way of being human is not only the norm but is considered essential for the very survival of our species. This is the world as a garden.

Gardens, by the very fact that they are gardens, consist of a *myriad* of different plants. There are all variety of hardy perennials that flower year after year. There are the annuals and the biennials that have to be planted in season. There are plants that provide various colours of foliage, or hedges and borders, or climb up fences, or play architectural roles. There are fruit trees, trees that provide fragrant and colourful flowers and trees that fix the soil and provide shade. There are the grasses so essential for the lawns. And what would a garden be without the proverbial birds and the bees? And those worms and insects that both enrich the soil and require some form of pest control. The thing about a garden is that all this truly monumental variety of life exists in symbiosis: nourishing each other and ensuring the overall survival of the garden. Of course, the garden has to be tended: the weeds have to be cleared, plants have to be pruned, we have to make sure that nothing grows so much that it ends up suffocating and endangering other plants.

So, I desire a future where all the vast and varied ways of being human, all the plethora of different cultures, past, present and the future, exists in symbiosis as though the globe was a well-tended garden. In essence,

it is a vision of a globe of pluralistic identities. But the kind of identities I seek, or rather envision, has little to do with identity as we have conventionally understood the term.

Philosophically, the concept of identity, as Amartya Sen has pointed out, is based on two basic assumptions. First, the presumption that we must have a single – or at least principal and dominant – identity. Second, the supposition that we discover our identity. The first assumption is plainly wrong: not only do we exist with multiple identities but often invoke different identities in different contexts. So: "the same person can be of Indian origin, a Muslim, a French citizen, a US resident, a woman, a poet, a vegetarian, an anthropologist, a university professor, a Christian, an angler, and an avid believer in extra-terrestrial life and of the propensity of alien creatures to ride around the universe in smartly designed UFOs. Each of these collectives, to all of which this person belongs, gives him or her a particular identity, which are variously important in different contexts" (Sen 2001). The second assumption is just as erroneous. We discover our identity, the argument goes, from the community we belong to: it is through the relationships within a community that we discover our identity. This argument suggests that we have no role in choosing our identities. But even though the constraints of community and traditions are always there, reason and choice too have a role to play. The point is not that we can choose any identity at random; but "whether we do have choices over alternative identities or combination of identities, and perhaps more importantly, substantial

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freedom on what priority to give to the various identities that we may simultaneously have" (Sen 2001).

It is because we have a problem with pluralistic identities that we are in the midst of a global epidemic of identity crisis. Most of us do not know who or what we really are. Some of us have impossibly romanticised notions of what we should be. We desperately cling on to an imagined "heritage", subscribe to the preservation of an unchanging "tradition", and are ready to kill and be killed to save some "essence" of our idealised identity. Many of us have altogether abandoned the very idea of a having a fixed identity: we change our identities with as much ease as we change our jackets. All of us are suffering from a disease that is slowly but surely eating us from the inside.

The symptoms are everywhere. In Northern Ireland, men in baladavas are not just "scum", they think of themselves as either Ireland's or Ulster's "finest" and will unite in violence for the sake of the difference. Britain seems perpetually in limbo not knowing whether to become more American or more European. For much of the 20th century, American identity, and its foreign policy, was shaped in opposition to a "communist bloc". In a post-Cold war world, America has to create imaginary villains ("Muslim terrorists", rouge states such as bankrupt and starving "North Korea", "the Chinese menace") in an inane attempt to resolve its predicament of self-identity. The collapse of the Soviet Union has produced a plethora of new artificial, national feuding identities, pitting Azerbaijanis against Armenians, Chechnyans against Russians, Kazakhs against Kazakhs of one kind against Kazakhs of another. The Balkans has just gone through one of the most brutal balkanisation of identities in all its history. In the Muslim world, traditionalists and modernists have been engaged in battles over what constitutes true Islamic identity for decades (Moussalli 1999). The very idea of being "White" has now become so problematic that "Whiteness" is studied as an academic discipline in its own right.

In short, identity is being contested everywhere. That is why the politics of identity has

become one of the dominant themes of post-modern time.

To "know thyself", as Socrates put it, is both a fundamental human urge and a basic question in philosophy. Having some idea of who or what we are helps us to determine how we ought to live and conduct our daily affairs. A little self-knowledge also provides us with a little coherence in our metaphysical and moral outlooks. But in a rapidly globalising world, it is almost impossible to have even a modicum of self-knowledge. All those things that provided us with a sense of confidence in ourselves - such as nation states with homogenous populations, well-established local communities, unquestioned allegiance to history and unchanging tradition - have evaporated. The sources of our identity have been rendered meaningless.

Consider, for example, the territory called "England". It is not the sole preserve of "the English" anymore: the population now is much more heterogeneous, with "Englishness" (however, it is defined) as only one segment in a multi-ethnic society. Moreover, the history and tradition that are associated with this "Englishness" - the Empire, House of Lords, fox hunting, the national anthem - are either questionable or meaningless to the vast majority of new-English who now live in England. Worse: this Englishness becomes quite insignificant when it is seen in relation to a new European identity which itself is an amalgam of countless other cultural identities. Not surprisingly, "the English" feel threatened.

While the concrete foundations of identity are cracking away everywhere, the shifting context adds another layer of perplexity. Identity is a label, a toolkit, a compass bearing. It permits us to find not only ourselves but discern similarity and/or difference in everyone else. When the foundations of our identity crack we lose not only the sense of who we are but essential elements of how we connect to all other identities. All labels become confusing, multiple and problematic.

Think of the rather common label: "black". It has no global connotation; there is no universal black identity. Being black has different meaning and significance in different places. In

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New York, being black is a mark of difference in contrast to the whites, the Italian, the Irish, the Hispanics and a symbol of being cool. In Nigeria, it is not important whether you are black or white but whether you are Yoruba rather than Hausa; and the only way you can be cool is to be totally westernised. In Jeddah, nothing is cool, and what really matters is not whether you are black or brown but whether you are a member of the royal family. In Cape Town, to be black is, almost by definition, to be confused: once excluded, now technically empowered, a dominant group in the rainbow, but still practically marginalised by the history that created and continues to operate practical exclusion. So, from the perspective of identity, context redefines meaning and we end up not talking about the same colour at all.

In addition, the very notions and ideas we use to describe our identities are changing radically. What does it mean, for example, to be a "mother" in a world where in vitro fertilisation and surrogate motherhood is rapidly becoming common? What happens to conventional ideas of parenthood in the case of the French baby "constructed" from the egg of a 62-year-old woman, sperm from her brother, and "incubated" in a surrogate mother? What does it mean to be a "wife" in a homosexual marriage? Or "old" when you have rebuilt a 65-year-old body through plastic surgery and look like a young starlet?

Thus, identity has become a perilous notion. It is not, if it ever was, monolithic and static; but multiple and ever changing. And the most fundamental change is this: all those other categories through which we in the West defined and measured ourselves - the "evil Orientals", the "fanatic Muslims", the "inferior races of the colonies", the immigrants, the refugees, the gypsies - are now an integral part of ourselves. It is not just that they are "here" but their ideas, concepts, lifestyles, food, clothes now play a central part in shaping "us" and "our society". We thus have no yardstick to measure our difference and define ourselves.

Descartes could say with some confidence, "I think, therefore I am" because his thought had already defined the Other, the darker side of

himself, through which he could confirm his own civilised and thoughtful existence. Today, our thought has to be directed toward a more frightening question: how much of the Other is actually located within me? The quest for identity is essentially an attempt to answer this question. And it is the fear of the answer that transforms, in the words of Amin Maalouf, the Lebanese-French novelist, "a perfectly permissible aspiration" into "an instrument of war" (Maalouf 2000). This transformation occurs through some basic associations.

The first of these is the conventional association of identity with power and territory. Identity always conferred power, defined the essential character distinctive to its own territory, and familiarised people with the proper means of domesticity, living comfortably within the homeland. But an all powerful identity is like an all-powerful tree in the garden: it sucks the life out of all other plants. When power is skewed in this manner, it is not possible to exist in symbiosis. Take the case of America, which began as a declaration of identity: a new world emptied of meaningful past and ready for migrants who would build an identity based on the power of a new territory. But the very definition of American identity provided power and privilege for those who were conceived as the insiders. The term 'ethnicity' has its roots in the American provenance where, apart from the European immigrants, all other immigrants are defined as ethnics. As Dipankar Gupta notes, ethnicity "connotes, above all else, the signification of the primordially constituted 'Other' as an 'outsider' " (Gupta 1996). The distinction is between hyphenated Americans - Italian, German, Polish, Irish, Russian - and ethnicity. American identity offers the hyphenated Americans the ideal American Dream of inclusion and opportunity. Thus, only hyphenated Americans have ever made it to the White House.

But ethnicity is very different: blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans are ethnics, problematic and different kinds of Americans. Ethnics make excellent domestic servants, a significantly different thing from domesticity. Ethnicity is the politically correct term for race,

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for a hierarchy within American identity and for the power of definition that is exclusive to white America. Asian too are ethnics. Chinese Americans had their identity neatly stereotyped in the works of Mark Twain and Bret Harte. Japanese Americans were the only people interned as real "enemies within" during the Second World War, an unthinkable reaction to German, Italian or any other quisling state Americans.

In British identity, power and territory are expressed in hierarchies of race and class. It is a little too glib to argue that British identity had the luxury of seeing race as external, the definition of difference beyond its shores. But the exercise of power that created an Empire on which the sun never set, a notion of class that defined and shaped modernity and was not a stranger anywhere in the world, are essential attributes of what it is to be British (Colls 2002). Without it the British could not be simultaneously xenophobic, internationalist and parochial: the sort of people who go on Spanish holidays to eat fish and chips and drink warm bitter ale. British identity is based on an assumption of authority that makes the world a familiar place, a proper theatre in which to continue being British. It also produced its own internationalist perspective: Britain has had its share of "old India hands", "Africa men and women" – urbane, cosmopolitans who know Johnny Foreigners better than they know themselves.

The problem with identity as power and control over territory is what happens when power wanes. Johnny Foreigner is now within, ethnics are demanding the American Dream. Power has been debunked, denounced and vilified. Does all that that identifies the Self go down the plughole with it? How can we be comfortable with accepting the identity of villains? Which leads us to the second association: to exclude the unsavoury foreigners from our identity we have to anchor it in romanticised history and frozen tradition.

Collective identity is based on the selective processes of memory. Let me illustrate how this process works, and how the creation of identity

can lead to conflict, by dwelling on the notion of British identity. British identity was (is?) the acknowledgement of a common past. Sharing and having been shaped by this common past is what makes the British different from all other identities. The trouble is history as a deliberate human creation, itself another wilful act of power, artificially constructed to support an artificial identity. Europe engineered a cultural identity based on a common descent from the supposed traditions of ancient Greece and Rome and two thousand years of Christianity. British history books always began with the arrival of the Romans. So British history begins by submerging, barbarising and differentiating itself from Celtic history. Celt and Welsh are words whose linguistic roots, one Greek the other Saxon, mean stranger. The history of Britain, as written in the age of devolution, records not a common shared past but continuous contest and conflict within British isles. Whatever Britain is, it is the creation of dominance by kings and barons and upwardly mobile yeoman who practiced colonialism at home, and after perfecting the technique, moved abroad.

It was Oliver Cromwell who noted that Britain had its "Indians" at home in what he called the "dark corners of Britain." He referred, of course, to the residual Celtic corners. It makes perfect sense that Margaret Thatcher, whom I always regarded as Oliver Cromwell in drag, should propose the solution to the Ulster problem as relocating Catholics to Ireland. It was Cromwell's policy: if they will not reform, be educated and submit, then they have no place within the identity, history and society that is Britain. That no one seriously proposes sending the Union Jack waving Ulstermen back to where they came from, or removing the Union from them, itself suggests a strong allegiance to a constructed history, the history of irreconcilable difference. As Orangemen so often say, marching with fife and drum to intimidate and demonstrate their dominance is their culture. In an age of the politics of identity, culture has its rights. But how far can you defend the rights of a culture whose only reason for

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being is to retain dominance?

It really is quite dumbfounding how much of Britishness, and by association Englishness, is based on fabricated history. Consider the whole notion of Anglo-Saxon Britain. Winston Churchill and Rudyard Kipling were devotees of Anglo Saxon history for a reason. It enabled them to avoid how genuinely European British history has always been. Norman kings hardly ever spent time in Britain, spoke French rather than English, and were most concerned with dominating Europe from their French possessions. Of course, the Saxon bit of the Anglo Saxon has its own problems. After the Welsh Tudors, and Scots Stuarts, a brief quasi native interlude, German monarchs were bussed in to reign over Britishness that was to be marked by Englishness alone, and that wanted nothing to do with Europe.

The selectivity of historic memory is part of its inventiveness. History always seeks ancient roots, the better to justify its innovations. Ancient Anglo Saxon liberties were purposefully invented on a number of occasions to fashion the Mother of Parliaments. This foundational institution was not a true popular democratic institution until 1929, the first election based on universal adult suffrage. The statue of Oliver Cromwell quite properly stands outside Parliament. His insistence that ancient Anglo Saxon liberties rested on property owning was the novel twist that secured class hierarchy, made the Restoration of monarchy easy, and enabled manufactured history to continue its work. The pomp and ceremony of the British monarchy was a late Victorian invention. The Royal Family as the model for the normative family, an ideal for a nation, is a post Edwardian invention, Victoria's son Edward hardly being a suitable candidate for model husband and father. And so it goes on.

Thus, the notions of race and class are intrinsic to the self-definition of the English. Without the idea of race there is little left for English identity to hold on to: only being a disadvantaged minority within Britain, the complete inversion of received history. What works well for youthful addicts of street culture does not suit the aspirations of new English identity,

and that's why the appeal to the barricades, sending them back, locking them up has to be made.

As recently as 1940, George Orwell could state that "when you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing different air". Identity as difference is less easy to define in a world already awash with globalisation whose most notable feature is rampant Americanisation. Where is the British sandwich? Surely that defined the difference of being here. But McDonalds, Starbucks, pizza parlours, doner kebab, chicken tikka marsala, the rise of ciabatta and the *pret a manger* syndrome have transmuted the familiar air of England in wafts of everyone else's fragrant confections.

These culinary metaphors have become basic to redefining British identity. The new culinary repertoire are not so much a smorgasbord as alternative choices. Does Britain embrace the global Americanisation of the high street, the merchandised model of individualism, the free market identity of buying into who you want to be in terms of dress, sex and politics? Or is Britain as European as ciabatta and its passion for fine wine? Are the British the kind of people who opt for a common European history of struggle for public ownership and secure, quality public services? In facing that choice, Britain has to discover how and in what way the spiced diversity of real curry, as opposed to an invented dish to suit only white tastes, fits into the feast of identities. And, these questions are not just rhetorical: they have a real import in terms of policy. Should Britain align itself with America or look more towards Europe is a question that dominates British politics – some would even argue that it is tearing the nation apart.

Much the same can be said about other problematic identities. Like Britain, Islam too has used selective memory in shaping an identity for itself that is posed against a demonised West. And, just like the Muslims, fundamentalist Hindus too have constructed a romanticised past to shape a Nationalist Hindu identity (Bhatt 2002). In both cases, the fabrication of monolithic identities has led to conflict and death. The desire to be pure, unpolluted and authentic

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often leads to construction of identities that are totalitarian in the content and destructive in their nature.

So we arrive at the third association: the negotiation of identity between the alternate poles of desire and death. As American scholar Cornel West has suggested, we construct our identities from the building blocks of our basic desires: desire for recognition, quest for visibility, the sense of being acknowledged, a deep desire for association (West 1994). It is longing to belong. All these desires are expressed by symbols – pomp and ceremony, marches, festivals, national monuments and anthems, cricket and football teams, etc. But in a world where symbols are all we are, all we have, holding on to these symbols becomes a matter of life and death. It is for the glorification of these symbols that the bloody tale of national history is written and enacted in nationalists' campaigns everywhere around the world.

Identity not only invokes the desire to be different, it also summons the desire to express similarity. Indeed, there can be no difference without similarity. But similarity is always seen as the opposite pole of difference, as appeals to making everyone the same. It is often posed as "our" similarity against "their" difference. Once the doctrine of similarity was the underlying principle of the communist ethos, now it has become essential to the internationalist-libertarian-individualist doctrine that underpins globalisation. "Workers of the World Unite" has been replaced by "Liberal Capitalism is the Only Way". Such championing of similarity can become war on those who fight to maintain their difference. Similarity in such contests becomes an ethos to die for.

In coming to terms with the contemporary crisis of identity, we need to transcend certain apparent contradictions. To reject the demonisation of difference does not require the abandonment of difference. The desire for similarity is not the same thing as the aspiration for homogeneity. Traditions and customs that do not change cease to be traditions and customs and are transformed into instruments of oppression. Identity has historic anchors but is not fixed to a limited, unchanging set of tradi-

tional signs and historic symbols. Identity is not what we buy, or what we choose, or what we impose on others; rather, it is something from which we learn how to live, discover what is worth buying, and appreciate what it is to be different. Just as the flora and fauna in a garden learns to live with each other.

What we need is to recover our confidence in identity as the product of various and diverse traditions. We need to recognise that any identity is the means to synthesise similarity through difference and to see difference as discrete means of expressing basic similarity. We need to move away from the politics of contested identities that heighten artificial differences towards acceptance of the plasticity and possibilities of identities that focus on our common humanity. Living identity, as opposed to the fossilised to die for variety, is always in a constant flux. It is an ever changing balance, the balance of similarities and differences as a way of locating what it is that makes life worth living and what connects us with the rest of the changing world. The challenge of shaping Other futures is to transcend difference and thereby enable it to fulfil its real purpose – to provide variety and diversity in a world that cannot exist with it.

This then is my vision of the future. A world of variety and diversity where we are at ease with our identity, know our Selves, and through knowing ourselves come to see beauty and goodness in Others who are not like us. A fragrant world with all the colour and multiplicity of a garden.

But, of course, it is more than possible that instead of moving towards my garden of identities, we could go forward to a totally different future. An alternative scenario is reflected in the title of Francis Fukuyama's book: *Our Posthuman Future* (Fukuyama 2001). Here, human identity per se evaporates and genetic engineering, cloning and neuropharmacology lead us to a future of identities manufactured in the laboratory. Eugenics will ensure that we are all much stronger, smarter and resistant to disease and death. Xeno-transplants will guarantee replacement parts for our failing bits of biology. Scientists would isolate biochemicals in an egg and transfer them directly to the skin cell –

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doing away with the idea and need of the human embryo altogether. So, our sense of ourselves, and how we interact as social and cultural beings, will be fundamentally altered. Identity will acquire a new meaning – or rather meaninglessness as we will all be fashioned in a homogeneous way by standardized technology. There are obvious problems with this scenario. As soon as biotechnology solves one problems, it creates a myriad of others. As Fukuyama acknowledges, it could at best lead to a new class of people – those who could afford the technology – and create a whole new underclass of ordinary mortals; at worse it could lead to a *Brave New World* that Aldous Huxley warned us about. My point is that a post human, bio-technology based future is simply a continuation of the Enlightenment project of progress through instrumental science. One source of Truth, and one Civilisation, continues in its trajectory – the human garden becomes an embodiment of a single, all-powerful identity.

There is another scenario that is worth considering. Globalisation may continue on its present course unimpeded for the next two or three decades (Sardar 2002). That would not only mean that the world is dominated and controlled by a single nation - for globalisation is only another name for Americanisation - but also the cultural space for difference would be totally eroded. In other words, the world will be awash with a single culture and its products, and difference as such would cease to exist. Diversity as we know it would disappear and cultures trying to retain some semblance of identity and originality would be in perpetual conflict with America. Puritanism and fundamentalism would stalk the earth on one hand, and America's arrogance will take cosmological proportion on the other. This scenario too leads us to a desolate panorama with a single identity.

To undermine these two undesirable scenarios, we need to abandon the idea that a single truth can be imposed on a plural globe. Just as a garden does not function on the basis of a single species, so the single Truth of western civilisation as well as creeds and ideologies that

are based on exclusivist notions of truth and seek redemption by imposing this truth on all others, cannot lead us to viable, sustainable future. Both America and the great monotheistic religions of the world must transcend their historic goal of claiming exclusivist notions of Truth just as science must learn to see itself as only one – and not *the* – manifestation of reality. The Platonic idea that truth is same for everyone has no place in my future garden of humanities. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks argues in *The Dignity of Difference* (Sacks 2002) this notion of truth sets up false oppositions. If all truth is the same for everyone at all times, then if I am right, you must be wrong. And, if I really care for truth, I must convert you to my view. We must move forward from the old recipe that "truth is supremely important, and therefore all persons must live by a single truth" to the new formula that "truth is supremely important, and therefore every man and women must be allowed to live according to how they see the truth." Ultimately, my notion of pluralistic identities comes down to how we all see the truth differently, according to our historic experiences and perspectives, and how we all live the truth in our lives, as individuals and communities, in our uniquely different and cultural ways of being human.

So, I open my eyes and go out to transform the world as I find it into the future world that I desire. A world where more than one of way of being human is not only the norm but is considered essential for the very survival of our species. This is the world as a garden. And you and I, and all of us, urgently need to cultivate our future garden of humanities.

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