eurozine

**Moris Farhi**

# All history is the history of migration

Migration and exile have characterised the world since the beginning of time. And for most of that time, the ambivalent presence of *The Other* has aroused extremes of sentiment within the host community.

Many years ago, whilst collecting material in Ethiopia for a novel, I met an Italian septuagenarian in the Eritrean port of Assab. *Tio*, "Uncle", as everybody lovingly called him, declared himself an *insabbiati*. The term refers to people "caught in the sand", like fish, and was coined for those Italians who, having participated in Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1936, chose to stay on after Italy's defeat at the end of the Second World War.

Although he barely eked out a living −− at the time of our meeting, he was working as a receptionist in what was then Assab's only tourist hotel −− *Tio* relished his deracination. He had been captivated by Ethiopia's rich culture and the beauty of her many peoples, particularly the women.

*Tio* and I spent many euphoric days and nights in the company of his captivating entourage. During sober moments, he showed me his stamp collection and recounted how he had managed to procure, despite his impecunious situation, some very rare specimens, and how, at his death, being childless, he would bequeath the entire collection to a children's charity. (Months later, in London, a prominent philatelist to whom I had brought a gift from *Tio*, informed me that *Tio*'s collection of Ethiopian stamps was incontestably unique and worth a fortune.)

Most of the time, *Tio* and I talked about the caste −− surely the largest in the world −− to which we both belonged: the caste of "the other": of exiles, refugees, immigrants, displaced people, outsiders, outcasts, strangers, untouchables −− and, of course, artists and writers.

*Tio* kept offering the image of the *insabbiati*, those "caught in the sand", as the perfect representation of this caste. He said we were creatures facing death with a much greater awareness of the frailty of life and thus with an enhanced compulsion to survive; creatures that could not −− or did not get the chance to −− live in their native matrix and, consequently, desperately sought to make a new life in unknown lands and under harsh conditions; creatures that often became fodder for the people in power in their new environments, thus providing the hosts with good nourishment.

Since then, the image of the *insabbiati* has served me both as a guide and as a metaphor. As a guide, it has helped me to struggle against the depression of the exilic condition, the harsh realities of exclusion, the longings for my native land, and the free−floating angst of feeling worthless because of the difficulties

of integration and acceptance. As a metaphor, it has given me a perspective on history by recognising that displacement −− or, to use the gentler word, migration −− is not only a condition that rules much of the animal kingdom but also much of humanity, that, as the title of this paper brashly declares, all history is the history of migration.

There is a duality in every human endeavour. The same is true of the history of migration. It has two selves.

The first −− we could call it "official" or "partisan" history −− narrates and repeatedly glorifies war, conquests, occupation, colonisation, the subjugation of indigenous peoples, the marginalisation of their cultures, the vilification of their religions, and, at its most extreme, the purge of "lives unworthy of life". The last is a phrase coined in 1868 by Richard Liebich of Holland about Gypsies −− a supposition that the Third Reich heartily embraced and one that has since become a factor indiscernibly incorporated into the policies of many governments, not excluding some in the Western world, not only for Gypsies but also for many peoples in the so−called "under−developed world".

The second −− which can only be read between the interstices of "partisan history" and which I shall boldly declare to be "true history" −− gives accounts of the lives of the innumerable men, women, and children, "the countless millions of unknown Jesuses" −− if I may paraphrase François Mauriac −− who lived and died, often with dignity, despite the brutality and humiliation that ruled their lives. And a great majority of those millions, either because they faced poverty, oppression, and social excommunication in their own countries, or because the romantic, if not the self−interested urge for a better and more meaningful life, impelled them, sought new opportunities in what must have seemed to them a redemptive "elsewhere".

I will not expound here on "partisan history". That, more or less, has been, and still is, every country's daily fare. A diet concocted in the main by the xenophobes worshipping the martial ethos of our patriarchal societies and served with the blessings of our pseudo−compassionate absolutist religions. A diet that expertly blends tribal, nationalistic, and religious insecurities in order to gorge our credulous and weak selves with the fatty yields of greed, rapacity, convictions of superiority, and the unimportance of everybody's lives except those of our own.

Instead, I will try to explore the predicament of the legions of exiles, refugees, immigrants, displaced people, outsiders, outcasts, and strangers −− of *The Other*, to use an archetypal image −− that chronicles "true history".

It is a basic tenet of psychology that a person's development is determined by the struggle between two opposing forces. The first of these maintains life, the second threatens it.

Freud, though he eventually distanced himself from it, struggled hard with this concept of the death instinct where the destructive force, the compulsion to return to primary matter −− to cease being −− always acts as an inbuilt impulse. Melanie Klein, positing the view that the struggle starts during early infancy, reintroduced this concept as an *absolute*. Maintaining that if a person is to survive psychologically and continue to develop, an attempt must be made to contain the force of the deathly instinct throughout life. She further maintained that in order to protect his vulnerable self, the infant and, later, the individual, creates an array of defences, in particular, the fantasy that the

destructive parts of his nature are alien to his person and that, therefore, they can be disposed of as and when they emerge and transferred on to *The Other*. DW Winnicott, less dogmatically, suggested that this conflict that continued throughout life was never entirely resolved but remained, as he named it, "the stage of concern". By that he meant that the acknowledgement of the individual's own destructiveness and subsequent and continuous acts of reparation took ownership of both aspects of the human condition.

In the emotive, polarised arenas of political, religious, and ethnic struggles, these destructive parts assume the character of an archetype.

The concept of the archetype is often arbitrarily interpreted or simplified to mean different things to different people. It is best, therefore, to try to define it. In *A Critical Dictionary of Jungian Analysis*, Andrew Samuels, Bani Shorter, and Fred Plaut define an archetype as: "a hypothetical entity irrepresentable in itself and evident only through its manifestations [...] Archetypes arouse affect [that is to say, emotion], blind one to realities, and take possession of will [that is to say, consciousness]".

In a paper in the *Journal of Analytical Psychology* (vol 30, no 2 April 1985), entitled "Losing and Finding: the location of archetypal experience", Rosemary Gordon states that as archetypes are non−perceptual and irrepresentable, they are, therefore, initially "perceived as if they belonged 'out there' to something or somebody in the external world".

Note the key phrases: "a hypothetical entity irrepresentable in itself", "[that] blind[s] one to realities and take[s] possession of will", "perceived as if they belonged 'out there'". Phrases that despite their generality induce in us −− who perpetually live in troubled times −− anxieties of an impalpable menace. For instance, at its most rudimentary connotation, "Out there" conjures an extraterrestrial force that could threaten our existence. And this sense of impending peril produces, as the psychoanalyst Christopher Hering suggests in a *Free Associations* paper on the science−fiction film *Alien*, a condition known as "emotional fascism". Arguing that if a force can be mythified as an arch−enemy that threatens all humanity, then psychotic fiction can masquerade as objective truth. Thereafter, all feelings of compassion, concern, doubt, and proscription can be discarded. Under such circumstances, the idea of annihilation −− of a final solution −− can be sanctioned as a rational, appropriate, and justifiable objective, indeed a moral imperative.

Let me, at this juncture, share some thoughts with you on the nature of *The Other*, our putative archetype.

For there to be *The Other*, there needs to be a group. A group can comprise as few as two people. A single person, unless deeply divided in mind and thus already preconditioned to prejudice, does not experience *The Other*; he or she sees a stranger as a possible friend, lover, enemy, or just a passer−by. *The Other* is designated *The Other* always by a group.

Initially, *The Other* is non−perceptual. At first, the host society, either smug or complacent or wary, disdains to give *The Other* a close look and, consequently, sees it as a being that has emerged "from somewhere out there". When later, economic and political turmoil erupts −− as it always does −− it is forced to scrutinise this being either subjectively, through ingrained prejudice, or premeditatedly out of political expediency. But it does so always with *The Other*'s alien image branded on its mind.

Thereafter, *The Other*'s features can be drawn so that they reflect the host society's most problematic instincts, fears, and prejudices. In effect, they are implanted and take control of the host's consciousness, to paralyse its reason and perceptions, to blind it to reality and suffuse it with any −− or all −− of its insecurities.

*The Other* is always an instrument of change. The change can be regressive or evolutionary, good or bad. This is true even when *The Other* is an idea. Or a religion. Or an iconic figure from history or mythology. Or even a graven image.

*The Other* can be the saviour we revere −− though seldom in their lifetime. Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed were *others*.

Or the scapegoat we require. The Jew, the Roma, the homosexual, the disabled have all been *others*. The plethora of vices attributed to them can be used to arouse fears in any community. Such bias, expertly manipulated, renders rationality as vulnerable as an infant without speech.

*The Other* has a vital role in every aspect of life. Because, in the main, they have to survive in intimidating territory, they have to be highly adaptive and creative. This creativity is invariably contagious and motivates those who work with them to be creative themselves.

*The Other* is omnipresent in history.

Politics, like religion, has to construct sets of commandments by which to rule. And to rule successfully, political establishments, also religious establishments, must assure their subjects that there are irrefutable justifications for existence under their rule, even though existence may seem at best an incomprehensible cosmic accident, at worst meaningless. *The Other* is always cast as key personae in this unfathomable mystery. Hence their Janus−like character: devils for some, angels for others.

There would be no nationalism without *The Other*. It is the spectre of *The Other* as enemy −− barbaric and evil beyond imagination −− that prompts people to gather under one ethnicity, banner, ideology, or religion. It is always the spectre of *The Other* that unleashes wars and justifies them.

Equally, without *The Other*, there would be no movements for internationalism, no vision of a united family of humankind in our bounteous but fragile planet. It is the immigrant, the outsider, seeking admission into a host nation, who has developed the concept of such a union. Possessed with a greater awareness of their own struggle, often of desolation of every kind −− and indeed with greater awareness of the desolation within themselves −− it is the immigrant who tries to make sense of an otherwise incomprehensible existence by conceiving a pluralist world where prejudice will have been eradicated.

In literature, too, *The Other*, as an archetype, occupies centre stage. (I am sure artists in other disciplines can testify to the same; for example, one of our greatest figurative artists, Paula Rego).

Most protagonists and/or antagonists in a novel, play, poem, or opera are outsiders. From the Odysseus of antiquity to the modern Odysseus, Leopold Bloom; from Dido of Carthage to Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*; from

Othello to Don Quixote; from the Jews fleeing the Pharaoh to the displaced Palestinians in Mourid Barghouti's poems, all are immigrants.

Archetypes being irrepresentable, they inevitably become mythic figures. Since myths are the foundations of literature, let us briefly explore the essence of myth. Jung asserts that "myths are stories of archetypal encounters"; that "mythic tales illustrate what happens when an archetype has free rein and there is no conscious intervention on the part of man"; that "we do not invent myths; we experience them."

I would go further and posit that myths have greater reality than everyday reality because everyday reality −− which is always coloured by myths −− is always distorted either with abused or neutered words or deeds, or shielded by falsehood, not only by our governments, not only by multinational corporations, but also by the media. Against these powerful factions, myths provide constants in conceptual frameworks, values, and in the domain of morality.

Of course, myths can be misused. Or to be exact: myths can be doctored to provide legitimacy to a system, strategy, or ideology. And the misuse can be devastating.

I would suggest, however, that uncorrupted myths, myths that have evolved through millennia from our unconscious and still remain vibrant −− every culture has them −− cannot be misused.

Take the Aryan myth of the Nazis and its pursuit of kitsch death. What made that a false myth? Simply the fact that although through indoctrination it appeared to be reasonable, it could not find anchorage in the unconscious, in that domain where the Ethical Self resides. (We often ignore the Ethical Self. Yet it is innate because it has provided all the moral proscriptions of all the religions.) Beneath the gloss of its pseudo−Darwinian echoes, and despite the efforts of countless scientists to give it legitimacy, the Aryan myth of a super−race in a world eaten away by the cancers of such inferior peoples as Jews, Gypsies, Blacks, homosexuals, the disabled, was based on a gross untruth. It betrayed the Ethical Self by its hollowness. And it found no anchorage in science. It was the biggest of pseudo−scientific lies. Certainly, the percentage of Germans who believed with passion in this false myth was not significant. The great majority who paid lip service to it did so by choosing to repress actions with an ethical basis that constitute the foundations of a civil society. They could thus enact their paranoia against *The Other*, enjoy the licence of gratifying their terrors, anger, envy and fears by evacuating the very struggle that makes for individual development into *The Other* and thus unburden themselves with absolute conviction.

I cannot think of any uncorrupted myth that has caused persecution. Every time a myth has been employed in the service of persecution, its truth was distorted. The witch hunts in Europe and America, and the Spanish Inquisition are two examples from many.

I can hear some modern Pilate asking: What is truth?

I think we know the answer. Truth is the awareness of our Ethical Selves and the lack of fear to be guided by it. Truth is everything that exposes our propensity for evil, and having exposed it seeks to heal it.

Like the Hitlerites −− as the Roma used to call the Nazis −− we are more fascinated by death than life. Consequently, more often than not, we are engaged in suppressing the truth out of fear of our very natures.

Fortunately for us, it is irrepressible.

A few words on the writer as *The Other* −− and just to make things more difficult −− about writers, like myself, who are strangers twice over for not being born into the host ethnicity, country or culture.

Most writers become others because they try to seek what is probably unfindable −− resolutions. And if not resolutions, then at least some elaboration of the true complexity of what it is to be human.

Do they succeed? I don't know.

But true to the ethos of *The Other*, they keep trying.

And none harder than immigrant writers who endeavour to transfuse with their ancestry the blood of a bleached host nation.

Diaspora literature −− wherever written −− has changed immeasurably not only the host society, but also the world at large.

Simultaneously, writers in Diaspora themselves have changed.

Most of the changes have been beneficial.

In terms of the UK, Diaspora writers have primarily brought broader political and cultural dimensions. They have vivified a literature that was increasingly neglecting the ambitions of its grand heritage. They have enlarged the horizons of a country self−righteously clinging to its insularity and shown it the world at large, a world much of which it had colonised, but seldom enhanced and often betrayed in proud insolence.

They have brought back the idealism that the present materialistic world order has so very nearly killed. They have defied the soulless worshippers of the abacus. And they have grappled with narcissism, cynicism, complacency, bigotry, and limitless greed.

They have brought new visions of truths, colours, depths, spectrums, insights, and compassion. They have brought new horizons. They have enriched us with neglected or ignored cultures. They have reignited in us such universal concepts as the struggle for love, liberty, equality, and universal welfare.

They have reminded us −− and stirred up those of us who did not want to know −− that the differences between peoples are superficial, that irrespective of ethnicity, colour, or creed, we laugh or weep in the same way and for the same reasons.

The world embraced Homer, Ovid, Michelangelo, Einstein, Mann, Hikmet, Neruda, García Márquez. The UK embraced Conrad, Freud, Berlin, Koestler, Rushdie, Walcott, Harris, Soyinka, Okri.

Earlier on, I made reference to "emotional fascism" that generates psychotic fiction as objective truth. I would like to bring that up again to shed some light

on how the new age politics is evolving vis−à−vis The Other, not just in the UK but all over the world.

*The Other* as a devil can be manufactured at will. You may remember the famous remark by Dr Karl Lueger who served as the mayor of Vienna from 1897 to 1910: I decide who is a Jew!

But preserving *The Other*'s menacing image and then perpetuating it demands careful planning. It demands the creation of a Credible Falsehood. It demands the continuous repetition of this Credible Falsehood until it eventually eclipses reason and establishes itself as truth. It demands psychotic fiction.

The UK should serve as a good example of how psychotic fiction as objective truth can be disseminated by politicians. You may remember some years back, the Right Honourable Jack Straw, one of our "compassionate", "progressive" flagbearers of "New Labour", then Home Secretary, decided to stem the flow of Gypsy refugees from Slovakia by decreeing that no Slovak could enter the UK without a visa. The reason he gave, in his omniscience, was that these Gypsies were not seeking to escape persecution but to find jobs or, failing that, to benefit from our welfare system. He called them "economic migrants", a shrewd soundbite in an age where possession has become the primary ethos.

This is psychotic fiction. It not only negates the prosperity immigrants bring to and/or generate in every country in the world −− and have done throughout history −− but also implies that they are barbarians and are mounting a siege at our gates in order to invade us, steal our wealth, and ravage our women. A psychotic fiction that insinuates that the pure blood of the "whiter than white" civilised world is in danger of being plagued by alien blood. A psychotic fiction that unashamedly seeks to cover up the fact that in many cases human migration occurs precisely because the "whiter than white" civilised world has, if not killed off or decimated the migrants' countries during its rapacious history of colonialism, certainly drained those countries of their resources and crushed their people's aspirations. A psychotic fiction that seeks to make us forget that it is precisely the impoverishment caused by our immaculate "whiter than white" civilisation that has forced the immigrants to migrate so that they can make some sort of a life for themselves. A psychotic fiction that even more unashamedly denies that our "whiter than white" civilisations owe their wealth, health, and the freedom to pursue happiness entirely to the labour −− always wickedly underpaid and contemptuously ignored −− of the migrants they, more often than not, originally impoverished and now use for menial labour. And, not least, a psychotic fiction that criminally overlooks the fact that our "whiter than white" governments, by choosing to keep some people out of their borders, by formulating irresponsible quotas, seek to destroy those whose heritage they have stolen.

So how do we fight the psychotic fiction Straw and his like produce in their bookkeeping?

Simply by defying them. By welcoming immigrants. By being proud that they have chosen this country for their new lives. By bringing down the barriers. By removing borders. By renewing the true meaning of asylum. And by building bridges.

From offering asylum to building bridges for those "caught in the sand" −− what a seismic shift that can be. And how utterly congruent that shift would be with the life−enhancing spirit of those seeking both to find themselves and to

enrich their adopted country. An old Roma legend, beautifully evoked by the Romani poet, Rajko Djuric, speaks of a time when God, taking pity on humans, builds a bridge between life and death in order to create an eternal cycle of regeneration. Today, at the beginning of a destructive and even more dangerous historical period, we are in even greater need of building bridges. For today, it is regeneration itself that is under threat. Today, the cycle of life and death has been reduced to a cycle of survival and extinction. More to the point, the cycle is disintegrating. A combination of interminable wars, fuelled either by national, ethnic, religious, and ideological hatred −− often by all four −− or the insatiable greed of rich nations, which shamelessly and cold−bloodedly plunge poor nations into destitution, has clammed up the very impetus of the cycle. Today, mass destruction of peoples and their civilisations has become a way of the world. So has the galloping destruction of the planet's resources. Today, the future wears the shroud of extinction. And, as the old Jewish proverb says, a shroud has no pockets.

Extinction, let me remind you, is final. It is non−generative. It is nothingness where not even a single seed can germinate. Unless the reality of "true" history is acknowledged, the end of all humanity, all Creation, even that of the planet itself, will be upon us.

What sort of bridges can we build to save ourselves and the planet from extinction?

I think my own answer is self−evident: bridges that are cultural; bridges that will unite us with *The Other*.

Unlike globalised trade, which in the name of competition gives licence to multinationals to enslave poor nations, to destroy the world's resources and to line the pockets of an elite, cultures replenish the spirit. Unlike despotic regimes and armoured men in uniforms −− military or religious −− who believe in ruling by force, discrimination, and hatred, cultures impart respect, love of people, and admiration for humankind's creativity and diversity.

Culture, in effect, is the only aspect of life which, by honouring Creation's ability to create eternally, gives meaning to human existence. Where creativity rules, extinction cannot gain dominion.

Building or rebuilding these bridges is the artist's duty. It is our *raison d'être*. And we must fulfil this obligation. Indeed, we must transform ourselves into bridges. Out of the desolation within us, we must attempt the primary task of loving life by creating work that celebrates life.

In many ways, building cultural bridges is a simple labour. Most of us can still touch our perpetual, life−long struggle to be truthful to our Ethical Selves. We are born to love, born to seek enrichment from *The Other*, to recognise the brutality in ourselves and redeem it with compassion. We are always ready to open our hearts to existence and to its splendour.

However, culture, because of its attempt to seek the eternal resolution between good and evil, is a fragile phenomenon. So are cultural bridges. It is up to us to protect in every corner of the world the eternity they are designed to carry. You may remember Heinrich Heine's prophetic statement that has become part of our unconscious: "where they burn books, they will also burn people". In the context of our times, that statement can be paraphrased: "where they destroy cultures, they will also destroy the world".

Let us understand that as the millions of *Others* develop their gifts, they will offer the world not one but two souls: the soul of their culture and the soul of their host country.

There is no end to what can be achieved with the union of two souls.

---

Published 2006−11−03
Original in English
Contribution by Index on Censorship
First published in *Index on Censorship* 2/2006
© Moris Farhi/Index on Censorship
© Eurozine