

## LOOK IN MY WINDOW

Once at a Festival of Literature a man leaned over with a rather leaden face and asked me, 'Why do you write for children?' 'Because I am a window,' I said with a broad smile on my face - and I think that confused him a bit, either my answer or the smile that went along with it. He had only just published his autobiography and of course, as he was regularly seen on TV everywhere, he was on essential booklists. On another occasion I was guest speaker at a Conference of Teachers in a University.

This time, another speaker got up to leave when I was introduced - his excuse: he was not interested in Children's Literature. The chairperson tried to make some polite excuses in his behalf, but I said to him, 'Never mind. Some people are afraid that their extremely adult minds will not understand what a child understands.' I wasn't joking on either occasion, I was serious about comparing myself to a window and also, about the fear some people have about trying to understand the world as children understand it, for the two ideas underpin my work and it is quite easy to explain that.

We often think of the mind as a chamber of some sort with everything that we have known and experienced, stored in it. It may then mean that my chamber has a window to it, or even that I am actually the window to a chamber that extends into my environment beyond the confines of my mind. In any case, I like to identify myself with both the object window and its function and whether I am the window, or I have a window, I try to hold it within the reach of children and young people.

And while thinking about the window, my mind goes back many years to moments in the past that became very important to me. It was before I started school and we were visiting my grandfather in a beautiful town. My grandfather was mad about chess - which drew other chess players and contestants to the house in the afternoons and I especially liked one young man, although nearly everybody avoided him except my grandfather. He was only welcome if my grandpa was around, but I liked him from listening to his conversations with my grandfather and I imagined him to be fantastically clever. The young man claimed that he knew the language of animals and trees, of pots and pans, knives, spoons and about anything else.

My grandfather would usually order a chair brought for him and served some refreshment, then the conversations began. The guest would tell the latest gossips he'd heard from dogs, goats and fowls about people. Sometimes it was trees sending messages across to other trees, or abusive language from disgruntled vessels and cutlery. Once a pan clattered noisily onto the cement floor from a woman's hand nearby and he threw his head back and burst out into uncontrolled laughter. When asked what it was about, he replied, still in titters, 'The pan just said "Silly woman. She's gone and fouled up her hands with some smelly stuff, then comes to touch me. She has no respect".'

On another occasion, he appeared rather troubled. He'd just overheard a conversation between two dogs. One dog that all other dogs envied because of where it lived, announced that it would rather be a stray than go back to its master's house. Why? Because it's very rich master never slept in his own bed. He always sneaked away to sleep in the kitchen, so it had to sleep in front of the kitchen door to warn him if anyone approached the kitchen while he slept. The dog was upset because lately, it too had been sneaking off to town while its master slept. Just the once, it failed to be back at its post in time and a maid had stumbled on the master, still fast asleep in the kitchen floor. Now the dog had been told that it would have to undergo surgery in order to keep it at home in the night. This seemed to disturb the young man because he knew the dog, or rather, its master.

It was all so wonderful sitting quietly and listening to those extraordinary conversations and as hindsight I think the experience became so important because of my grandfather's attitude towards the young man - the respect and interest that he expressed towards him and his stories. That is how I learnt for instance, that trees don't only communicate with other trees, but also, that they do feel pain as well as kindness.

I believe that if I respect living things today, including trees and man-made objects like cutlery, pots and pans, it is not because I am particularly religious or animistic. It is because I gained such insights during those impressionable years of my life. I had a chance to look into an extraordinary window and through it, I saw what I could not ordinarily have seen. I think, from that strange encounter long ago, I may have learnt that the real world is far too big, too varied and much too complex for me, to see enough to know enough of what there is to know.

Many years later, I learnt from my mother that my grandfather's wonderful friend was in fact, a patient at the town's Psychiatric Hospital, a schizophrenic – and why everybody avoided him at our house except my grandfather. But in him, I met Lewis Carol and Hans Christian Andersen in person, long before I even learnt their names. The stories that I heard from him were fantastic but not fantasy as in the folktales that I also heard. He told his stories as gossip and gossip is not fantasy, for one might even bump into the cause of the gossip round the corner.

And so my first statement: Everything that describes the human condition is valuable in all its diversity and multiplicity in that, as individuals, our resources only enable us to see the world as we alone see it. The views of others who see things as we do not see, or even things that we don't see, may together with our own, provide a wider scope and afford us a more rounded, clearer view of our world. Put another way, we are able to see things via the multiple visions of others and that way, see things that we could not have seen on our own.

Still, nearly two thousand years ago a wise man reflected, and I quote:

The reason, in respect of which we are rational beings, is common;  
if this is so, common also is the reason which commands us what to do;  
if this is so, there is a common law also; if this is so, we are fellow citizens;  
if this is so, the world is in a manner, a state. My nature is rational and social  
and my city and country is Rome; but so far as I am human, it is the world.

'Globalism' had not quite emerged as the clear concept we have today, as in fact, the entire continent of America was not even part of the generally known world at the time. Yet, interestingly, Marcus Aurelius who made this statement overlooked our inter-dependency through commerce, industry and finance as we are learning now, even if we didn't know it before. His reasoning rather focused on the common attributes of human nature, the heritage that we all share as humankind. The statement begins with the 'common reasons in respect of which we are rational beings, the reasons which command us what to do and a common law which makes us all 'fellow citizens of the world-state'.

I take all of this together to be what we also know as 'culture', for we believe it is the sophistication of human culture that separates us from all other creatures. Besides enabling us to accumulate and transmit our knowledge and experience, culture demarcates for us the parameters in which we can live and express ourselves as rational human beings. It is our map for being here in the world as human beings and as such, it is more useful to us, the more informed it is of the diverse views, knowledge, experience and resources of our kind.

Increasing changes as we are seeing now requires us even more to recognise that we are indeed, all fellow citizens of the 'world-state' and as fellow citizens, to know, to understand and to feel the way round our world together. Now, we don't need to be reminded that anyone's business is everybody's business and that leads to my next statement taken from Clifford Geertz and I quote,

We are surrounded neither by Martians nor by less well got-up editions of ourselves. To see ourselves as others see us can be eye opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves, is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves amongst others as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that the largeness of mind without which objectivity is self congratulation and tolerance a sham, comes.

I don't think the point could be made any stronger than that, although I'm sure we'd express much curiosity if Martians were to descend on our neighbourhood. Neither can we miss the essential 'largeness of mind' which I think invites us to 'open our minds to the world' or perhaps, the other way round. To achieve this 'largeness of mind' we need to 'open our minds to the world'. So far, we've only tried to 'open our eyes' beginning with the idea of the window and urging us to open them beyond the immediate and the familiar by welcoming and sharing in the diverse views and visions of the world.

Well, I started with the window and have touched upon culture. It has also been suggested that we are all fellow citizens of the 'world-state', that we are surrounded not by Martians but by fellow human beings just like us even if they appear to be different. But to truly apprehend the commonality of the human community, we must achieve a 'largeness of mind'. My last statement is from Mahatma Gandhi and I quote,

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed.  
I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible.

So I try to finish with the window and I think it is a very clear picture and I want to believe that with the help of these great persons whose thoughts I have shared with you, a strong case has been made for 'open-mindedness, multi-culturalism, inter-culturalism and cross-culturalism. Furthermore, there isn't anybody who doesn't know by now, that a book is a whole world that we can pick up and hold in our hands and therefore, an essential window to the world. Moreover, I still remember the earliest stories I ever read and some that I heard when I was very small, although I've forgotten many that I've only recently read. The foundations not only of my knowledge, my personality and my outlook were all formed for life, when I was a child - I've just shared a bit of it with you.

But perhaps we can demonstrate it by looking through a window together.

## **Magic**

The shadows disappeared in the twilight as the sun slipped behind the low hills in the west. It was Alide's favourite time, the moments just before everything sank into total darkness and kerosene lamps cast dancing shapes on walls and ceilings. Everything became the same then. Houses looked alike and people turned into faceless, talking silhouettes. The half-light wrapped all up into one.

But it was not only the light. Dogs never bark unless they were themselves, bitten. Conversations took on low, even tones. Wooden mortars sent their cheers booming up to the sky, toom- tam- toom- tam- toom and the air was spiced with stews, soups and sources. That was the time.

Father was at the veranda, straining his eyes over a newspaper. Whether it was from tiredness or for trying to read news he'd heard many times over, it was one yawn after another. Little Keli too was desperately turning into something that he alone knew and sounded like a drowning frog. Mother was in the kitchen with Muko. It was Alide's job to clean the three lanterns of the house and she was busy at it.

First she cleaned the new lantern, the big, shiny one with a net inside that made white light like the full moon, The *Aladdin*.

'Alide', father had said when he brought this lamp from town, 'I've brought you an *Aladdin lamp*. It will sit on the cupboard in the front room and give you all the light you need. Now you can read as much as you like, but you must take care of it.'

'Aladdin's Lamp?' she asked curiously, 'The magic lamp?'

'Magic?' father wondered for a moment, 'Ah, I see what you mean', his face brightening up, 'In fact this lamp too has magic. But you'll have to find out by yourself.'

Everyone came to look as father unpacked and assembled it. Indeed, it was like magic when he filled it with kerosene, pumped it up and lit it with a match. With a pop, a tongue of flame jumped up, fluttered a bit and turned into a solid cone of white light. It was so bright that for a while, it dazzled the eyes. But soon everyone got used to it. That was three weeks ago.

On this evening, like many evenings before, Alide had cleaned the *Aladdin*. The glass shade was as clear as rainwater and she'd topped up the kerosene as father had shown her to do. She cleaned the second lamp, an ordinary storm lantern and placed it next to the *Aladdin*. Last was the one that left rings of kerosene wherever it sat, though it's been soldered many times by the tinker at the market.

She picked it up by the wire arm, she always picked it up that way. But this evening, for whatever reason, it felt like lead. So she decided to lift it harder.

The old lamp left the floor, hung in the air for a moment and swung away from her. Before she knew it, it started to swing back towards her, feeling even heavier than before. She was unable to stop it. The bottom of the old lamp smashed heavily into the middle of the *Aladdin*- c-r-a-c-k! The clean glass shade of the gleaming, new lamp tinkled on the cement floor like beads.

Alide's heart missed some beats and for a moment, she saw nothing. When the darkness cleared, she saw not only the shattered glass all round her. Father was holding the twisted, empty frame of the *Aladdin* in his hands, so was little Keli.

'What is it?' mother enquired from the kitchen. Alide was tongue-tied and couldn't answer. It was her father who replied, 'It's the *Aladdin lamp*. It's shattered. We can't use it anymore. It has to be thrown away.'

'What happened?', mother asked again.

'Don't know, but it was a terrible noise. Alide, are you all right?'

Still in a daze, she did not answer. She was trembling when father put down the mangled lamp and stretched an arm to her.

'Strange,' he said to her, 'but you are not hurt. Maybe we all made the old lantern jealous of the *Aladdin*. Now you will have to read by its old light again.'

Without the white light from the *Aladdin* it seemed like being in the shade.

It was not the twilight that she loved and it was not the night with the full moon. It felt strange. That evening, Alide ate her supper, but only because she had to.

She found none of the tastes and smells that she always enjoyed from eating. She'd never felt so sorry for herself before.

Mother said to her, 'Alide, don't feel so sorry for yourself. It was an accident. You could even have been hurt, but you are safe. Papa will get us a new one soon. Now cheer up.' But nothing could cheer her up. She liked the *Aladdin* a lot and she had smashed it.

Later in the front room, Muko was at his usual place at the table, doing his homework. Mother and father were at the veranda and Keli was in bed. Alide sat on the floor as she always did, in front of the cupboard. She brought out her book, leaned against the wall and opened it. The light came from the old lantern on the cupboard.

Alide looked up for a moment and began to think of father's strange words, 'Maybe we all made the old lantern jealous of the *Aladdin*.'

'All the same, I broke it and I cannot forgive myself,' she thought in her head.

'You can't forgive yourself for what?' a voice asked from somewhere.

'Look, whoever you are,' I've wrecked the *Aladdin lamp* and I feel miserable.

'You feel miserable for wrecking a lamp?'

'Not just a lamp,' said Alide, 'It is the *Aladdin*.'

'My dear child,' the voice said again 'If you knew the troubles other people have, then you'd see how tiny yours is and how lucky you are.'

'This is the worst thing that happened to me. I could kill myself,' said Alide.

'No. No. No,' said the voice, 'I will show you something. Just open your book.'

Alide opened the book, what she knew to be just a book. But suddenly, she was looking into a window. Through the window, she saw a donkey. But it was not just an ordinary donkey. The pelt of this donkey was all gold. Alide was surprised and even as she wondered, the voice asked her, 'What do you see in the window?'

'A donkey,' she answered, 'A golden donkey.'

'Ah –ha,' said the voice knowingly, 'You think that is a donkey, but he's not. In fact, he is a Prince. Now he's been sold and bought so many times over, he should be dead.

But there he is.'

'So, so how did he become a donkey?' Alide stammered.

'He will tell you, if you ask him,' answered the voice, 'You only broke a lamp and want to kill yourself. Now ask him. Ask how he turned from a Prince into a donkey,' the voice urged her.

Before she opened her lips to speak, the golden donkey drew closer to the window and began, 'I owe the way I am now, to my own folly,' he said, 'I fell in love with a maiden and wanted to visit her. But I wanted to fly to her. That would have impressed her immensely.'

'Yes,' Alide agreed, 'But- but that should not...'

'There was only one way to fly,' said the donkey, 'We had no flying machines. We only had magic. But that was no problem. I knew another maiden, the apprentice of the most powerful magician in the land. We were very good friends so I asked her for help. She told me the times her mistress was away and we made a date. I was with her at the appointed hour and you can imagine how excited I was!'

The donkey paused and remained silent for a while. Tears rolled down his face to the ground. Looking more closely, Alide noticed that the teardrops had a sheen. There were small piles of it by his feet, each droplet a nugget that shimmered like the moonlight.

'So even his teardrops are gold!' Alide remarked.

'Yes,' said the voice, 'But he's still very distressed after all these years. He'll continue in a moment, just bear with him.'

That gave Alide an idea. Who is the voice talking to her?

'You are wondering who I am,' the voice said.

'Yes. How do you know?' asked Alide. The voice did not answer. It said instead,

'He is ready now. He'll tell you how it happened. And the donkey resumed,

'The great magician was away, it was deepest night. I was alone with my friend the maiden, the magician's apprentice. We were in the magician's *sanctum* surrounded from floor to ceiling by phials, jars and vessels of every description and colour. By then, I could not bear the excitement. I imagined myself soaring into the sky, the moonbeam glinting off my back, a great silver bird. I imagined myself hovering and circling over the dwelling of my beloved. I imagined myself landing before her door with a huge flutter of wings, the hero. I shivered. I trembled with my own excitement.'

There was another pause, but this time, there were no tears in his eyes.

He only swung his short, golden tail from side to side and continued,

'My friend the maiden reached for a small coffer of ebony and ivory. She set it down on a table before me and lifted the top open. There were nine vials in it, I can't tell what colours they were. With a gleam in her eyes, she lifted one phial and held it to me. "*Here you are*", she said confidently, "*Drink it and you will know the wonders of flight.*" I took the tiny bottle in my hand and tipped its content into my mouth. I could feel it coursing down my throat. Its warmth was inside my stomach and soon, it rose to the surface of my skin. I remember her watching me. Her face was a mask carved out of ice. When it thawed, she led me to a mirror "*Now fly*" she said with a smile on her face, "*Fly wherever you want.*"

Alide's heart nearly stopped. But the voice came back, 'Imagine his anxiety' it said, 'I'm sure you have questions on the tip of your tongue. But we must leave him. Come. Turn another page in your book. I'll show you something else.' Alide turned the page and another window opened before her. This time it was a vista beginning from the window and stretching far into the distance.

Beneath the sky, there were mountains, hills, valleys, lakes, rivers, fields, forests There were suns, moons, stars, plants, animals, roads, curves, slopes, toads and trees. Before her eyes, a young woman appeared. She looked very pretty but also angry. It was obvious that she was looking for someone. She turned her head from left to right and peered into the distance ahead of her. She never said a word. Then she did something. She took one step to the side so that the road was before her, like a ribbon with many folds and curves.

With no effort at all, she took her end of the road in both hands and pulled. She pulled and pulled and the curves began to straighten out. She pulled for the last time and the road became as straight as a yardstick. She gave a sigh, for not too far ahead now, was a young man running desperately away from her.

'I've got you,' the woman said gleefully as she swiped the entire vista with her hand.

Alide's breath rushed out with a hiss. The man disappeared just as fingers and thumb met in a clasp. But the hand only clasped thin air. That instant a fine bird - a kite, hovered over the clasped hand and with a flutter of wings, flew into the sky. The look on the woman's face said that it was not over yet.

'Turn another page in your book,' the voice said again. She had forgotten all about the broken *Aladdin lamp* and the voice did not matter. She turned a page and another window opened before her. Guess what is in the window. Take your book. Open it.

### *Reference*

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, *Meditations*

Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge*

Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*

M Asare, *Magic* - in *Eating Words for Breakfast* (Penguin Books)