

## REFLECTIONS

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### Globalization and the Human Imagination

*Shashi Tharoor*

If, as the historian Eric Hobsbawm has suggested, the twentieth century really began with the assassination in Sarajevo that sparked the First World War, it is fair to suggest that, in the impact it is likely to have on the shape of the decades to follow, the twenty-first century began with the demolition of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.

What do I mean by that? Why should the destruction of this American symbol—the tallest buildings in the richest city in the most powerful nation on earth—mark such a change? One might argue that the destruction of the World Trade Center struck a blow not only at the institutions of American and global capitalism but at the self-confidence that undergirded them, the self-confidence of a social and political system that, without needing to think about it too much, believed it had found the answer to life's challenges and could conquer them all. If only by bringing home to Americans the end of their insulation from the passions that bedevil the rest of the globe, September 11 changed the world forever.

But the horrifying events of that one day are emblematic of our new century in another crucial way. The defining features of today's world are the relentless forces of globalization, the ease of communications and travel, the shrinking of boundaries, the flow of people of all nationalities and colors across the world, the swift pulsing of financial transactions with the press of a button. The airplane, the cellphone, the computer are the tools of our time. These very forces, which in a more benign moment might

have been seen as helping drive the world toward progress and prosperity, were the forces used by the terrorists in their macabre dance of death and destruction. The terrorists crossed frontiers easily, coordinated their efforts with technological precision, hijacked airplanes, and crashed them into their targets (as their doomed victims made last-minute calls on their cellphones to their loved ones). This was a twenty-first-century crime, and it has defined the dangers and the potential of our time as nothing else can.

It has also provoked a reaction in the United States that will, in turn, leave an indelible mark on the new century. The twentieth century was famously dubbed by *Time* magazine's founder Henry Luce as "the American century," but the twenty-first begins with the United States in a state of global economic, political, cultural, and military dominance far greater than any world power has ever enjoyed. The Yale historian Paul Kennedy has pointed out that the U.S. military budget exceeds that of the next 15 countries combined, and that before long the American military will dispose of resources roughly equivalent to those of the entire rest of the world put together. That is a level of comparative military power unprecedented in human history; even the Roman Empire at its peak, or that of Alexander the Great, did not come close to outstripping the rest of the world to the extent that the United States does today. "Nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power," Kennedy wrote in the *Financial Times* in February 2002, "nothing." But that is not

all. When the former French foreign minister, Hubert Védrine, called the United States a “hyperpower,” he was alluding not only to American military dominance but also to the United States as the home of Boeing and Intel, Microsoft and MTV, Hollywood and Disneyland, McDonald’s and Kodak—in short, of most of the major products that dominate daily life around our globe. Or, to quote the self-proclaimed American unilateralist Charles Krauthammer, waxing eloquent in the winter 2002/03 issue of the *National Interest* about “the unipolar era,” the United States “is dominant by every measure: military, economic, technological, diplomatic [*sic*], cultural, even linguistic, with a myriad of countries trying to fend off the inexorable march of Internet-fueled MTV English.”

And yet—before 9/11 Washington had been curiously ambivalent about its exercise of that dominance, with many influential figures speaking and acting as if the rest of the planet were irrelevant to America’s existence or to its fabled pursuit of happiness. After September 11, I was not alone in thinking that there would be no easy retreat into isolationism, no comfort in the illusion that the problems of the rest of the world need not trouble the United States. The terrorist attack was an assault not just on one city but, in its callous indifference to the lives of innocents from 80 countries around the world, an assault on the very bonds of humanity that tie us all together. To respond to it effectively, we must be united. Terrorism does not originate in one country, its practitioners are not based in one country, its victims are not found in one country—and the response to it must also involve all countries. Out of the solidarity that the world has demonstrated with the victims of this horror, a unity may emerge across borders that will also mark the new century as different from the ones that preceded it.

Terrorism emerges from blind hatred of an Other, and that in turn is the product of

three factors: fear, rage, and incomprehension. Fear of what the Other might do to you, rage at what you believe the Other has done to you, and incomprehension about who or what the Other really is—these three elements fuse together in igniting the deadly combustion that kills and destroys people whose only sin is that they feel none of these things themselves. If terrorism is to be tackled and ended, we will have to deal with each of these three factors by attacking the ignorance that sustains them. We will have to know each other better, learn to see ourselves as others see us, learn to recognize hatred and deal with its causes, learn to dispel fear, and, above all, just learn about each other.

When the United Nations helped reconstruct East Timor from the devastation that accompanied the Indonesian withdrawal, we had to rebuild an entire society, and that meant, in some cases, creating institutions that had never existed before. One of them was a judicial system of international standards, which in practice meant Western standards, complete with the adversarial system of justice in which a prosecutor and a defense attorney attempt to demolish each other’s arguments in the pursuit of truth. The U.N. experts had to train the Timorese in this system. But they discovered that there was one flaw. In Timorese culture, the expected practice for the accused is to confess his crimes and justice to be meted out compassionately. In order to promote the culture of the “not guilty” plea required by Western court systems, the U.N. experts had to train the Timorese to lie. Their mental processes—their imaginations—had now truly been globalized.

This brings me to the second half of my argument. In one sense, the terrorists of 9/11 were attacking the globalization of the human imagination. In an issue of *Red Herring* not long before the magazine—one closely associated with the Silicon Valley culture that was expected to dominate the twenty-first century—closed in 2003, editor

Jason Ponting wrote that “the Western culture that the developing world associated with globalization—secular, materialist, pluralistic, and promiscuous—was spectacularly rejected in the attacks on the World Trade Center.” He went on to quote the historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto as saying that those who cheered the attacks were “declining modernity.” I think there’s something a little sweeping, even simplistic, about that point, but I must admit that those who professed to “understand” these attacks saw themselves as rejecting a globalization from which they were excluded.

Terrorism, of course, takes advantage of desperate people. And if we speak of the human imagination today, we need to ask what leads surprisingly large numbers of young men, and sometimes young women, to follow the desperate course set for them by fanatics and ideologues. Perhaps it is not surprising that young people raised in oppressive environments and offered little hope for just redress feel frustrated and angry. It’s almost axiomatic that a sense of oppression, of exclusion, of marginalization, can give rise to resistance. Four decades ago, in 1962, the now-forgotten U.N. secretary general U Thant warned that an explosion of violence could occur as a result of the sense of injustice felt by those living in poverty and despair in a world of plenty. Some 2,600 people died in the World Trade Center on 9/11. But some 26,000 people also died on 9/11 around the world—from starvation, unclean water, and preventable disease. We cannot afford to exclude them from our global imagination.

But that is, of course, not all. If a state cannot even offer its people hope for a better life for their children—by providing access to basic education—then how can we expect those people or those children to resist the blandishments of terror? It should come as no surprise that the Taliban recruited its foot soldiers from the religious schools that were the only source of nurture and education—or indoctrination—for the many chil-

dren who learned not science or mathematics or computer programming, but rather only the creed of the Koran and the Kalashnikov—the Koran crudely interpreted, the Kalashnikov crudely made.

### *Imagination and Borders*

Which brings me back to the troubling question: have we fallen into the dangerous illusion that the human imagination can be globalized? Many in the developing world fear that globalization, which has brought McDonald’s and Microsoft to every land, has also brought Mickey Mouse and Nintendo to every mind. The answer inevitably involves considering the global mass media, whose focus, of course, reflects principally the interests of its producers. What passes for international culture is usually the culture of the economically developed world. It’s *your* imagination that is being globalized. American movies and television shows, in particular, can be found on the screens of most countries. That’s entertainment.

But who else makes the cut to enter the global imagination in our brave new world? Yes, there is the occasional Third World voice, but it speaks a First World language. As far back as during the first Congo war in 1962, the journalist Edward Behr saw a television newsman in a camp of violated Belgian nuns calling out: “Anyone here been raped and speak English?” In other words, it was not enough to have suffered: one had to have suffered and be able to express one’s suffering in the language of the journalist. Have we moved very far in the last four decades? Are those speaking for their cultures in the globalized media the most authentic representatives of them?

Can the Internet compensate? Is it a democratizing tool? In the West, the answer to those questions must be in the affirmative. But everywhere else, there is the dread digital divide: there are more Internet connections in Manhattan than in the whole of Africa (a continent of 800 million that collectively enjoys the use of less bandwidth

than the 400,000 citizens of Luxembourg). You can tell the rich from the poor by their Internet connections. The dividing line is not just the poverty line but the fiber-optic and high-speed digital lines. The key is the keyboard. Those who do not have one risk marginalization; their imagination does not cross borders.

These concerns are real. If they are addressed, if the case for overcoming them is absorbed and applied, the twenty-first century could yet become a time of mutual understanding such as we have never seen before. A world in which it is easier than ever before to meet strangers must also become a world in which it is easier than ever before to see strangers as no different from ourselves.

As an Indian writer, I have argued that my country's recent experience with the global reach of Western consumer products demonstrates that we can drink Coca-Cola without becoming coca-colonized. India's own popular culture is also part of globalization—the products of “Bollywood” are exported to many countries, and particularly to expatriate Indian communities abroad. One Indian movie, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, opened on a sufficient number of U.S. screens in 2002 to record the seventh largest weekend gross of all films opening in the United States that weekend. The trade paper *Variety* wasn't counting—but the empire can strike back.

And it's not just India. A recent study has established that local television programming has begun to overtake made-in-America shows in more and more countries; one survey found that 71 percent of the top 10 programs in 60 countries were locally produced in 2001, a significant increase over previous years.

A parochial note: In my first novel, *The Great Indian Novel*, I reinvented a two-thousand-year-old epic, *The Mahabharata*, as a satirical retelling of the story of twentieth-century India, from the British days to the present. My motivation was a conscious one.

Most developing countries are also formerly colonized countries, and one of the realities of colonialism is that it appropriated the cultural definition of its subject peoples. Writing about India in English, I cannot but be aware of those who have done the same before me, others with a greater claim to the language but a lesser claim to the land. Think of India in the English-speaking world even today, and you think in images conditioned by Rudyard Kipling and E. M. Forster, by the Bengal Lancers and *The Jewel in the Crown*. But their stories are not my stories, their heroes are not mine; and my fiction seeks to reclaim my country's heritage for itself, to tell, in an Indian voice, a story of India. Let me stress, a story of India; for there are always other stories, and other Indians to tell them. How important is such a literary reassertion in the face of the enormous challenges confronting a country like India? Can literature matter in a land of poverty, suffering, and underdevelopment? I believe it does.

My novel begins with the proposition that India is not, as people keep calling it, an underdeveloped country, but rather, in the context of its history and cultural heritage, a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay. Such sentiments are the privilege of the satirist; but as a novelist, I believe, with Molière, that “*le devoir de la comédie est de corriger les hommes en les divertissant*”—you have to entertain in order to edify. But edify to what end? What is the responsibility of the creative artist, the writer, in a developing country in our globalizing world? In my own writing I have pointed to one responsibility—to contribute toward, and to help articulate and give expression to, the cultural identity (shifting, variegated, and multiple, in the Indian case) of the postcolonial society, caught up in the throes of globalization. The vast majority of developing countries have emerged recently from the incubus of colonialism; both colonialism and globalization have in many ways fractured and distorted their cultural

self-perceptions. Development will not occur without a reassertion of identity: that this is who we are, this is what we are proud of, this is what we want to be. In this process, culture and development are fundamentally linked and interdependent. The task of the writer is to find new ways (and revive old ones) of expressing his culture, just as his society strives, in the midst of globalization, to find new ways of being and becoming.

### *Cultural and Imaginative Freedom*

As a writer committed to Indian pluralism, I see cultural reassertion as a vital part of the enormous challenges confronting a country like India—as vital as economic development. We are all familiar with the notion that “man does not live by bread alone.” In India, I would argue that music, dance, art, and the telling of stories are indispensable to our ability to cope with that vital construct we call the human condition. After all, why does man need bread? To survive. But why survive, if it is only to eat more bread? To live is more than just to sustain life—it is to enrich, and be enriched by, life. Our poorest men and women in the developing world feel the throb of imagination on their pulse, for they tell stories to their children under the starlit skies—stories of their land and its heroes, stories of the earth and its mysteries, stories that have gone into making them who they are. And (since my second novel was about Bollywood) they see and hear stories too, in the flickering lights of the thousands of cinemas in our land, where myth and escapist fantasy intertwine and moral righteousness almost invariably triumphs with the closing credits. Globalization, its advocates say, is about growth and development. But it cannot just be a set of figures on GNP tables, a subject for economists and businessmen rather than a matter of people. And if people are to develop, it is unthinkable that they would develop without literature, without song, and dance, and music, and myth, without stories

about themselves, and in turn, without expressing their views on their present lot and their future hopes. Development implies dynamism; dynamism requires freedom, the freedom to create; creativity requires, quite simply, imagination.

But in writing of a cultural reassertion of imagination, I do not want to defend a closed construct. I believe Indians will not become any less Indian if, in Mahatma Gandhi’s metaphor, we open the doors and windows of our country and let foreign winds blow through our house. For me, the winds of globalization must blow both ways. The UNESCO charter memorably tells us that “as war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the foundations of peace must be constructed.” This is true not just of war and peace, but of the entire fabric of human life and society—which must be constructed in the mind. The globe will always have more than a single mind. And that is why cultural diversity is so essential in our shrinking globe. For without culture, we cannot see beyond ourselves and our narrow surroundings to the realities of our larger world. Without a multiplicity of cultures, we cannot realize how peoples of other races, religions, or languages share the same dreams, the same hopes. Without a heterogeneous human imagination, we cannot understand the myriad manifestations of the human condition, nor fully appreciate the universality of human aims and aspirations. This is why, as a writer, I would argue that the specificities of literature are the best antidote to the globalization of the imagination.

Not that literature implies a retreat from the globe: rather, it is the mind shaped by literature that understands the world and responds to its needs. Literature teaches us to empathize, to look beyond the obvious and beneath the surface, to bear in mind the smaller picture—of the ordinary human beings who are ultimately the objects of all public policy. And above all, to remember always that there is more than one side to a



story, and more than one answer to a question. Those are pretty useful prescriptions for public policy makers in the era of globalization.

We all know that Harvard's Samuel Huntington looked at the globalizing world emerging from the Cold War and argued that "the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural." The chief cultural fault line, according to Huntington, occurs where the West meets Islam. This vision of an impending "clash of civilizations" is not inevitable: it can and must be replaced with what we at the United Nations call a "dialogue among civilizations." While Huntington admits that "in the final analysis all civilizations will have to learn to tolerate each other," his thesis is ultimately pessimistic and, I believe, severely flawed. Civilizations are not monoliths; each of the civilizations he analyzes has a great deal of diversity within it. And religion or culture are merely among the many variables governing the actions and policies of states. Very often, states with a religion in common may have other differences between them; we just have to consider the contrasting positions taken by different Islamic states over the Taliban's rule over Afghanistan to illustrate the point.

A large part of today's intercultural conflicts are a result of perceived cultural humiliation. Much of what is happening in the Islamic world, simplistically described as fundamentalism, is an assertion of cultural identities that have been marginalized. We must respond by supporting the development of democracy at the local, national, and international levels to provide a context for cultural pluralism to thrive; we must take a stance of respect and humility in our approaches to others, to be a force for inclusiveness rather than marginalization, and to reflect this in our day-to-day lives.

In much of the world there exist societies whose richness lies in their soul and not in their soil, whose past may offer more wealth than their present, whose imagination is more valuable than their technology. Recognizing that this might be the case, and affirming that the imagination is as central to humanity's sense of its own worth as the ability to eat and drink and sleep under a roof, is part of the challenge before the world today. The only way to ensure that this challenge is met is to preserve cultural and imaginative freedom in all societies; to guarantee that individual voices find expression, that all ideas and forms of art are enabled to flourish and contend for their place in the sun. We have heard in the past that the world must be made safe for democracy. That goal is increasingly being realized; it is now time for all of us to work to make the world safe for diversity.

There is an old Indian story about Truth. It seems that in ancient times a brash young warrior sought the hand of a beautiful princess. The king, her father, thought the warrior was a bit too cocksure and callow; he told him he could only marry the princess once he had found Truth. So the young warrior set out on a quest for Truth. He went to temples and to monasteries, to mountaintops where sages meditated and to forests where ascetics scourged themselves, but nowhere could he find Truth. Despairing one day and seeking refuge from a thunderstorm, he found himself in a dank, musty cave. There, in the darkness, was an old hag, with warts on her face and matted hair, her skin hanging in folds from her bony limbs, her teeth broken, her breath malodorous. She greeted him; she seemed to know what he was looking for. They talked all night, and with each word she spoke, the warrior realized he had come to the end of his quest. She was Truth. In the morning, when the storm broke, the warrior prepared to return to claim his bride. "Now that I have found Truth," he said, "what shall I tell them at the palace about you?" The wizened old

crone smiled. "Tell them," she said, "tell them that I am young and beautiful."

So Truth is not always true; but that does not mean Truth does not exist. The terrorists failed to see their victims as human beings entitled to their own imaginations. They saw only objects, dispensable pawns in their drive for destruction. Our only effective answer to them must be to defiantly assert our own humanity; to say that each one of us, whoever we are and wherever we are, has the right to live, to love, to hope, to

dream, and to aspire to a world in which everyone has that right. A world in which the scourge of terrorism is fought, but so also are the scourges of poverty, of famine, of illiteracy, of ill-health, of injustice, and of human insecurity. A world, in other words, in which terror will have no chance to flourish. That could be the world of the twenty-first century that has just been born, and it could be the most hopeful legacy of the horror that has given it birth. ●