

Burn Without Reading

By: Kaustav Mukherjee

I hope you did not start a fire and since you are here anyway I just want to state that the human mind is very obtuse. Or probably it is the abstract notions of my simple minded dimwittedness which is finding its expression here; really who would want to scratch, fiddle, brood, lean back and forward, roll up and down, cough and sneeze, shiver, mull, yawn and castigate himself for doing all the above for four straight years knowing fully well another couple lurk in the background? So here am I, asking myself why I ever wanted to earn a doctoral degree in this lifetime? Walter Benjamin had once said that every monument is a mark of barbarism. I am at the present moment inclined to add a corollary to the above theorem—every PhD is a mark of barbarism to the self.

The game started way back in 2005 as I found myself gripped by Spartan fever, one of those diseases whose co-ordinates of disease production and affiliations have been obscured by the vanities of prudence. High hopes were followed by dementia. Yes I am demented, hysteric and largely untouched by being both as each obscures the other. But this obscurity does not prevent me from indulging in the addiction that Spartan fever brings with itself. So each day as I try to work myself towards a degree with one eye open for the perusal of baseball scores, I ask myself the Heideggerian questions about being and time and being in time, only to infer that being in the PhD program is time consuming.

But the overall price of the entire saga can be said to be quite bullish in stock market terms, even in this bear heavy market. The socio-cultural learning curve has been quite perpendicular and has been directly proportional to fun and excitement. For the first time in my life I found myself surrounded by people who were proud to be a fraction. I mean the story of being one-fourth Irish, one-third Dutch, one-third Italian and full fledged strange. For example, I have a close friend who on St.Patrick's day becomes Irish while for the rest of the year she keeps on declaring herself an Italian. Talk about identity crisis! And what amazes me is the purported accuracy of the fraction—I have heard a person say that he is $1/24^{\text{th}}$ Icelandic. Now, do not get me wrong—I am not criticizing the tendency; I am merely applauding the common people's mathematical skills in this country.

I had grown up on Hollywood and its *mixture* of Tom Kidman, Nicole Holmes and Katie Cruise. What I am trying to show here is that armed with good language skills and *outside* knowledge about the country, I was immensely confident about my chances to find my way through this *mix*. But still it took me a month to realize that Salads here should be eaten with a dressing and it took me a month to understand what a dressing is!! Yes, for one whole month I had been eating at Subway without a dressing for my subs as I was too hesitant to ask what a dressing was. Talk about being smart and confident! It is with this same confidence that I first drove on the streets here at Michigan, on the left side of the street that is.

Okay—I am not a moron. Give me a break—my home is about 9000 miles away in India and mistakes are bound to happen right? We all learn from our experiences and as Wittgenstein would have said, it is from our position in time and space we understand our

surroundings. Well, I have learnt from my share of experiences—starting from being held at knife-point by a drunken madman outside Boston’s north station only to be told that he expected me to *buy* the knife from him. And who said doing a PhD in humanities is not physical? Trust me it gets really physical when you have to tackle down zany intruders who stop your students from giving their final exams; yes I had to enact the above curriculum in front of 200 wide-eyed students one cold December evening (the full story might be revealed in my forthcoming novel *I Am Not Kidding Though You May Think So*, some time in the future). I was also the recipient of an enquiry about whether I was a terrorist by Joe 20 packs (I am sure he had gone way beyond a 6 pack) in a grocery store up north in Paradise, Michigan, was chased by coyotes near Grayling, have been amazed to see the important Presidential debates being dominated by discussions about Joe the Plumber who is actually *not* a plumber and a host of other incidents which if expressed will turn this essay into a non-rhyming epic. Do not get me wrong—through all of the above and through my friendship with people from around 130 countries, through thanksgiving dinners with my friends and their families, through seeing snow for the first time in my life, through falling in love with American football amidst my growing fascination for baseball and GM 3.8 liter engines, I have enjoyed each and every moment of my stint here at Michigan State. Theses experiences have made me realize how wonderful and crazy the world can be with all its diversity. I have been lucky to have led a bunch of talented and diverse individuals as the president of the International Students Association here and together we have tried our best to not only harness the diversity here at MSU but to weave a closer connection with the greater community.

Before I go off to my obtuse broodings which are nowhere close to the prominence that Saleem Sinai found for himself, I must add a few more words to this essay. I know this is for a competition and that the judges have probably stopped reading my ramblings by now and these words are falling on empty attention, but for the sake of my inane ambition for falling onto deaf ears I want to tell a little story before I end. It was the summer of 2006 when I found myself at the Amsterdam international airport during a brief stopover on my way back to India. I was wearing one of my green Spartan shirts and was trying to kill some time before my next flight through idle chatting with a few of my new airport acquaintances when suddenly out of the blue I heard the all too familiar shout of GO GREEN!! Looking at the direction of the racket I saw two unfamiliar faces staring expectantly at me; seeing that they had managed to get my attention the shout was repeated. Shaking off the effect that one has when he suddenly realizes that all eyes are focused on him, I reached down to the bottom of my Spartan spirit and shouted back, GO WHITE!! Seriously, in the middle of a busy airport, people suddenly saw three strangers giving each other high fives. The concerned men turned out to be a couple of ex-students of MSU who were on their way to Norway; the flight interval had seen them consume more than a few glasses of wine and seeing me with my Spartan colors, their nostalgia, fueled by some alcohol led protrusion of emotion, overcame all hindrances. It was an amazing feeling when three strangers from different corners of the globe, united by a tradition and two colors, green and white, proceeded to spend two hours together, knowing fully well they will never meet each other again, that it was the Spartan spirit which bound them in an undefined camaraderie. It reminded me of my first day here at MSU when a friend had promised us that if we stand in a corner of any major airports of

the world and shout GO GREEN, from some nook and cranny of the airport we will undoubtedly get a return response— GO WHITE!!

Rambling is over.