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## *Reviews of Books*

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**Kirpal Singh, *Thinking Hats and Colored Turbans: Creativity Across Cultures***

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I have never read an Edward de Bono book so the wit of Singh's title passed me by quickly. Fortunately, it was explained in one of the four introductions that start, and re-start, this curious, rolling, conversational, at times insightful, at times annoying and at times amusing examination of 'creativity'. As a reader or writer, I should admit, I've never been overly concerned with the idea of 'creativity', its conception and explication. In fact, I am probably prejudiced against people who talk too much about their 'creativity'. It's quite often struck me that people who spend time talking about creativity, however creatively, seem to expend all their 'creative energies' on the talking and not the doing. That said, Singh is not one of those. He is reputed to be much-loved and highly respected by his students, one of those rare cases of an impassioned academic. There is a huge amount of energy behind this unusual book that engages the reader and at times manages to give a sense of creativity without defining it. A dictionary definition, smacking of staid academic form and tedious reason, of as he calls it 'embedded truths', would be anathema to Singh's project that is to suggest, provoke, engage and challenge, if not simply have a good long talk.

Singh is very clear from the outset that 'this is not a scholarly book in the usual sense of the word. It is not meant to be one.' Continuing:

Indeed, scholarship can be said to be opposed to creativity because creativity deals with the unborn, scholarship merely probes the already. Throughout there will be repetitions, there will be gross statements, general thrusts of intellect with no undertow, crude simplifications (how simple the act of sex, how complex the result!), broad determinations and amplifications—all with a view to impress upon you, the reader, just what a journey the voyage of creativity entails. Are you ready for it? Truly ready?

Throughout, Singh does challenge the reader in precisely this way. Singh's loquaciousness and out-and-out enthusiasm for his subject doesn't fail to engage the reader, and while some of his more general thrusts and cruder simplifications can be exasperating, there is a general bonhomie and good consciousness to the book that keeps the reader curious, sometimes perplexed by that curiosity, until the end. Most of the book's endorsements appear to come from 'good friends' while the book itself consists of seven 'case narratives' drawn from equally old friends of Singh. Equally, the reader is often addressed with a directness and intimacy ('my dear reader') that presumes the openness and patience of a friend. Strangely enough, on this last point or challenge, Singh's passion for his subject and his idiosyncratic execution manages to engender just such attention in the reader. You find yourself listening as though to an eccentric but good-hearted friend giving you his rundown on life and its living, all the while having a joke and introducing you to several other 'dear' friends. Singh combines humour, critique, wild assertion, anecdote,

good and bad puns, and parables into a strange text: equal parts self-help and academic broadside.

Helpfully divided into colour-coded sections, the book consists of a preface and no less than four introductions, a short section covering 'the Cultural Factor' and 'the Language Question', followed by the bulk of the book devoted to 'case narratives', a conclusion, a coda and five appendices. Much of the book (for example the inclusion of four introductions) seems aimed to provoke the reader. Even so, it's good enough fun. Singh's introductions do lend themselves to establishing the difficulty of determining the terrain the book will cover, the multiple perspectives on creativity he is seeking to express rather than determine. They also signal Singh's difficulty in focussing his quixotic energies.

His short section on culture and language is perhaps the most academic in intention and also the most problematic, asserting as it does a hierarchical relation of cultures and languages to creativity. Using the word 'culture in a broad, loose sense', Singh's message in 'The Cultural Factor' is that various established patterns in cultures (such as cultures of family, learning, playing, working and loving) can inhibit creativity, especially when those aspects of human life are geared towards predetermined results (such as school grades and 'getting things done' at work). Singh laments the 'blocking of alternatives' and ends the chapter with a direct assault on institutions that inhibit creativity:

It is never too late to learn. And for some of us, for reasons best known to ourselves, learning is important and accelerated because of the who factor; i.e., if someone we respect or someone in authority (yes, especially here in Singapore!) tells us to do, we are very quick to respond and react. Alas, many of those in authority take too long to make up their minds or give the benefit of the doubt to us poor sods, who may have the ideas but not the pull or influence and certainly not the authority. Indeed, it has been my own experience that people with creative ideas are sometimes not even given positions of authority because of the fear that "they may not follow our bidding or instructions". And it is this slavish culture which always pays heed to rules and regulations that kill and destroy the spirit of creativity.

Here the institutions are unnamed, but it is apparent from the vehemency of this passage that Singh is not simply thinking about abstract ramifications of culture on creativity but some real-life past examples and experiences of his own. Singh then turns to 'The Language Question', posing that 'some languages are more creativity-enlivening; others more creativity-deadening' and then going into a series of aggravating comparative assertions. For example, Singh claims that Spanish is more creative than English, supporting his argument with statements by friends who tell him 'no English translation of *Don Quixote* comes remotely close to the richness of the puns and metaphors used in the original'. At issue here is more translation theory than linguistics. It would be interesting to hear his friends' perspective on Spanish translations of *Ulysses*. He then goes on to add Italian to the list as '[a]fter all, Italians burst into song every moment they can; they seem to be born poets and Boccaccio's tales seem so much more fun than Chaucer's inventive imitations.' Irish carousing aside, would a comparison between Calvino and Rushdie be more profitable or equally beside the point? English then gets some mild encouragement, as Singh denigrates French and German as being too fixed grammatically, leaving the reader to wonder about the place and inheritance of the French Surrealists and the German Dadaists in such a claim. Throughout this Singh is careful to note his ignorance, claiming this is 'virgin territory', and to beg the reader's indulgence. Unfortunately, even Singh's charm and china shop bull enthusiasm doesn't excuse his spurious claims in this instance. There is a chauvinism to Singh's notion of creativity-enlivening and creativity-deadening languages that is simply insulting and at odds with the pluralism that Singh seeks to cultivate and embrace elsewhere.

The most interesting and engaging part of the book is the series of 'case narratives' based on

various interviews Singh has carried out with friends, old and new. Each case-narrative offers an individual's different approach to creativity and its effect on material and career success. The range of professions and personalities represented is quite broad as is the range of views offered on creativity. Forming the largest section of the book and the most discursive and conversational, it is also the most successful. Singh interviews a South Australian woman Verity Roennfeldt who manufactures a new kind of Teddy Bear; Feng Da Hsuan, Vice President of Research and Graduate Education at the University of Texas; Alejandro Fogel, an Argentinian author of German-Jewish descent; Shelley Berc, a New York-based playwright; Ong Keng Sen, the wunderkind of the Singaporean Arts scene; Anita Rodick, activist and millionairess founder of *The Body Shop*; and Peter Doggett, the International Marketing Director of Seaworld. Of these, the interviews with Feng Da Hsuan, Ong Keng Sen and Anita Rodick are perhaps the most interesting, offering insight into the development of creativity within established power-structures. Feng Da Hsuan's case narrative (along with Peter Doggett's) gives clear examples of how to work across cultures and to foster exchange (creative, fiscal and otherwise). Ong Keng Sen's case narrative gives a clear example of the value of passion, independence and risk-taking in creative ventures, and shows that even under repressive regimes unusual success can be achieved. For her part, Anita Rodick's case narrative seems to be a parable of too much success thanks to and finally at the cost of creativity, as she suggests that *The Body Shops'* commercial success finally pushed it away from its philosophical and creative beginnings.

Singh's book about creativity across cultures appears to the outsider as a product of its own culture, that of Singapore. There is a prevailing sense to the book that Singh is writing through his frustrations with academic institutions in Singapore toward his love of fostering creativity in others. There is no doubting the sincerity of Singh's faith in 'creativity', his passion for it to be valued as a fundamental part of education. Curiously enough, perhaps the clearest and most pertinent chapter on creativity appears in the appendices (Appendix IV), where Singh reviews the development of Creative Thinking as a subject at Singapore Management University. It is here, buried in the appendices, that perhaps the most useful case narrative from the point of view of education is to be found: Singh's own. Singh offers an overview of the CT program which he was intimately involved in establishing at SMU, outlining the selection procedure (which focused not simply on exam results but the 'creative energies' of the student), a basic breakdown of the course content and its execution, and then an exposition on the changes that have occurred following the early successes of the course. At one point Singh writes:

Young people need inspiration and hence at SMU we try and inspire our charges in all ways we can. Anyone who knows Singapore and walks into our campus will know immediately just how different we are. The signs of our students' creativity are everywhere and we try and ensure that they do not tire of attempting to be different, to be creative.

This passage is telling of the book as a whole, emphasising as it does that the individual creativity of the students is most clearly seen in the context of the broader culture it exists within. Similarly, Singh's book may be seen as stemming from this same culture and environment, an example of the heterogenous, frenetic, fallible and fertile mind at work within and against a repressive culture (be it Singapore or academic writing). Most interestingly, it is also in this appendix that the best definition of creativity in the book is to be found, coupled with a cautionary rider, which perhaps best reviews Singh's maddeningly opinionated, enjoyably frustrating exercise in creativity. So Syd Harrex writes to Singh, that creativity is:

A way of looking at life, things, ideas that conjure a new realization, a "shock of recognition"; an original way

of drawing attention to what was always known but now is apprehension comprehended as if for the first time; and vice versa, of course. Defamiliarizing the familiar so that in one of Shakespeare's many post-modern mirrors you discover "a local habitation and a name". But beware of retina damage—or worse, macular degeneration—when your eye is rolling in too fine a frenzy.