On Being a Third Culture Kid

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Abstract. Author Jessica Faleiro writes about her experience of being a Third Culture Kid of Goan origin who was raised in the Middle East, outside her parents’ culture and in a space between theirs and her host country’s culture. She writes about the impact of being raised in this interstitial culture and how it influences her writing.

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Third Culture Kids
It begins with the innocuous question, ‘Where are you from?’ To most, it’s a simple query to answer. But, when posed to a globally mobile person like me, it’s a question that fills one with dread. I’m trying to assess the best possible response without creating a head-scratching, frown-laden moment for the inquisitor. For a brief second, I’ve forgotten that there are no shortcuts, and I begin the torturous rigmarole that has become one of the reasons why it’s tedious for me to introduce myself to strangers. I begin with a lie.

“I’m from Goa.”
“Where’s that?”
“It’s in India.”
“But, your name doesn’t sound Indian.”
“Blame my parents.”
“And you sound British.”
“I lived there for sixteen years.”
“Oh, so you’re British?”
“No, I’m not.”
“Well . . . where were you born?”
Ah, they’re changing gears. Most would have said, “Umm,” by now, or uttered some kind of non-committal grunt and changed the subject or walked away. This inquisitor is persistent.
“In Goa.”
“And you moved from there to England?”
“Not exactly, I was raised in Kuwait.”
“Where?”

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“Ku-wai-t. In the Middle East. You know . . . the Gulf War?”
Head-scratch. Frown. “Ummm.” They make an excuse and walk away.

Phew! And that’s me getting off easy. This is just one version of the conversation. There are variations of the same theme.

At university in the UK, my friends used to tease me, saying that whenever someone asked me where I was from, I should hand out a pre-printed summary in response and walk away instead of wasting my breath. The reality is much more challenging. My answers change depending on who is asking the question: a quick version for a stranger I might never bump into again or the abridged book version for an immigration official who’s wondering why an Indian-looking woman born in Goa has a Portuguese passport. Things get interesting when the official asks me a question and hears me respond in well-spoken English. I’ve learned to give answers that match what someone is seeing and what they want to hear as the quickest route to escape the whole horrible ordeal of answering what, to most non-Third Culture Kids, must seem like the most normal question to answer, after ‘What’s your name?’

In the 1950s social scientists, Ruth Hill Useem and her husband John, were doing research in India on Americans who lived and worked there. They noticed that these expatriates generated a sub-culture of their own that was different from their home culture and the culture of the country hosting them. They termed the home culture as the “first culture,” the host culture as the “second culture” and the sub-culture as the “third culture.” Ruth Hill Useem went on to study the common characteristics she noticed children growing up in this sub-culture exhibited. She called them “Third Culture Kids (TCKs)” (Pollock and Van Reken 14–15).

In Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds, co-author David Pollock defined a “Third Culture Kid” as “a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents’ culture” (Pollock and Van Reken 13). He added, “The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK’s life experience, the sense of belonging is in relationship to others of similar background” (Pollock and Van Reken 13). The co-authors also categorized developmental years as “from birth to eighteen years of age” (Pollock and Van Reken 21). I was a Third Culture Kid (TCK). Technically, I am now an Adult Third Culture Kid (ATCK), which is just another way of saying that I’ve spent some time on this planet dealing with the impact of being a TCK.

My father was a Goan migrant worker in Kuwait in the 1960s. He was born and brought up in Goa, an ex-Portuguese colony on the West coast of India that is now an Indian state. Like many other Goans in the 60s and 70s, he took the ship across to Kuwait to improve his family’s economic standing. He worked as a clerk in the Bank of Kuwait and the Middle East. Once he established himself, he got married to another Goan Catholic from Goa, like himself, and set up house in Kuwait. My brother was born two years later, and I came along a few years after
that. I was born in Goa but was on my first flight to Kuwait with my mother when I was four months old. I was raised in Kuwait, spent all of my developmental years and achieved my childhood milestones there, until the age of fourteen, when the 1990 Gulf War severed any links I had with the Middle Eastern state. While most people simply watch, study or analyze other cultures from a distance, I was growing up in two cultures at once during my developmental years, constantly negotiating my way between the two while developing in a third culture that belonged neither to my parents nor to the host country where I lived.

Cultural difference
A large majority of people are raised in the country of their birth and their parents’ birth. I was raised in a country that I always knew, legally, wasn’t mine. Unlike my parents who were born and bred Goans, who dreamed of one day returning to their homeland with the nostalgic eye-gleam that every migrant bears, I didn’t have any sense of a homeland or a home beyond the two-bedroom apartment that we rented in Salmiyah, Kuwait. Our neighbours were Palestinian, Jordanian and Egyptian. My peers were all Indian but from vastly different states, cultural histories, backgrounds and religions. It taught me to get along with others without prejudice. I was taught in an English-medium school, with an Indian school syllabus, but Arabic was a compulsory language along with Hindi, and our mandatory ‘Moral Studies’ school period was an Islamic studies class.

I consider myself privileged to have been raised in such a diverse background that expanded my young mind beyond its years into realizing the presence and richness of other cultures. In contrast, my contemporaries in Goa were surrounded by Konkani, the local language in an English-medium school, most likely had mostly Catholic and Hindu student peers around them and had a strong sense of where they came from and their place in the world. They grew up never questioning where they belonged, what country they belonged to, or what their place was in the society they lived in. They didn’t have to worry about where they would eventually move to after they grew up. I, on the other hand, was infused early on with the persistent anxiety of question marks about belonging, home, country, place and identity constantly pushing against the back of my brain from the moment I became conscious of these things.

Kuwait, was hot, dusty and an unwelcoming desert country in the 70s and 80s, when I was growing up. My mother spent hours every day dusting everything in the house, and I learned about the unusual places that dust accumulated if you left stuff out. I learned to recognize the signs of a pending dust storm early on, so we could shut the windows. The summers were so intensely dry and hot that you could fry a two-minute egg on the sidewalk in the 40 degrees centigrade summer heat. I had no idea what the monsoon season was like until we holidayed in Goa. The movement of women was restricted in the Islamic state. I couldn’t roam around freely and there were no natural surroundings to play in, besides the desert sand, intense heat and endless dust. I never used the public transport system. Like most everything else in Kuwait, it wasn’t female-friendly. I spent
most of my time indoors and my hobbies became reading and watching TV. The rest of the time I studied, frankly, for lack of anything else to do.

Into this world, my parents’ expectations were born. They expected me to imbibe their values and grow into a good Goan-Catholic girl who would go to Sunday church, say the rosary at least, if not the Angelus and marry other rosary-chanting, Angelus-praying, Goan, middle-class Catholics like ourselves. I was expected to know how to cook, embroider, play an instrument and serve men before myself. I was raised to respond to my elders and authority figures with obedience. All I dreamed about was escape from these expectations and the dust-ridden country that obliterated women’s voices, denied them personal freedom, and de-valued migrant workers from India.

I should add that not every Kuwait-born TCK had a similar experience to mine. Many grew up with strong bonds of friendship forged in schools and neighbourhoods or were raised in enclaves and closed communities with other TCKs from a similar cultural background. I didn’t have the luxury of close friendships growing up, other than a couple of schoolmates. I grew up in this isolation and I imagine it is one of the main reasons why I am able to spend long periods of time comfortably on my own now while writing; using creative expression to exorcise the wounds of these early childhood experiences.

At this point, I hasten to add that TCKs don’t have it rough. They develop unique skills that allow them to become culturally savvy and are able to easily navigate different cultural backgrounds with ease. They tend to be multi-lingual, have a deep understanding of world politics and trends, have strong international networks of friends, connect easily with people and are very comfortable with transition and mobility. Their high adaptability to challenging environments and various cultural contexts makes them particularly appealing high-value hires for multi-national corporations and outfits. But, the point I’m trying to make is that this life comes at a cost.

I spent much of my pre-pubescent years trying to hide my knowledge of different cultures and trying to blend in, especially when we visited Goa on vacation. I stuck out like a sore thumb but never knew why. Now, much older and wiser, I’m proud of my difference especially now that I’m starting to understand it. I also have a much deeper understanding of my self as an adult TCK and the vast richness of experience it has given my life. My experience as a TCK has made me extremely adaptable, personable and increased my abilities to trust life’s bounty to provide, having been tested time and again by extreme circumstances. TCKs are cultural chameleons, able to cope and adapt to varied types of transitions and circumstances with aplomb. All these advantages have only helped me become a stronger, better writer.

Life defined by global mobility
As I said before, I had taken my first flight across land boundaries before I could crawl. Since being cut off from Kuwait at the age of fourteen, I’ve lived in Goa, Mumbai, Miami, Paris and a few places in England including London. I’m living in
Goa at the moment, but I’m very conscious that many of the tangible items that were a part of my life in England are still lying packed up and stored away in a garage and have been so for a few years now. I’m living the highly mobile life that characterizes the TCK existence, still. I’m a globally mobile adult TCK who lives out of a suitcase, with one metaphorical foot out the door.

The reason why it is important to acknowledge the existence of Third Culture Kids and their adult forms is because ‘No generation before now has had so many of its members simultaneously living in, between, and among countless cultural worlds as is happening today. A large number of people, including entire families, now move among countries and continents with great regularity. How can anyone keep up with the impact such cultural interactions and patterns of mobility have on those who are in the midst of living them out?’ (Bushong).

TCKs see the world differently, feel differently about life and have different influencing forces that powerfully impact their inner lives. Their worldview, shaped by their high mobility, is certainly different, more often than not, even from their parents’ worldviews, and definitely more global in its scope.

**TCKs and the ‘Homeland’**

When people ask me “Where are you from?” I know they are doing it to try and place me in some cultural context that they may be familiar with. I hesitate because of my own uncertainty. Am I from the place where I was born (Goa) or the place where I was raised (Kuwait) or the place my current passport is from (Portugal)? None of these rings true for me. While my brain scrambles to answer the question as clearly as possible, people start to feel discomfort with the answer I’m giving them. I can see it in the glaze that draws across their eyes; their inability to accept the answer I’ve just given them. I’m led to believe that while I’ve come to terms with being a global nomad, it is actually a source of trauma to others to find out that I come from everywhere and nowhere; a concept very few people have the brain biochemistry to process. To another TCK however, hearing this answer sounds like a call home. There is resonance. The nod of familiarity. You’re one of my tribe. The acknowledgement brings relief.

However, if you really want to upset an adult TCK, just ask them: “Where is Home?”

The Oxford dictionary defines diaspora as ‘the dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland’ (Oxford Living Dictionaries English, 2017) TCKs and ATCKs are a sub-set within this wider circle. The quintessential TCK questions their definition of ‘homeland’ as defined by their parents’ place of birth or place of origin and eventually will find a home in the third culture; the interstitial space between two ‘other’ cultures. This is the place where TCKs can feel a sense of belonging and relationship to others like them, as their parents or other contemporaries might feel with people from their hometowns. While my parents were a part of the Goan diaspora that eventually returned to their homeland, my own cultural identity lay within a sub-set under the broad reach of diaspora. From a literary point of view, my writing, while it covers similar themes often seen in
literatures of the diaspora like Alienation, Belongingness, Home and Identity, is
generated from a different source, embedded in the absence of one homeland in
particular and of a monocultural upbringing.

After reading “Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds,” I wrote an
essay entitled, “Well then, where is your home?” (India Currents, 2015). It was a first
step towards trying to understand how my identity was rooted in being an ATCK
and come up with my own definition of Home. On deeper reflection, I realized
that Home is where my humanity is. I carry it around deep within me. It’s an ever-
evolving thing that stretches and is moulded by my sense of compassion which
waxes and wanes within the complexities of being a human being.

At university, I was clear who my tribe were: international students. We were
all strangers in a foreign land trying to negotiate cultural difference without tripping
over our own lack of knowledge and understanding. I got support, warmth and
welcome from this group of misunderstood individuals. Our meals were buffets of
global cuisines where I got to taste my first French Tartiflette, mixed my first Greek
froppé and learned how to make perfect al dente pasta from an Italian exchange
student who came from a village. Our conversations complemented my interest in
international politics. Our behaviours moved towards creating a community of
individuals who found themselves in the same boat of alienation and took comfort
from this.

When I entered the professional world, I knew that I wanted to live in a city
and chose to live in London, where individuals have to determine their own place
and sense of identity in a vast potpourri of mixed backgrounds, origins, cultural
histories. Cities are rife with stories of migrations and that’s where people like me
feel most comfortable, blending in with the anonymous; forging a small world and
community of our own. But, the downside of cities and communities like this is
that they are transitory spaces, after all. My small community was constantly
transitioning into other locations. The very thing that brought us together, tore us
apart from each other. I was still restless and searching for a tribe, belonging and a
sense of identity within my community, without having a long-distance relationship
with friends who’d moved oceans apart.

Dealing with Transition fatigue
I’ve spent decades growing up with an inexplicable sense of restlessness and a need
to be globally mobile, even though I’ve now reached a stage, four decades later,
where travel and the newness of places can exhaust me. I’ve always had trouble
reconciling these two dynamics, until I came across Pollock and Van Reken’s book
and discovered the expression “Third Culture Kid.” It was the first time something
had resonated so strongly within me.

After buying the book, I proceeded to consume every word. It was as if the
book had been written specifically for me. The revelations within the pages
brought me an equal amount of tears and smiles as I increased my understanding
of who I was and why I was a certain way. I found explanations for feelings I’d
harboured for years but couldn’t tell anyone else about because of my own lack of
comprehension and knowledge. But, for all the A-Ha moments I had, it was a tough book to read, because it identified certain behaviours and psychologies linked to trauma, triggered by grief and loss that had not been acknowledged. It did not, however, tell me how to process my grief and loss in a positive, healthy way. It talked about the advantages of being a TCK and how I should celebrate my difference from others who were non-TCKs, but it did not show me a path of how to process the major events that had happened in my life and use my difference to re-frame a healthy, positive life narrative for myself. That was around 2014. I’ve recently come across a few more titles that are much more helpful in these respects, including one for counselors of TCKs that I’m poring over in order to make more sense of how TCKs can resolve lots of conflicting behaviours in order to live more fully without falling into repeated patterns of grief and loss.

The downside of being so globally mobile is that a TCK starts to deal with patterns of loss very early on and simultaneously with transition fatigue. Every change of address or country means having to say goodbye to someplace, something or someone. Every TCK understands fully the twin dynamics of leaving and being left behind. I’m able to empathise with both feelings having lived through both scenarios time and time again. I’ve been burgled twice where I lost almost all my personal belongings including clothing, once in Kuwait and another time in London. I lost touch with my schoolmates in Kuwait just after the invasion of Kuwait. This was before the internet and social media could help us reconnect, some twenty-five years later. Then, the pattern repeated itself again while I was at university in the USA and had visa problems leading to my student visa being cancelled quite suddenly and me being transferred to a university in the UK without saying good-bye to university friends in the USA, most of whom I’ve been unable to locate again. I’ve packed up and collected more addresses across the world than I’d care to recall right now. At no point while I was transitioning did I realize that I had to grieve these losses, let alone realize that these were meaningful, significant losses that would continue to have a huge impact on my life. As a result, stability is an elusive word in my vocabulary. Any location can be taken away from me, as I’ve had the evidence of twice before in my life: once with the Kuwait invasion and the other time with my visa being cancelled. While others speculate about the consequences of immigration policies and war, I have lived-experiences of these which resulted in major life transitions where I had to leave behind things, people and places.

Violence and War: The Invasion of Kuwait
I was on holiday in Goa with my mother while on school vacation in July 1990. My father arrived to join us on 1st August, the day before the invasion of Kuwait. When we heard about the invasion on BBC World radio the next day, my father initially slipped into denial about it, confident that the UN security council would never allow an oil-rich country to slip into a dangerous dictator’s hands. When days turned into weeks, suddenly, thanks to the invasion, I found myself enrolled in a new school in Goa, in a new country, a new culture, a new education system,
with new teachers without having had any chance of saying goodbye to my schoolmates or my past life in Kuwait. Overnight, a slate had been wiped clean and I was expected by all around me to just cope and adapt. Most shockingly, I found myself being sort of repatriated, under extreme circumstances to the place of my parents’ birth. This was a strange and foreign land to me. This was my parents’ home, not mine.

The kids I was in school with had all grown up together. They had shared histories together. I was the outsider to kids who had, maybe, heard of a place called Kuwait. Perhaps a few could locate it easily on a map. Did they know the national language? Did they know the country had the death penalty? Or what the national currency was? Or how many rupees a dinar was worth? Did they know its capital city? What Kuwait Towers looked like at night? How a lamb shawarma tasted? I was devastated that my life had been pulled out from under my feet and even more devastated that I was expected to just get over it and fall in line. I was expected to adapt, so I did.

Growing up in Kuwait, I’d heard my father refer to Goa and family members there with a sense of rootedness that I couldn’t relate to. Goa was where he and my mother came from. But, the traumatic circumstances under which I ended up being there didn’t help me acclimate at all. It didn’t help that I had none of my personal belongings apart from a few vacation clothes. We were given old, used furniture and had to make do.

When I was quickly enrolled in Fatima Convent High School in the tenth grade soon after the invasion, I was completely lost. All the kids at school there had grown up together, they had their own jokes and cultural references that I couldn’t understand. They cared about things I wasn’t the least bit interested in. None of them could relate to my experiences of living and growing up in a country different to the one I was in now. They were accommodating of the new girl, so to speak. A few of the smart girls in a clique befriended me. I was invited to birthday parties. We shared private inside-jokes in the way teenage girls did. None of those friendships have lasted.

People in the ‘new’ place don’t know what has happened, can’t help you deal with a situation that they’re not familiar with, have never experienced themselves or are not equipped to help you deal with. If your parents are also these people, then your isolation as a child and a teenager eventually carries on into adulthood. At the time, I only knew that I needed help, but I had no idea why. Now I know that I was unable to process the deep sense of trauma, loss and grief I was in the middle of and had a deep-seated anxiety borne from absorbing the traumatization that my parents were simultaneously going through. My father was trying to deal with the fact that he might not have a job to return to and might never see his life-savings again and my mother was trying to keep some semblance of normality together for our family’s sake, while trying to cope herself under very difficult circumstances.

At the end of the Gulf War, my father was one of the few lucky people to get his job back, and my parents were able to return to Kuwait again. I, on the other
hand, was eager to sever the temporal umbilical cord that had attached me to Kuwait and ironically, the war gave me the chance to move forward. To me, Kuwait represented the oppression of women and the abuse of immigrant workers, who worked long hours in stressful jobs and were looked down upon by Kuwaitis. I was eager to fly away from these ultra-oppressive surroundings. From Goa, I went to college in Bombay, then moved on to the USA and England for further study and work. Continued mobility meant new friends and locations to say Hello and Goodbye to, over and over again.

**Influences of being a TCK on my writing**

It’s therefore no surprise that these repeated patterns of loss have found their way into my stories. My first novel *Afterlife* (2012) is a collection of ghost stories forming a novel with a frame narrative, which delves into the issues of haunting. My recently released second book, *The Delicate Balance of Little Lives*, is a collection of five interlinked short stories, each one focused on a Goan middle-class woman based in South Goa, somehow on the periphery of society due to a change in her identity defined by a traumatic loss of some sort. As with my first book, I had a sense of these five female characters being linked somehow, but this time it is through place and degrees of separation of the people they come across in their lives. It’s no coincidence that I’m writing about alienation through the manifestation of ghosts, and about identity shifts due to personal trauma.

I was recently invited to speak at the ex-Portuguese colony Macau’s annual literary festival, “The Script Road.” When I was asked about my sense of Home, Identity, Alienation and whether these themes enter my fiction, I talked about my experience of being a Third Culture Kid and how that had influenced my writing. Then, I was asked whether writing about ghosts was a way of dealing with an existential crisis that I was having because of my rootlessness. I replied that I was aware of who I was and had a sense of my life purpose, so I wasn’t having an existential crisis. I’d always known I was different and that my life experiences influenced my writing. But, the difference was that it was only in the last few years that I was able to clearly articulate my difference and understand the impact on my writing as differently nuanced from that of diaspora literature. I believe that all art, after all, is generated from unresolved grief, loss and trauma; we write from our wounds in the hope of healing them through expression, exploration or catharsis, of any kind. On deeper reflection, I find that I write to discover the depth of my own humanity and hope that it translates across boundaries, whether natural or man-made.

**Work Cited**


Jessica Faleiro’s fiction, non-fiction, poetry and travel writing have appeared in the *Asia Literary Review, Indian Quarterly, Mascara Literary Review, Muse India, IndiaCurrents, Rockland Lit, Forbes India, Times Crest, tambdimati* and in various anthologies. Her debut novel, *Afterlife: Ghost Stories from Goa*, was published by Rupa in 2012, and she recently released her second book, *The Delicate Balance of Little Things*. Jessica also hosts talks on writing life and runs writing workshops in Goa. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Kingston University (UK).