

 Hello. Welcome to Tortoise.

Greater expectations

The author Nikesh Shukla reflects on why immigrants shouldn't have to be superheroes



Even now, a year on, it makes your palms sweat. A baby is hanging from a balcony, four floors up on a Parisian apartment building. There's a dad up there trying to do the right thing, but he seems confused and frightened. Whatever's happening, it looks too late for anyone to help.

Then Mamoudou Gassama starts climbing. Up the four floors he goes on the outside of the building, balcony to balcony, heedless of fear and gravity, like Spider-Man. He hoists the baby to safety and the crowd below goes nuts.

Why This Story?

The world's richest countries are moving towards immigration policies that let in the "best and brightest" only, as if countries can be clubs.

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It was an incredible act of bravery. The video went viral and Gassama was rewarded with French citizenship (he was an illegal immigrant from Mali at the time), as well as a ten-month job with the Paris fire service.



Mamoudou Gassama climbs a Parisian apartment block to rescue a child in danger

In a recent interview with the *Financial Times*, Gassama reflected on his new circumstances, saying he was “very, very, very happy to be a Frenchman”. People criticised President Macron at the time, for turning Gassama’s extraordinary act into a publicity stunt to detract from France’s continuing deportation of illegal immigrants. Even so, Gassama was sanguine in his interview: “He’s my president, you know, so I like him...”

Recently, a mate of mine was applying for a US visa to work on a television show there. It was all very exciting. The visa was called an O-1, for an alien of extraordinary ability. You see, you can’t be rolling up to the United States wanting to write on a sitcom with ordinary abilities. Nah, you need extraordinary abilities. We want your best only.

My mate needed press clippings, recommendations from known personalities, memberships of elite institutions, just to get the American Embassy on side.



To get a US visa, you have to prove that you are "extraordinary" |

You can’t just be a good immigrant any more. You need to be extraordinary. If you want to do the simple thing of moving country to improve your job prospects or pursue a career where there’s more

opportunity, you have to be a hero.

And it's a problem. It obscures why people make certain choices. It keeps us in boxes and minimises who gets the opportunity to move about. You can only do so if you're rich or have privileged access to contacts who can make your application look good – or, if you have none of that, you can climb up the outside of a building to perform an impossible life-saving act.

“This act of great bravery exemplifies the values which help unite our national community, such as courage, selflessness, altruism and taking care of the most vulnerable,” said the official decree granting Gassama's citizenship.

When I think about remarkable acts of bravery to justify your right to exist, I think about my mum's brother, my mama, Mahesh Upadhyaya. In 1968 he tried to buy a house in Huddersfield. He was refused because the building company had a policy not to sell to “coloureds” and felt it might devalue the area.

In an era of “No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish” signs, when housing was a real issue, the idea of having a brown person as a neighbour was too much to take.

However, the Race Relations Act had just come into being. Its purpose was to protect citizens against such instances of racial discrimination. Mama decided to take the company to court and became the first person in Britain to bring a case of racial discrimination under the act.



An anti-racism protest in London in 1968. Such demonstrations led to the Race Relations Act

He did this at huge personal cost. Family, friends, his employers all felt that he shouldn't make a fuss. Keep your head down. Be quiet. Get on with things. But mama wanted to stand up for what was right. Also, he said at the time, these laws had been put in place to protect us. Why not use them?

He believed in the law. And the Race Relations Act 1968 had been implemented to ensure that we all had the same rights and protections; that instances of everyday racism, especially in housing and employment, would be made to go away.

Due to a technicality, judgment was reserved. But the judge noted that "discrimination had taken place", which led to the company changing its policy. Years later, when mama and I spoke about this case, I sent him a link to a story about a landlord who refused to rent properties to south Asians because they always stank them out with curry smells.

This was inherently ridiculous, I told mama, because curry smells delicious. He noted the date, 2017, and expressed sadness that he'd fought this exact battle fifty years ago, and still nothing had

changed. “Sure,” he noted, “the laws have changed to give everyone the same rights, but what has been done to change people’s hearts and minds?” My uncle’s opinion was that things were worse now because there was such a disconnect between our rights and how people felt about us.

This conversation saddened me.



Nimesh Shukla's uncle, Mahesh Upadhyaya, brought the first case under the Race Relations Act

What had been done to change people's hearts and minds? Who was working to ensure that the people of Britain welcomed difference and accepted immigrant neighbours?

Because being a good immigrant shouldn't be about absurd, arbitrary scales. People should be allowed to exist as they are, and immigrants are people.

Or are they? The fact is that the burden of proof is set higher for immigrants. The default setting is BAD. You're bad because you're a leech. You come over here and drain our resources. You take all our jobs, steal all our women and give birth to children with mixed ethnicities and then you take up all the appointments at our surgeries and hospitals and take all the benefits and moan about how unfairly you're treated because we can't understand your accent. CAN'T YOU SPEAK BLOODY ENGLISH. LEARN TO INTEGRATE. HERE WE SPEAK ENGLISH.

It's a pretty bad default setting. And if you're visibly of an immigrant background, as I am, people put these assumptions on you before they even know you're born here. And the bullshit thing is, it doesn't matter whether I was born here.

A guy who racially abused me at Didcot Parkway station one night broke out of his rant to express surprise that I spoke good English. If I was a tourist, or recently arrived, or too old for formal education, I might not know English. That doesn't make it OK to rant at me.

Expecting a stranger to know perfect English is bad faith. If I was walking around Berlin or Mombasa would I be expected to speak German or Swahili? And what of the compounds in parts of Spain where British ex-pats congregate? Do they learn Spanish?

Integration is not binary. It's not about erasure. It's certainly not about language. Integration is about moving, respecting the laws and customs of a country and retaining some semblance of your identity. Because this is not a monoculture. We are not in a dictatorship that assumes behaviours of its people.



Immigrants arrive at London Airport in 1968, the year the Race Relations Act was introduced

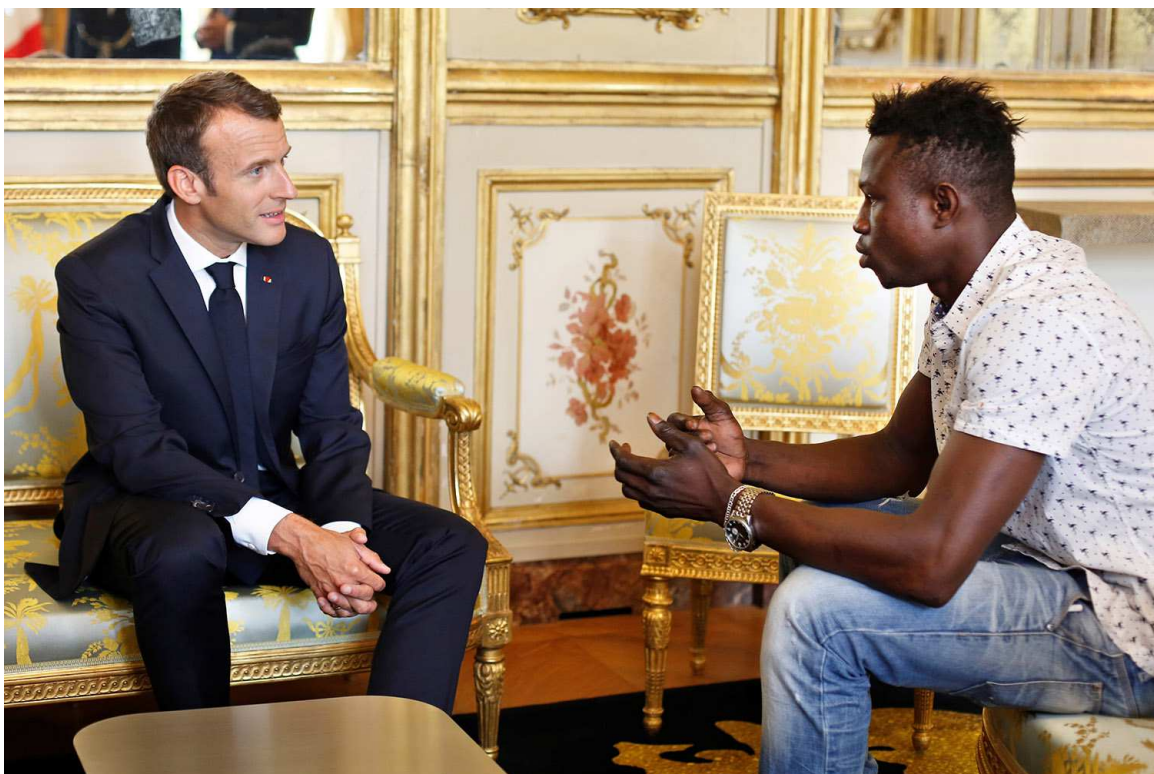
Even “British Values”, as taught in schools, are vague at best. According to the schools inspectorate Ofsted, British values are democracy, the rule of law, and individual liberty; mutual respect for and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs, as well as those without faith. British values allow for difference. They make space for multiculturalism. Importantly, they do not require assimilation, but that doesn’t mean integration is easy by comparison.

The country is changing, its demographics shifting, its political discourse ricocheting wildly. In order to integrate, we must have an idea of what we are integrating into.

This is why putting migrants on a scale of good to bad – which is where the story of Mamoudou Gassama puts us – is ultimately

useless. It asks that we be exceptional in ability in order to gain acceptance. We can't just be nice normal people who work in a shop. We must possess extraordinary abilities. Or have lots of cash.

What mama said about hearts and minds kept rattling around my brain. I realised, talking to a group of school kids about mama's fight, that I was doing that work to change people's hearts and minds. Artists are doing that work. Writers. Creators. Actors. Books and films and television are doing that work. Representation and inclusion in the stories we tell, diverse characters as main characters, as normal people, or as exceptional superheroes, as villains and love interests, as the comic relief and criminal mastermind, as the grief-stricken person with a magical pet or the doctor who is as flawed as they are brilliant – these normalise the way we look at the world.



President Macron meets Mamoudou Gassama after his act heroism

As the former Children's Laureate Malorie Blackman said, books can be mirrors and they can be windows. As the author Junot Diaz said, the easiest way to turn a human being into a monster is to deny them at the cultural level any reflection of themselves.

Whether we are good immigrants or bad ones, the distinction prevents us treating each other as human. Often, when we talk about our divided country and healing it, people mention that we

need to focus on the things that bind us, that bring us together. But with that comes an erasure of who we are. Sure, we have common goals, we have our streets, our towns and cities, our communities. But we also have those things that make us *us*. And these need to be thrown into the mix.

For all his heroics, Mamoudou Gassama was still othered in his bravery. He was still the exceptional immigrant who went to extraordinary lengths to belong. He shouldn't have to.



NIKESH SHUKLA

Nikesh Shukla is an author, journalist and screenwriter. His books include 'Coconut Unlimited' and 'Meatspace'. He also edited the essay collection 'The Good Immigrant'.

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