Speaking in Tongues

Hello. This voice I speak with these days, this English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place-this is not the voice of my childhood. I picked it up in college, along with the unabridged Clarissa and a taste for port. Maybe this fact is only what it seems to be – a case of bald social climbing-but at the time, I genuinely thought this was the voice of lettered people, and that if I didn't have the voice of lettered people, I would never truly be lettered. A braver person, perhaps, would have stood firm, teaching her peers a useful lesson by example: not all lettered people need be of the same class, nor speak identically. I went the other way. Partly out of cowardice and a constitutional eagerness to please, but also because I didn't quite see it as a straight swap, of this voice for that. It never occurred to me that I was leaving Willesden for Cambridge. I thought I was adding Cambridge to Willesden, this new way of talking to that old way. Adding a new kind of knowledge to a different kind I already had. For a while, that's how it was: at home, during the holidays, I spoke with my old voice, and in the old voice seemed to feel and speak things that I couldn't express in college, and vice versa. I felt a sort of wonder at the flexibility of the thing. Like being alive twice.

But flexibility is something that requires work if it is to be maintained. Recently my double voice has deserted me for a single one, reflecting the smaller world into which my work has led me. Willesden was a big, colorful, working class sea: Cambridge was a smaller, posher pond, and almost univocal; the literary world is a puddle. This voice I picked up along the way is no longer an exotic garment I put on like a college gown whenever I choose now it is my only voice, whether I want it or not. I regret it; I should have kept both voices alive in my mouth. They were both a part of me, but how the culture warns against it! (...) Voices are meant to be unchanging and singular. There's no quicker way to insult an expat Scotsman in London than to tell him he's lost his accent. We feel that our voices are who we are, and that to have more than one, or to use different versions of a voice for different occasions, represents, at best, a Janus-faced duplicity, and at worst, the loss of our very souls.

Whoever changes their voice takes on, in Britain, a queerly tragic dimension. They have betrayed that puzzling dictum "To thine own self be true" so often quoted approvingly as if it represented the wisdom of Shakespeare rather than the hot air of Polonius. "What's to become of me? What's to become of me?" wails **Eliza Doolittle,** realizing her middling dilemma: a voice too posh for the flower girls and yet too redolent of the gutter for the ladies in Mrs. Higgins' drawing room.

And she leaves like this:

I can't. I could have done it once; but now I can't go back to it. Last night, when I was wandering about, a girl spoke to me; and I tried to get back into the old way with her; but it was no use. You told me, you know, that when a child is brought to a foreign country, it picks up the language in a few weeks, and forgets its own. Well, I am a child in your country. I have forgotten my own language, and I can speak nothing but yours.

Zadie Smith, *Changing My Mind,* 2009

Eliza Doolittle *is the main character of the play Pygmalon by Bernard Shaw, a flower lady made to talk as a duchess by the best scientist of phonetics, Professor Higgins after a bet he made with his friend Colonel Pickering. The experience exceed expectation as Eliza is made to speak very differently from what she used to.*