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Increasing Futility of the New World

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Abstract:

We are approaching fast towards such a complete breakdown of all accepted values and norms of living, creating an unprecedentedly grave situation, which must concern every writer worth his name. The old tools of a writer are not serving him anymore, with each day that passes bringing unexpected gleamings of a future whose meaning he cannot decipher. Our writers today may as well say that they can't say to what extent they have nothing to say.

Keywords: Predicament, nothingness, absurd, futility, alienation, suffering.

Samuel Beckett said 'I can't say to what extent I have nothing to say. The irony, however, is that to say this, or rather not to say this, repeatedly as well as effectively, he had to go on producing quite a few volumes of plays and novels, in which strange people are found to do and utter strange things, till he was reconciled, apparently happily, to the idea of accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature for saying things which he desperately feels he can't say to what extent he hasn't anything to say about. Beckett, while saying this, might not have spoken for himself alone. His comment, on the contrary, might be related to the predicament in which the writers in general find themselves today. The situation is not very different in our country also, though not at all for the same reasons which might have provoked the author of Waiting for Godot to make the statement.

Based on the existing human condition which provides raw material to writers, a literature of nothingness, more particularly of the absurd, has emerged in the West and has already travelled much beyond its adolescent frontiers. Indeed, however genuine in the region of its origin, this form of literature is by now a fashionable western item of export. There is also another side of the picture heralding a decay of literary values, particularly in those countries where technology and affluence have made deep inroads transforming basically the landscape of human relationship. In some of the western countries which until the other day were famed for their literary masterpieces, a considerable section of the enlightened public have started raising anti-literary slogans. Indeed we are increasingly finding there a poetry calling itself anti-poetry, a novel which is anti-novel and a play which is anti-play-in short, a literature which is anti-literature. The gradual decline of literature in these highly developed countries has certainly something to do with much talked about alienation between the individual and the society, the latter being more and more governed by the primary concern over material well-being and acquiring goods, though seemingly there might not be any contradiction between the material well-being of a society and the scope therein for the continuance and unceasing growth of good literature. For, wouldn't it be preposterous to claim that a country must put an end to its aspirations for a better, healthier and wealthier society and condescend to remain in a perpetual standstill in order that its literature may continue to thrive? On the contrary, the relationship between literature and society being obvious, a thriving literature would, most legitimately, presuppose a thriving society producing it. But the fact remains that actually what is happening is the opposite of what one would have expected to happen under similar circumstances.

When we are at it, we might also refer to another interesting point relating to the problem. During an interview Jean-Paul Sartre remarked that one of the main reasons why he has stopped writing creatively is that after the spectacular progress of Marxian studies and the

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tremendous achievements of sociology and psychology, the writer's task of interpreting his society has become virtually impossible. Particularly a writer of fiction these days, therefore, is bound to look either trite or his contributions more and more contrived in both cases he is doomed not only to a minor but a growingly insecure as well as insincere role. The simple verities of the human heart which William Faulkner glorified so well in his celebrated Nobel Award speech, are perhaps not that simple anymore and which also has contributed to the difficulties of a writer.

If I have chosen to start my discussion of Indian literature with arguments which at first sight may not seem to have much relation to this country and its present circumstances, it is principally for two reasons. First, an essential point I wish to make is that no matter what the motivating forces are in various different societies, it is a troubled time for literature almost everywhere. Secondly, as we have been accustomed to hear and at least partially accept the much repeated contention that Indian literature is one though written in many languages, which may no doubt appear to be a bit too far-fetched at times but all the same is true to some extent, there is little reason why we should not prepare ourselves for a further leap forward and agree to extend our human loyalties to regions which are beyond our immediate frontiers. The human community may not be one, at least at the moment, but in this world of gradually shrinking distances, both physical and spiritual, the humanity at large is inseparably tied to a destiny which ultimately is common to all of us. And it is certainly not today that we have suddenly started hearing of the influence of one region of this globe on another, not only in creative endeavours or artistic attempts, but in many other spheres of human interest as well.

The time, however, is yet to come for much generalization in this regard and it is better to accept the differences where they exist. Needless to say, ours is the opposite of an affluent and technological society and though an alienation does prevail here also, between the individual and the society, its nature is drastically different from the one plaguing the western

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countries. If I say plague, then the alienation we here are suffering from, is also a plague, but only of a more deadly nature.

Our alienation is broadly of two kinds: one between the generations, and the other between the individual and the society. It might be argued that the first type of alienation, which is between the generations, has existed from time immemorial; but there is no parallel in recent history to what is happening today. One example might illustrate the point. For example, unfortunately, concerns no less a figure than Gandhi, still revered by quite a few individuals of a fastly withering, dying generation as the Father of the Nation. The screening of a documentary film on the life and teachings of the Mahatma, made and released by the Gandhi Smarak Nidhi in connection with the Gandhi centenary programme, produced some extremely untoward scenes and such shouting comments by a section of the audience, consisting mostly of young students, as are unutterable. Quite a few cinema houses have been considerably damaged by an unruly mob just for showing the film, till, at least in one State, the authorities were forced to take steps to withdraw the film from circulation. Several exhibitions of books on and by Gandhi had also to be closed down hurriedly. It is, indeed, difficult to imagine of a greater irony than the fact that armed guards have to be kept posted, day and night, around the statues of the apostle of non-violence in his centennial year, for protecting them from damage and disfigurement.

The issue here is deeper than what is suggested by the personality of Gandhi, about whom it is often said these days that one of the most fortunate things that could ever happen to him was his merciful assassination which made him a martyr, saving him from the inevitable agony and disgrace he would have suffered, were he to live today. It is also true that there is much in Gandhi's ideas which may seem outrageously naive in the present context, but that in itself is not enough and does not explain the eruption of violence in some quarters at the very mention of his name. The fact is that Gandhi so supremely represents a past and a set of

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values which have no relevance today and are despised and rejected in their totality by the present, up-coming generation. There are a few other father figures in the country who are more fortunate and are still venerated very distantly, but it is a sure prediction that their days are also numbered. If a father himself in a house is still tolerated, it is more because of the demands of the still lingering, though already much dilapidated, joint family system than anything else; but even in such cases two or more generations living together only co-exist in an atmosphere which may remind one of the days of the Dreyfus affair in France. In short, the past today is there like a rotten, worm-eaten plank, only to be called names and spat upon. More than anything else, it also represents the same revolt against the past generation and a desire to crush the existing social system which the rebels think is not only immoral but an endless exercise in futility. The old tools of a writer are not serving him any more. with each day that passes bringing unexpected gleamings of a future whose meaning he cannot decipher. Echoing Beckett, therefore, our writers here today may as well say that they can't say to what extent they have nothing to say.

Here again, we may draw a universal parallel between our student unrest or the revolt of our young generation and its counterparts elsewhere. especially in the western countries. But there is one big difference between the two while what is happening in the West is in reality an inevitable tempest of spiritual unrest of a civilization wedded exclusively to the concept and practice of affluence, ours is an inhumanly impoverished country which is still far from winning even the battle for a handful of grain. In both cases, therefore, the unrest may be a common factor, but the causes of it differ violently.

The second type of alienation we are suffering from, which is between the individual and the society, is also of a very special kind. The practice of creative arts and the circulation of the products of our efforts in the artistic field, including literature, are of necessity strictly confined to an infinitesimal section of the middle class élite, which in itself is a great

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minority in the country. Moreover, apart from the obvious alienation between the middle class writer and his vast society to much of which he is a complete stranger, the middle class itself is in the process of disintegration. Economically, morally and socially, it is being constantly pushed into a dark and deadly dungeon from which there is no escape. This Indian middle class, product of an English education and the nineteenth- century renaissance, was inevitably designed to be alienated from the very beginning of its coming into being. But the forces of history are such that the social boundary-walls have already started falling down with a bang and that the middle class, due mainly to suffocating economic pressure, is gradually but surely dissolving into the vast community of the under- privileged. The gentle behaviour, manner of speech or way of thinking- in short, all that is associated with the term gentry-run the risk of soon becoming a thing of the past.

However, the irony of the situation is that in spite of all these considerations, even a superficial look at the current literary scene will convince anyone of the growingly impressive quantity of our writers' output. Here I would like to quote an excerpt from a controversial article on Bengali poetry by Ashok Mitra, a perceptive critic, which might be accepted as relevant to the Indian scene in general. Moreover, there is apparently no reason why an example of a particular region should not be taken as representative of the country at large if we are prepared to accept this basic contention that Indian literature is one though written in many languages.

'As they were used', writers Ashok Mitra, 'to do some forty years ago, or twenty/thirty years ago, or in 1958, young boys go on writing poetry. So the background in Bengal that truncated, rotten, withered country-has not changed. Only, even at a faster pace than the over-all population growth, the young ones are more numerous today than ever before. And what is more surprising is that some of those beautiful girls, who were once only stupidly reverent

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in front of the poetry by young boys, have not remained quite immobile either. On the contrary even those golden brass-dolls themselves are writing poetry today.

'I love, or used to love, poetry since my childhood. Nor am I averse to beautiful women. Yet this spate of Bengali poetry. I must confess, makes me nervous and sick before it, I feel like vomitting. Standing at the crossing of Calcutta's Gariahat or Rashbehari Avenue, I have an irresistible desire to hurl vulgar abuses at the authors of those poems. The clever diction of some of these teenager-poets is to me pure frivolity, their mutual talk about their indigested Baudelaire and company is loath-some to my ears. If only I could get at some of their excercise books, I would, under each poem, have unhesitatingly inscribed the remark: "Herds of pigs, you get less than zero out of a hundred."

'But there might still be time to check the disaster that is happening in the name of poetry. And it is still possible to write poetry even in this suffocating atmosphere. But what should the nature of that poetry be? I would certainly kick at it, should it seek its imageries elsewhere than in the all-pervading reality of this dirt-ugliness-storm-flood-disaster. In the world of Bengal stand thick rows of helpless clerks and school-masters; beyond the structure of the middle class society are vast crowds of refugees, thousands of unemployed new graduates, retrenched labourers, evicted share-croppers or peasants on daily wages. In the same Bengal are the want of rice, rise in prices, the vulgar show of might of the capital from outside and its domination, appalling sanitary conditions and horrifying malnutrition. In it also are despair, violence, outbursts of frustrated anger and the agony of helplessness. But simultaneously, in this very Bengal are dreams of a revolution, political build-ups and processions. Also, there are radiant faces in processions, strikes, clenched fists raised above in protest and those who have the courage to hope and work for a future which will bring beauty-equality-prosperity to everyone's life. All this can at least, should-be the subject of poetry.

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'Those writing poetry today do not seem to be interested in this coarse unornamental Bengal. Taking who knows what hidden, underground way, all their symbols escape to another world, so much so that the nature and appearance of these symbols could be assumed as imported from the planet Mars. They have no interest in the world of clerks and schoolmasters or in that of peasants and unemployed labourers. They have no interest either in that world in which I have seen a heroine dying, slowly but surely, and literally, of malnutrition. Is, then, their poetry meant solely for those few of the fine society, whose number, alas, is so easily countable? If the poets can say it bluntly and declare that their poetry is not for you and me and that their heroine belongs to this parasitic, impotent society alone, all discussion, naturally, becomes pointless. But in that case we can also be equally blunt and say to them: "Herds of pigs, come, let us carry your poetry to the crematorium and, after that, engage ourselves in our exclusive poetry-the poetry that is allied to the procession." Indeed, our earnest and most sublime prayer is that may our poetry be completely identified with the procession?'

One may take exception to the angry tone of this article by Ashok Mitra, but its content is bound to evoke sympathy of many honest thinkers. His emphasis, clearly, is on what has come to be termed progressive literature, however unsatisfactory and inadequate the expression may be. But my point is that the little that is already there of the so-called progressive literature, it also provides, in the context of the present helplessness of literature, a splendid example of an exercise in futility. Indeed, one may go further and say that this particular field of literature is the abode of the most stupendous frustration.

For one thing, one can't think of greater strangers in their own time and place than these writers who are in mid-stream, struggling for survival. They may either, like meek pacifists, raise bellowing cries of a calf, or, if they want to be more assertive, roar like a lion demanding justice. In both cases, they are equally ineffective, since those to whom they so

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badly want justice done will never accept them as their own people, nor will they ever read this literature. Outwardly, this class of people are rickety, diseased and uneducated, and their interior is being consumed by a very different fire. Lost and hidden in dirty, stingy city-slums or in grey, insipid countryside, they are much beyond the reach of all middle class writing and aspirations. It is true that they are also trying to awake and are becoming increasingly loud, but no stretch of imagination will ever unite them with today's so-called progressive literature. On the contrary, if and when the great bonfire starts, it will make no distinction between what is womanizing or contentless or progressive in today's literature, but will consume all with equal greed.

Our concern for the writer's predicament is understandable, but there is certainly nothing in it which may lead us to despair. The human community, after all, is the subject of such eternally splendid possibilities and time is gloriously immortal. A new society is bound to be born and, with it, a new literature.

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