



Literary Odysseys multitudinous perceptions of truth, authenticity and meaning

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Abstract

This paper is exploring the complex history in the evolution of the perception of truth through Theology, Art and Literature. It is deconstructing the radical transformation in the human perception that Renaissance ushered in. The horrifying reality of the dissolution of the public spaces brought an irreversible twist to the quest of reality. With the very distrust in language that postmodernism inaugurated, the last of the edifices of the supposed authenticity disowned itself. The paper continues the analysis through the Marxian perspective. Marx had a special fascination for some of the Shakespearean plays which is subjected intense scrutiny. Marx narrows down on the insurmountable contradictions in Shakespeare. The paper concludes with a comparative analysis of the postcolonial deconstruction of Coetzee's *Foe* and *Robinson Crusoe*

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Introduction

The concept of the writer as having an existence and identity of his own is a contribution of the European Renaissance. Replacing the divine creator in his heavenly abode, a new breed of creators came to establish their grounds. He presided over the rights of language and imagination. To protect and safeguard his rights, family, private property and government were created. For the next four centuries, his domination and the divine rights to rule the minds of the people went unchallenged. But in the twentieth century, his monopolising total control and indomitability is hugely shaken and remains exposed of the falsity of its monolithic facade. The ideas that are apparently disseminated from the writer ultimately was revealed to carry indecipherable signatures of the ones who belong to the masses. It is these unknown selves who are the ultimate custodians, creators, arbitrators and judges of the language and creative imagination which the farcical author claimed to possess the sole proprietorship. A huge fortification of self-deification was ultimately beginning to disown itself and crumbling down. It was the beginning of a new way of looking at literature.

It was by rationally challenging and demolishing the revelations of the Bible that from the Renaissance onwards, the horizons of Western intellectualism began to evolve. It was not a rejection or derogation of the enlightenments of an individual but subjecting it to be scrutinised and appropriated through a collective enterprise that was democratic to the core. The man in the street equipped those ideas could transform his life into a struggle for democracy. It had been numerous struggles like these that gradually led to the creation of public spheres. Umberto Eco observes that it was during this time that ideas like 'Death of the author', 'Who is a writer' began to surface in the intellectual sphere. In the twenty-first century, at a time when the public spheres have begun to shrink, the counter revolutions inaugurated by the novice aristocracy and the claims of copyrighted enlightenment, it is time for a rethinking of the spirit Renaissance had ushered in four centuries ago. At the same time there are innocent souls who remain impervious of the

inherent disasters of the new reality. It is obvious that in the prevailing times, everything would be subjected to constant and perilous interrogations, like 'Who has the ownership of language, literature, thought, culture and imagination?'

During the European Renaissance, the authority of religion had yield place to literature, which began to establish its supremacy by garnering synergies from emotions and passions of the lived out reality, rather than the metaphysical planes of the ideational which religion promised. Literature began to establish forth perennial truth and transcendental experience to which had till then religion claimed to possess the patent rights. Literature began to provide a world which offer alternate views of the real. Those enlightenments and revelations of the gifted genius was made available to the man in the street, it was transition to an experience that was democratic to the core. The epics and tragedies of those ages engaged the people in a discourse that was sublime and ethereal. Since tragedies primarily are concerned with the travails of individualism, the Renaissance ideology ultimately began to promote the rise of the individualism though imperviously to some extent.

Even the prevailing tendency to ascribe heroic stature to individuals in politics and public life has its beginnings in the composition of the great tragedies of Renaissance. As a historical irony it must have been, no one suspected the Shakespeare tragedies inaugurating hero worship which continues unabated till date. The ideological Marxian opposition to hero idolatry was usurped incidentally by the die-hard Marxists themselves.

The society of which Aristotle had been a part had a solid belief in unassailability of fate and deterministic philosophy whose most powerful visible manifestation has been the Delphic oracle. The plot of the ancient Greek tragedies are designed to effectively frustrate all attempts made by the hero to evade the unbearable impact of fate. Romanticism which came later is often mistaken as a counter force to classicism though in many respects it could be seen to adoring and pursuing the lost glories of classicism with a nostalgic craving. Yet at the same time, it is unshakable

belief in the powers of the individual to triumph over the malefic impact of fate that underlies the spirit of Romanticism. It is this that is emphasised by the Indian theoretician Anandavardhan when he observes that it is not the plot, but what really matters are the *rasa* and *bhava*.

In the ages that followed Renaissance, there had been a discernible tendency to visualise the language as a medium that is possessing its own organic self and identity. Language till that age had mostly remained a means and medium to express ideas. This prominence which language acquired as having an exclusive self and entity began to cast its spell on later discourses on literature, polity and culture. The advancements made in the disciplines of science encouraged the tendency to understand and interpret language and its realities in a similar fashion. The Marxian school observes that this age created elite bourgeois ideology and ideal levels of excellence as created by the epic poets and tragedians which may always remain a distant dream for the man in the street. It is significant that Aristotle considers Tragedies as the most exemplified works of the creative genius. The school goes on to remark that the *Paradise Lost* of Milton, the poetry of English Romanticism and autobiographical novels become collective expression of a certain culture or people as they all come to represent certain unmistakable ideological patterns.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, all the divergent voices of dissent and anarchy were systematically sidelined and the only those falling into the dominant aristocratic ideals were given the chance to express. The voice of the Middle Ages which were chaotic and rebellious was considered to be symptomatic of anarchism and modernism sought to repress those voices of dissent. Enforced discipline became the hallmark and defining attribute of literature. Ordinary people were guided to the sublime values through the exploration of perennial human values, rational thinking and heightened imagination. The literature that celebrated the bourgeois values and ideals were projected as ideal creations capable of preventing the illiterate masses from treading the path of disruption and rebellion. Literature became an effective tool in promoting the national culture and national language.

The voices of dissent which often will be loud is often labelled as unacademic, anti-cultural and barbaric to the core. The cacophonies of the market is usually taken symptomatic of the ruthlessness which the uninitiated into the aristocratic ideal are prone to. Jonathan Sterne argues that on the sidelines of Enlightenment, there had always been an 'Ensoniment'. It is in this perspective that the present perspective of the symphonies of Beethoven may be examined. Structurally and thematically a symphony is a composition wherein the multitudinous sounds which are disparate and chaotic, each one trying to assert its separate identity and existence is ultimately subjected the divine pattern of harmony and unified character.

Marx is fascinated by the music of 'the other' not because its unitary character but due its polyphonic potentials. Of all the plays of Shakespeare, Marx had a special liking for *Much Ado About Nothing*, as *Ado* suggests all those multitudinous voices which were antithetical to bourgeois aristocratic ideals. In the first part of *Das Capital*, Marx puts *Merchant of Venice* and *Timon of Athens* as case studies of economic analysis. Since the plays of Shakespeare belongs to the transitional stage from Medievalism to Modernism, there are discernible elements

of pre-Modernism in his creations. Marx placed Shakespeare on the same pedestal as Aeschylus, in whose works there a free fusion of the sublime and inferior, heroic and comical. For the same reason, Voltaire did not approve of Shakespeare. In *The German Ideology*, co-authored by Marx and Engels, they make an extensive analysis of *Timon of Athens* to make a comprehensive analysis of the transformations money brings about in an individual.

Since writing takes place in a language that is socially centred, it will reflect all the conflicts, contradictions and internal dissensions in the society. It will bring alive the harrowing socio-cultural and historical realities. Every sensitive writer becomes a part of the socio-historical narrative. It is this historical authenticity of Shakespeare that Marx used as major instrument of his ideological foundations. Marx considered Shakespeare as the embodiment of all insurmountable contradictions. He performed before the people without assuming to be possess the gift of elite ideals. It has to be noted that Modernism instead of regarding the tragic protagonist turned the focus towards the chaos of the street and the liberated women. The uproarious laughter of Carnival was richly orchestrated by Shakespeare, Cervantes and Rabelais to satirise the vainglorious and absurd arrogance the power sought to display.

Don Quixote proved to be iconoclastic by demolishing the language and dialogue patterns of the Romances of those times. Its humour, devices of parody and absurdities seek to disrupt the conventional equations between the spoken word and the context. The ritualistic language of the religious ceremonies is dragged onto the collective ironies of parody. The words that are part of the mundane conversation are made to wait for their antinomies. Words are insisting on the reader to take a journey back in time where words were still in their nascent form. By creating parenthetical social drama, the author is offering new readings into the mindscape of man and his world. By introducing words and text in the emerging social scenario, new readings are made possible.

Whatever be extent of original perception a writer may succeed in maintaining, ultimately he will be swayed by certain prevailing themes and currents that characterise his age, culture and civilisation. In spite of all perceptible attempts to establish a domain of his own, the writer continuously compromises with the traditions and conventions that is existing over the ages. Eliot could be suggesting the same idea when he pointed out that the poet has to surrender himself continuously to the tradition.

In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus reemploys characters and situation which Homer took from history. *Pygmalion* is later given theatrical interpretation by Bernard Shaw, further to be adapted by Hollywood in 1964 into film version in *My Fair Lady*. Since the original work is existing in the public domain, any later writer may appropriate it in his own way to suit the language and culture he seeks to represent. It is in this way Greek epic characters are reborn in every age and space. It is this process of never ending appropriations that make European literature a living, throbbing experience. Genres in literature originate as a result of the existence of common spheres as defined by the age, location, gendered self, racial and tribal consciousness.

Anything is capable of getting represented in literature. There is no such literature in the world whose values remain unassailable. If there sets in a tectonic shift in literature, it would be possible that a new generation might appear who

are incapable of comprehending Shakespeare, as Huxley foresees in *Brave New World* and theorised by Terry Eagleton in his *An Introduction to Literary Theories*. Marx found it difficult to understand the reasons as to why Greek literature still continues to hold its relevance even though, the socio-historical space that gave rise to that literature has ceased to exist long ago. Terry Eagleton finds his own solution to this question when he suggests that since history has not come to an end, it will continue to captivate the people eternally.

But inspite of the contention of Eagleton, the question continues to hold its debating value as to why only certain works reach the heights of immortality. Some critics suggest even today our society primarily continues to be male dominated and the books that challenge this are denied stature of immortality. It is this male obsessed ideology that conceptualised on the great traditions in literature and poetic imagination, who ultimately had to ostracise women as well as other marginalised characters to the sidetracks.

If the writers do not yield to the dominant ideologies, and surrender to the system and its linguistic patterns, and do not comprehend that he belongs to the public domains, he ultimately has to contend with opposing ideologies. It can be seen that experiences do not have common denominators, which are as chaotic and incoherent as the voices in a street. It always deviates from the segmented terrains of academic history and sponsored experiences of culture and straight lines of civilisation. Swaying to the aberrant themes and impressions of the mind, it will begin to move about, ultimately creating a work of literature where content and form are inseparable. The perfectly balanced work of literature with its agreement between a good beginning, a properly developed middle and a proper conclusion has a Colonial sub motif. It makes the work a closed discourse. Reyner Banham, the British historian of architecture, offers an aggressive resistance to the concept of a fortified city with a precise centre. In his book, *The Story Teller*, Walter Benjamin points out that there had been a time when stories primarily chose to remain inconclusive offering an open possibility.

From the never ending torrential flux of history, the writer ferrets out an instance, exaggerating its manifold character and claims perfection and totality for that. When a work is reaching completeness, it has to force to oblivion and insignificance many a contentious factor. In Ramayana epic, the later Uttara Ramayana is an exemplar example of this never to be concluded character of literature. In this part of the epic, the marginalised stories and characters of the original begins to be focussed upon, acknowledging and incorporating oppositional readings within its framework. It is offering a counter view to an epic which is primarily revolving around the cult of idolising the image of the hero. In another it seeks to deconstruct the subliminal themes such as greed for power and the vicious machinations of the State and its brutality.

Tony Harrison provides a contemporary reading of Sophocles' *Satyr Play* in *The Trackers of Oxrings*, which transports the Athenian spectacle to the reality of 1990's. Harrison cunningly employs to play to criticise the Right Wing's strategy of creating a polarity in the society like that of the Elitite society and those of the underdogs. In certain literary circles this has been termed as the 'Fourth Play'. After the age of the classical Greek trilogies, there has many concerted risings against the consecration of the male sexual

domination. It is similar to the act of 'groundlings' in the Globe theatre, who through the act of carnivalesque, usurped the patented hierarchies which the elite aristocracy sought to create in the society. Shakespeare in his *Sonnet 130* is disrupting the traditions of the conjectured romantic platonic love which was fashionable in the poetry of the times.

Those who are waxing eloquent on the lyricism of some novels are the people who pay scant disregard to its structure. Novel is a way comprehending the complexities of existence. As in the case of *Much Ado About Nothing*, novelist has to keep up his never ending admiration for the chaos and anarchies of life. It should not be reduced to the charming monologues pattern of the lyricism. In the bygone century, there has been a plethora of counter narratives in world fiction which were primarily counter narratives. From Ireland, the iconic landscape of rebellions appeared Oscar Wilde and James Joyce, a detailed exploration of which appears in Paul K St.Amore's classic analysis, *Intellectual Property Rights and Literary Imagination*.

These writers waged a relentless battle against the rulers which lasted over a century, from 1830 to 1930. By leading protests against the Anglo-American legislatures, they led artistic revolts against the enemies of humanity. Saint Amor makes references to the their rejection of Romantic individualism, opposition to writer's copyrights and the attempts to make writings a private property. They freely permitted others to reprint copies of their books. Copied liberally from other writers. Redefined the traditional modes of story telling, and challenged the indomitability of authorship. Amor testifies that hundred of copies recorded the story telling sessions of Wilde and even republished them in their own names. Reportedly Wilde once told a friend about story theft that 'stealing is an honourable act, but refusing to acknowledge it is a violation of rights of friendship'. Wilde always held onto the view that published works are public properties. Not only did not encourage copying, he went on to establish a commune of story thieves....' Thieves of all world unite....', should be seen in the read as a radical opposition to the rights over the writers' intellectual property rights.

Amor argues that copyright rules weaken the public spheres instead of strengthening it. The new age critical insights have to reveal the traditional sorcery, writers are indulging in with the nuances of language. The community of readers have poise their might against the agenda of the cultural industry which seeks to commercialise art and literature. Originality is a cultural phenomena which is always willing to hold a discourse. Language and literary expression should belong to the public imagination and not be kept in private reserves. The concept of 'I' is not a creation of me. On the other hand it is the composite encomium of many divergent and warring themes that comes to affect the individual and the society together. David Cooper, the African psychologist who authored 'Demise of the Family', asks 'Who authored me?' This enquiry resists the absurdist position as to 'Who am I?' Cooper goes onto state that the family will not tolerate such questions.

Homibhabha argues that reinterpretations always challenge and coerce the authenticity of the original. Rights of the writer over the created work is as illusionary and temporary as the rights over the landed property. No writer begins or ends in himself, once against corroborating the contentions of T.S.Eliot in 'Tradition and Individual Talent'. In his

Surplus Capital, Marx points out that Milton composing *Paradise Lost* has its analogy in Silk worm generating silk . Marx thinks that it is a natural process which cannot stake any claim to originality or ingenuity. Piery Macheri later suggested that instead of ‘creativity’ , the expression ‘literary production’ may be used. Marx deprives the writer of his creator’s halo and replants him amidst the public sphere.

It has become an accepted pattern in contemporary literature to critically deconstruct well known book. *The Wind Done Gone* is a writing that is resisting the racial politics of Margaret Michael’s *Gone With the Wind*, gendered politics of Bronte’s *Jane Ire* meets its opposition in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Robinson Crusoe’s Colonial politics has its reversal in J.M.Coetz’s *Foe*. Even in the contemporary democracies, the people who remain outside the mainstream narrative are denied the opportunity for self expression, resistance and opposition. The time has now come for demolishing the traditional notions of authorship and look afresh at literature through a more candid democratic and socialist perspective.

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