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At the crossroads

Is the fact that the CommonwealthPrize was held here, an indication of the recognition of English writing inIndia? There is certainly greater visibility and awareness, but not so much of a renaissance. Despite the talent and the plaudits, there is a sense of misdirection. SHASHI DESHPANDE rightly argues that what is needed is literature in its right place - among writers and readers.

IT was a week of books, of writers, of writing in English, of the idea of the Commonwealth, of jubilation about Jhumpa Lahiri and the Pulitzer. A week made up of sudden crises (one author's missing baggage, one suddenly missing author) and suspense: Is HE coming? Has HE come? Has SHE come too? Heightening drama and finally the climax, an evening that was a frightening display of the hunger of the media for sensation, of its pursuit of one man. An evening which belonged to this one man, thoughtful and a little lonely despite being the sole focus of interest. Even the prize seemed to matter less (partly because the winner Coetzee was absent), though the first book Prize winning author, Jeffrey Moore, did manage to capture the crowd for a moment by thanking "Salman Rushdie for coming all the way to see me get the prize"!

Now that it is all over, I am left with two questions that were repeatedly asked of me by the media, of which the first invariably was: "Isn't the fact of the Commonwealth Prize being held in India a recognition of the (English) writing in this country?"

There were different words used in place of recognition - coming of age, success, achievement, once even the rather grandiose word renaissance. In effect, however, the question carried within it the presumption that English writing in India had made it. The simplest answer to this question was of course that, since the event moves from country to country each year, it has nothing to do with recognition of the writing in any country. Nevertheless, I

had to ask myself: is this indeed such a time for English writing in India? Is it a coming of age? A renaissance?

The idea of any literature getting steadily better with the years, moving on finally to an apex of excellence (and falling down on its face afterwards because there's nowhere else to go?) is something that is hard to agree with. Instead, what seems closer to the truth is that any literature, once on its way, has periods of sluggishness, as well as sudden spurts of growth. Times when nothing seems to be happening, others when there is an energy and fizz in the literature, different genres alive and kicking, writers vibrantly responsive to society and readers responding intimately to the writers, so that there is a kind of spark between writers and their readers. I can remember a particular time when I saw this kind of thing around me, in Dharwad, a time when writers like Karanth, Bendre, Gokak, Shriranga, Masti, Puttappa were icons for people, and the halls in college were full, students overflowing into the corridors any time a writer came to address the students. Is this happening in English writing here?

The best thing one can say at this moment is that there is a greater visibility of the writing. Writers, some of them at least, are much written about by the media (though not always because of their books). More bookstores stock books by Indian authors which are no longer poor cousins to be hidden somewhere at the back and are well displayed. Hopefully this means that the books have more readers than before. These are all very heartening thoughts. On the other hand, this is but a small part of the whole picture. Beyond the brightly lit stage, there is a large dark penumbra of imitative bad writing. Of very few original voices. Of writers in a hurry to be published, hoping to make it with the very first novel, hoping, in fact, for another The God of Small Things. (I remember a writer who sent me a book for my opinion, adding "I don't mind if you recommend it for a prize or an award"!) Of writers with little to say, thinking that language and style are a substitute for substance. Of, on the whole, a great ignorance of what literature is really about.

Nayantara Sahgal, when asked this same question about the coming of age of English writing, offered the parallel of what happened to Latin American writing some two or three decades back. The writing was already there, it had been happening; it was the discovery by the West that made it the worldwide success that it became. So too now, with English writing in India. It is the recognition by the West, triggered by Rushdie, Seth and Roy, that has brought it into the limelight. Success, it seems then, is inextricably linked with recognition by the Western world.

It is a curious coincidence that at the time I was pondering over this question, I found myself reading Rabindranath Tagore - The Myriad-Minded Man by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson. A major portion of the book deals with Tagore's links with the Western literary world, with the response of that world to his writing. What interested me, however, was a statement of Tagore's in a letter to a friend, written more than two decades after the Nobel Prize, in which he says: "I am no longer young and I have had ample time to realise the futility of going out of one's own national

sphere for winning recognition."

There is something poignant about the words, a sense of disillusionment, of having gone wrong. To me, they speak both of his awareness of the value of recognition in the West, which after all was what got him the Nobel Prize, as well as his doubts about it. Part of the problem would most certainly have been because the recognition was almost exclusively for the poems, for his Gitanjali, while the short stories and novels remained unknown in the West. In fact a magazine, Harper's, rejected a short story of his on the ground that "the West is not sufficiently interested in Oriental life". But there was sufficient interest in the Gitanjali all right, in poetry which was seen as different, as spiritual, mystical and full of the wisdom of the East. While, on the other hand, to many Indian readers, the short stories and novels are still very much alive, still much read, and parts of the Gitanjali are, at least to me, embarrassingly unreadable.

This brings me to a question that has been troubling a great many of us: why is there such a difference in the perceptions of readers in two parts of the world? Do we have different criteria for judging literature? Are there, in fact, any criteria at all? This was the second question often asked by interviewers: what are the criteria by which the books will be judged? I had asked myself the same question, in a slightly different way, and with great apprehension: if there are no criteria, how will five people from different countries - different continents, in fact - with different backgrounds and different cultural landscapes agree on what is a good book? In fact the question is one that is becoming very relevant with the increasing gap between readers and critics, between readers/critics and sales figures. As far as English writing in India is concerned, there is the very curious phenomenon of some books which have been outstanding successes in the West - both critically and sales-wise - but have failed dismally in India. Why is there such a gap between the critics in India and those in the West, between readers in India and those in the West?

Most unusually, a few weeks back a weekly magazine tackled this question, even if sketchily, replete with quotes from a few informed people (who happened to be, as they always are, from Delhi). One of the theories mooted for the gap between the reception to Indian books outside India and within the country was an often expressed one - that of envy. Writers and critics, it is said, are envious of those who succeed abroad and therefore, like crabs in a bucket, pull down the crab which is trying to climb up. Let me admit that I've often had problems trying to understand the rave reviews that some (to me) unreadable book has got abroad. It leaves me confused, wondering what's wrong. This is a simple, uncomplicated reader's response. However, since I am also a writer, I become, in effect, one of those pulling-down-others crabs. Therefore, hoping to be an honest crab at the least, I asked myself the question: am I just plain jealous?

The findings were as follows:

* If it is a good book that's got all that applause, yes, I'm envious - and not of the applause or of the success, but of the book itself. A 'I wish I'd written

this book' envy. Good sattvic envy, that is part of all creative artists.

* If it's an average book that has got a response which has made it much discussed and reviewed by eminent critics and readers everywhere, giving it greater significance than it merits, yes, again I'm envious. Every serious writer craves this kind of serious attention.

* If it's a bad, an unreadable book, at first there's chagrin: why did I waste my time on this? Then there's bewilderment: this a good book? How can anyone think of this as worthy praise?

The reporter who put the feature together in the magazine asked this same question, but put it differently, the other way round. Why is it, he asked, that Indian critics trash a book that has won much acclaim abroad? In effect, why are Indian critics hostile to a book that does well abroad?

I thought it was curious that the journalist should put the question this way. The opinion of the critics abroad is held up as the standard and the question asked is - why do we think differently? Whereas, the natural thing for anyone would be to regard one's own opinion as the starting point and then ask why others differ from it. For, if mine is a well-considered opinion, do I need to concede to another just as well considered opinion? After all, responses to any art will be subjective. Which makes me wonder - is this a matter of a voluntarily accepted cultural subjugation? And, at the risk of being classed as a "cultural czar", I have to ask this too - doesn't this idea of "coming of age", of a "renaissance" or whatever we call it, come entirely out of the success of a few books in the West, out of the acclaim and the interest showed in the writing by publishers, agents and critics abroad?

Whatever the answer to this question, one thing is undeniable, that the success abroad comes with strings attached. While it is no longer true that the West is not interested in Oriental life, there is no doubt that this life needs to be presented in a particular manner to make it interesting enough. As Tagore found out, not only was the Gitanjali his only literary passport to the Western world (and how galling it is for any writer to have the major part of his work unknown), the poems translated were judiciously chosen by Tagore himself (for their universal appeal, according to Robinson and Dutta, and stripped of their local habitation) and then another final selection was made by Yeats. A careful selection of material, in other words, to suit a different readership. Any Indian author aspiring for acceptance in the West will find himself/herself confronting this reality. Certainly the acceptance factor has been considerably enlarged by writers like Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Rohinton Mistry. The contribution made by these authors towards opening the gates for other Indian writers is enormous. At the same time, the fact cannot be ignored that most of these authors are, in the words of Pico Iyer, "a new breed of people, an intercontinental tribe of wanderers." People whose sensibilities and experiences are cosmopolitan, their mindsets comfortably close to those living in the West, even while they write of India. The tight rope walking that international acceptance requires (just enough of the unfamiliar to make it excitingly exotic, such of the unfamiliar as can be easily explained

or understood) comes naturally to them; they can do this with ease and skill, because they are situated on the bridge between the two worlds themselves. But this is not possible for everyone. Nor will a selection made with some readers in mind have the same appeal for all readers.

It is entirely natural that one's sensibilities are defined by ones location and background, entirely natural therefore that perceptions differ, as do expectations. It is also equally natural that as readers, we enjoy opening windows into strange fascinating rooms, and that the reader who inhabits this room is impatient of detailing and descriptions and thinks, "yes, that's all very well, but get on with it!". Natural, therefore, that what fascinates some readers will not have the same impact on other reader. What is troubling is the privileging of some opinions, of some voices for reasons that are not always connected to their merited right to be heard. As Vijay Nambisan, in his review of the Oxford Guide To Contemporary Literature, asked with reference to the inaccuracies on the entry on India: who is this man who has written this? What are his credentials for writing on India? Could they not find any Indian scholar who could have done this job with a better knowledge of the subject? And, to go back, with a more reasonable and less angry state of mind (one hopes! - specially now that there has been a kind of apology) to Rushdie's opinions on Indian writing, one has to admit that they were his personal opinions and he had a right to express them. What was not right however and what can never be right is the enormous weight the piece carried, the stamp of finality it carried because it was Rushdie and the New Yorker. It seemed as if Rushdie had been made the spokesperson for Indian writing. And, whatever was authenticated by him had to be accepted as the best.

It cannot be denied that by writing in English one enters, whether one intends it or not, the global world of English literature. It is also true that the slot made available to our writing here, unless one is extraordinarily lucky or extraordinarily good, is that of exotica. The problem with being exotica is that interest in it can be a passing phase, a trend, a fashion and it can fade. And, while appreciation from outside the country is undoubtedly welcome, as Rukmini Bhaya Nair pointed out in the magazine feature, there is often an element of condescension in the praise heaped on writing from the third world, a kind of patronising acknowledgement, like Johnson's praise for women preaching, that it is being done at all. As she says, the moment the writing becomes a threat, like Arundhati Roy's did when she won the Booker, there is a change of tone. Tagore found this out too after he won the Nobel Prize. There was a kind of reversion of feeling towards his writing, much of it connected to the fact that Thomas Hardy had been passed over in favour of Tagore.

The most unhappy consequence of these things is the increasing number of divides that are being created. It is regional languages pitted against English, English writers living in India against writers living abroad, diasporic writing against rooted writing, etc. A kind of caste system has come into being with some writing and some authors belonging to the privileged caste, there is a kind of evaluation linked to the royalties/advances earned by authors. Ignoring the truth that no Indian

publisher can hope to match up to what a foreign publisher can offer, and that, for a number of reasons, not all related to the quality of the writing, it is not possible for most Indian authors to have either publishers or agents abroad. And that a huge advance speaks of the publisher's confidence, not only in the book, but in its saleability. On the other hand, there is also a politically correct condemnation of English writing because it is elitist. All these things ignore the truth that the merits of a book do not always or entirely depend on the theme or language or where the author lives or who the publisher is. As Boris Pasternak says, "the greatness of an author has little to do with the subject matter itself, only with how much the subject matter touches the author." Or as Shama Futehally has, in a recent review, quoted Nissim Ezekiel as asking "yes, yes, but is it good?"

There are bound to be differences in perceptions, but the need is to recognise them, not to sweep them under the carpet. And certainly not let the media lead the way, by giving more space and more significance to some voices, in deciding what books are important and what are the issues we need to discuss in literature. Recently in an interview with Vrinda Nabar where we spoke of some of these things, I asked the question: who will bell the cat? Who will say the things that need to be said? Not the critics who are busy stirring the pot of post colonialism. Not the reader who is too timid and unsure of herself. Not the writers who are afraid of being called biased and jealous. Perhaps it is because of all this that a sense of frustration creeping in and a tone of peevishness is making itself felt. As a recent review said, "can this (the hard-nosed critic's) voice be heard above the cacophony of cash, cheers and flashing photobulbs?" "Voices in the wilderness" - Nayantara Sahgal used the phrase when she spoke of this fact. There is frustration among writers as well, among those who are not rated "instant successes", as writers are today expected to be. There is an even greater damage done to those who "succeed" too quickly, for this does away with the humility that is an integral part of the process of growing for any creative person. Writing seems to be becoming narcissistic, a self-indulgent exercise, a need to quickly publish and be known. For the reader there is confusion, a floundering among the various messages coming from different sources - media hype, high pressured marketing and the wildly diverging opinions of critics conflicting with the reader's own opinion.

Since this is honest-crab time, let me admit that I was very apprehensive of being part of any prize-awarding exercise. To give a book a prize, I thought, is a frightening responsibility because it is like sending out a message - this is a great book. But ultimately, readers will, if they are able to free themselves, form their own opinions about what is a good or a great book. One may buy a book because of marketing or hype, or because it has won a prize, one may even read it, but whether one enjoys it is another thing altogether. Almost none of the books I read over and over again have been prize-winning books - whether it is Anne Tyler's Breathing Lessons, or Joyce Carol Oates' American Appetites or Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye. Most of the books that are much loved have been discoveries, books I stumbled upon, not knowing that they would yield me a lifetime of pleasure. Like, recently, The Bird Artist, a novel set in Newfoundland in

the early part of this century and written by an author I had never heard of; none of which are factors I would have regarded as positive in choosing a book; but there it was, a good novel which I knew I would read again. And perhaps again. Good books declare themselves to be above and beyond any criteria. In fact, there can never be any criteria; the criteria are what emerge out of books themselves.

After having lived for years with a sense of inadequacy and guilt for not having been able to appreciate some great writers like Conrad and Henry James, it was wonderfully liberating to decide that I would no longer be over-awed by the reputation of any book or writer. More and more, I have begun to realise that it is important for all of us who together form the world of literature to free ourselves of the various bonds that have begun constricting us. The writer needs to be free, not just of the obvious shackles, but of the pressures of conforming to a trend, of success. Success is a word that is very inappropriate for any creative art. There can be only "fulfillment" - which comes from within and happens very rarely. The critics need to free themselves of academic jargon, of the fear of speaking of simple things, of being accused of using cliches. To say what one believes in is important, even if this happens to be a clich.

This moment of time, as far as English writing in India is concerned, is, at the best, one of greater awareness, and, at the least, just a passing phase of interest. A time, not so much of a coming of age, certainly not of a renaissance, but a standing at the crossroads. Despite a number of very talented writers and a larger number of publishers than before, despite all the plaudits, appreciation and publicity, (or perhaps because of these things) there is a sense of misdirection. On the one hand, there's the enormous pull of money, fame and media attention, and on the other the writer's desire to find his/her own way. There is occasionally good writing, but more often one sees a kind of soulless writing, writing that seems in too much of a hurry to get somewhere. There's a critical judgment that's afraid to go against the grain and there's a kind of criticism which is not willing to let writers have time to grow. Above all, there is a wrong perspective. Symptomatic of which is the enormous significance given to any writer who makes it abroad, a significance that is sometimes far beyond what the writing merits, and at the same time ignoring something that is closer home. While one understands the celebration that followed Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer as a rejoicing over a genuine talent, over a writer we can claim as being one of us, what about the scarce notice taken of another talent, right here among us? I speak of the first Crossword Translation Prize which was given to Gita Krishnankutty, who also won, at almost the same time, the Sahitya Akademi translation award. Here was an opportunity to take note of the work done by this most excellent translator, of the volume and quality of her translations, of providing a role model for aspiring translators - which is really what prizes and awards are for. But there was nothing. And this, when we are crying out for more translations, for more and better translators. What's wrong with us? One of the questions asked during the Commonwealth Prize week was: why don't they include translations among the books that are eligible for the Prize? Yes, perhaps if that is done we will take more note of our translators, because recognition for us, it seems, has

to come from outside. International recognition is, undoubtedly, very welcome and important to any artist because it means, as I heard the filmmaker Karan Johar say, more viewers/readers. But, as he added, the beginning has to be here, at home; the real vitality in a literature can come only from within, from the society the literature emerges out of. It is through our cultural identities that we define ourselves and literature, perhaps more than any other cultural expression, carries the identity of a people.

Let's forget about renaissances and comings of age and just hope for a healthy literature. For which we need a lively debate, a chorus of voices, with respect for another's opinion, for another's work. Bias there is bound to be, maybe envy as well, both of which are very human; what we don't need is malice, personal attacks, vague generalisations, one-upmanship. What we do need are writers writing out of a genuine desire to say something, something that moves them, and, free of the pressure of quick success, learning their craft through the process of writing, discovering more about themselves and the world as they write. Real writers who will go on writing even when the spotlight moves away from them, from the scene they are part of. What we need are readers responsive to writing and free to choose, not afraid to follow their own opinions. What we need is literature in its right place, which is among writers and ordinary readers, not in the social pages of glossy magazines.

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