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Dear Reader

Literature is a means of speaking to a reader. It is a private one-to-one relationship between the author and the reader, between the speaker and the listener, between the voice and the ear. It is not a public oration. This relationship is the heart and soul of literature, it is what makes literature real, alive and growing, writes SHASHI DESHPANDE.

"READER, I married him." Today, a reader who reads these words, which begin the final chapter of Jane Eyre, will see no more in them than a satisfactory conclusion to a tumultuous love affair. This direct addressing of a reader was, after all, only a matter of style adopted by the novelists of the day. But for the reader today, it could be, if one thinks of it, a moment of great importance. In making the reader the recipient of a confidence, it brings the reader on to the page and in a sense affirms the existence of this person. As a reader I enjoy the thought, I exult in this brief moment in the limelight. As a writer, however, I have to remember the authorial arrogance with which I have replied to the question, so often asked of writers: Who do you write for? Nobody, I have declared, I write for myself, I am my own reader. Writing is a soliloquy.

But is this true? Is it entirely true? A recent review of An Equal Music by Vijay Nambisan asked a question: Why has Seth written this book? An odd question, surely, for a critic, who is himself a creative writer, to ask? Surely any writer knows that one never writes for a specific purpose? But I think the questions Nambisan was really asking of himself were: why do I have to read this book? What's there in it for me? Why am I to consider it an important, a significant piece of work?

These are really the questions a reader often unknowingly asks of her/himself while reading a book. If the answer is "the book says nothing to me," it ceases to exist for the reader. And without a listener, words are engulfed in silence, they are buried in obscurity. They cease to exist.

"It is not the voice that commands the story; it is the ear."

So much for authorial arrogance! Even an author like Naipaul confesses:

"If we, (he and his brother Siva, that is) were addressing an audience of people like ourselves, we would have been different writers. I'm always

aware of writing in a vacuum, almost always for myself and almost not having an audience... I was always writing for people who were indifferent to my material."

This not only asserts the importance of the reader, it also says many other things. That you need people who are not indifferent to your material. That without such readers you are actually writing in a vacuum. That if you had different readers you could have been a different writer. It is this last premise that seems to directly connect to Indians who write in English. If we wrote in our own languages, for example, would we have been different writers? Would one write differently depending on which Indian language one wrote in, or is it the addressing of a reader outside India that makes for a different writer? Perhaps the real question is: who are our readers when we write in English? It is always simpler and makes more sense to answer a question from one's own perspective than from a general one. So if I were to ask myself - whom do I write for (in spite of my declaration that I do not think of a reader at the time of writing), when I go back to what I have written and find that I have used the name of Ashwatthama to express a state of being an outcaste from humanity, it seems to me that my reader is one who will know the terrible story of this eternal exile from human society. A reader who therefore understands the terrible punishment of forever roaming, of never belonging. All these nuances are clear to this reader, who is, therefore the ideal reader. Which does not, however, mean that other readers are kept out.

"A writer writes opaquely to keep some readers out, let others in. All books are not meant for everyone."

While I agree with the second sentence of this statement of the novelist Fay Weldon, I would phrase the first part slightly differently. The novelist has no intention of keeping anyone out. The door is open. Any reader can walk in if she/he desires to enter. But if the reader is, as Naipaul says, indifferent to the writer's material, the reader will stay out of her/his own volition.

But can a writer by a judicious choosing and shaping of material make it possible for more readers to enter? This question is the one most relevant to Indians who write in English, the novelists specially, because much of the controversy, within the country, as well as the success of English writing outside the country, seems to hinge on this fact. It is by addressing readers outside the country, by giving these readers what they want, that English writers have gained their international reputations (as well as royalties that are unthinkable of for most Indian writers) - this is an often made charge. Is this a tribute to the importance of the reader, or the result of understanding the significance of who are the readers you should address yourself to? And what of the Indian reader?

Some time back, I received a letter from an unknown reader which gives a clue to what some Indian readers feels about this. This reader, whose early education was in his own language, began reading English later, after he passed out of college. Gravitating to English written by Indians, he was, he wrote utterly disappointed. These books are not for me, he thought. The last

straw, as far as this reader was concerned, was reading a much-hyped and commercially successful book, which he found not only totally irrelevant as far as he was concerned, it was, he wrote, utterly unreadable. This book, he said, put him off English writing completely. Not for me - this is what the writer Gauri Deshpande was also saying when she asked during the course of her comment on *The God of Small Things*, "why do I need to know in such detail about the givens of our lives, its taken for grantedness?" Or, as Harish Trivedi queries in a review of the Hindi translation of *Midnight's Children* - why spell things out in such unnecessary, uninteresting and excruciating detail which no self-respecting Indian reader needs to know? Or yet another question: is this the result of the Indian writer taking on, as Ashish Nandy puts it, "the imposed burden to be perfectly non- Western?"

Is it then wrong to try and reach out to a wider audience? After all, as Rushdie says, literature is a means of holding a conversation with the world. Why not therefore reach out to the world? This is, after all, the age of globalisation. Why not global literature?

Putting aside all questions of a writer's integrity, (which would be the most important issue if considered from the writer's point of view, but much too knotty and personal to be generalised) I will look at it from the reader's perspective. And it is from this point that I refute the idea of global literature, of literature being a means of holding a conversation with the world - which is both a grandiose and inaccurate idea. Literature is a means of speaking to a reader. One reader. It is a private one-to-one relationship between the author and the reader, between the speaker and the listener, between the voice and the ear. It is not a public oration. This relationship is the heart and soul of literature, it is what makes literature real, alive and growing. It is this relationship that is being threatened now - for various reasons and by various factors. It is the death of this relationship, if it ever happens, that we will need to mourn, rather than the Death of the Author or the Death of the Novel (which Naipaul seems to think is imminent) - both of which are very unlikely to happen. A very strong indicator of how this relationship is in peril are the various lists of the best books of this century that are appearing all over the place - the best hundred books, the best book, etc. who are the people or agencies who are offering us these lists? Whose choices are these books? And have these lists, these choices, any relevance to us? To me as a reader? As far as I know, all these lists come to us from the West. Which means that the best books are those written by British or American writers, with some European as well as Scottish and Irish authors thrown in. And a few Indian books too, maybe - in English, of course - which are highlighted with much pride by our own media. If a reader asks the question - is this my list? - will the answer be a "yes"? So influenced are we by the media, by the power of what appears in print, by what comes to us from the West, that most of us would spinelessly accept these lists as being true, at least approximating close to the truth. When the truth is that these choices are subjective, that they are influenced, inevitably, by biases and vested interests. When the truth is that this is really a subjective matter and therefore every reader's list will differ, each reader has the right to decide what books are the ones that appeal to her/him. Nobody can make this choice for others. These lists are part of the

same game that thrusts books on the readers, that tells us, even before a book comes out, "this is a great book. And therefore you must read it, you must buy it." The tyranny of publishers, literary agents, marketing forces and the celebrity- hungry media is trying to snuff out the reader, to take away the reader's freedom of choice, of thinking for oneself. Savvy marketing, media hype and attention draw the reader's attention to a book, they even - for after all, the reader is human and therefore weak - propel us into buying the book. And then comes disappointment, the thought which the astute reader who wrote to me speaks of - but this is not for me! And therefore I would say: Reader, make your own lists, choose your own books, make your own judgments. You know what you want, no one else can decide what you should read.

But what does a reader want? A sharing - of an experience, a world, an idea. A close involvement with what the author is saying. This is what calls out a strong and vibrant response from the reader, this is what makes a book valuable and significant to a reader. It is out of many such responses that a book finds its place in a literature, that makes it endure for generations. For most Indians, almost all Indians, the books that have called out such responses and become part of people's cultural, emotional, even their quotidian lives, books that have become cultural signposts, have been books in their own languages. To hear a Bengali speak of Tagore, or a Marathi reader speak of P.L. Deshpande is to get a glimpse of the close connections between readers and writers. This being the case, to say, as was said recently, that English writing is the best that India has to offer, was an insult not only to the writers but to readers as well. The best writing? Who is to say what is the best? The millions of readers to whom the writing is a part of their lives, or someone whose knowledge and understanding of all these literatures is almost non-existent? For the same reason, to say such a statement had to be made because of the paucity or the poor quality of translations is missing the point entirely. This idea of an assessment of literature on a global scale, requiring, obviously, a translation of all texts into English, shows a total lack of understanding of what literature is. The close link between a literature and its readers, its survival for centuries among its readers, its place in these people's lives - this is what proves a literature. There can't possibly be any kind of marking system which ticks off things like "language?", "style?", "theme?" and so on, awarding so many marks in each category. One of my favourite quotes is Saul Bellow's remark in an interview that authors are not racehorses to be marked as first, second, third.

The one good thing that Rushdie's statement has done is to create a greater awareness of the importance of translations. Translations have always been with us, specially from one Indian language to another. Bengali novels translated into Marathi, Marathi novels translated into Kannada and so on - these were common and these books were easily accepted by the readers in the translated language. There was no sense of having to make an effort at all. Most translators were unskilled enthusiastic amateurs, who chose a text purely because of their own personal response to the book. This is now being replaced by a greater professionalism and a considered approach to the choice of texts. But this time there is a difference; it is the translations

into English that are hogging the limelight, it is these translations that are finding publishers, it is around such translations that workshops and seminars are being organised. And therefore, like it is for English writing, the question - who is the reader for these translations? - becomes relevant and has to be asked.

Obviously, there is a very large readership for these translations in our own country. The success of some of them, specially of the Katha series, proves this. To many of us, these translations are a discovery, an eye-opener, a window into a world that is so close to us, yet inaccessible because of the language. And therefore very welcome. But when one comes across an explanation of idlis as "steamed rice and lentil cakes", it is impossible to rid oneself of a nagging suspicion that a number of translations, like some of the English writing, are being addressed specifically to a reader outside India, or rather one who is not Indian. A reader who would be indifferent to the material in the book if it were not packaged as exotic and different. There is nothing wrong in giving outside readers access to our literature. What makes one uneasy is that translations are being used as a political strategy rather than a cultural one, they are being seen as a political necessity rather than a cultural one. Translations are being used to prove a point - that we have a great literature. Obviously it is necessary to correct the picture of Indian literature that the world has had, specially in recent years, with English writing being presented as the face of Indian writing. There are however two questions we need to ask ourselves about translations, apart from the obvious one of who is the reader? The first question is: do we need to prove ourselves to anyone? Our literature has its place in the lives of the people, in their cultural and political history; this literature has not only touched lives but shaped ideas and movements. What more proof do we need? Or is it the need to prove ourselves to the outside world, to the Western world primarily which we are really talking of? Which would mean that, like all colonised people, we still feel that real life is elsewhere, that we need the recognition of our existence as well as our worth to come from this other place before we can feel real.

The second question is: do translations work in the same way as they do in their original form? Today, on the whole, books are chosen with much thought and by experts, translators are certainly more skilled and professional at their work, and translations, because they have become more trendy and politically correct, are finding a market. Nevertheless, the fact remains that very few translations have been able to hold their place in their new home. Books which were considered great in their own languages have died with a whimper in their translated forms. Does this mean that the books were not good enough? Or is there another answer?

I got a glimpse of the possible reason during the course of a conversation with a friend. Speaking of the paucity of good biographies in our country, I related this both to the lack of documents as well as to our being a nation of sycophants and flatterers. My friend, however, differing from me, put it down to the concept of *maryada*, which according to her makes it difficult for us to speak or write critically about anyone older, great or dead. I think she is right. And these cultural attitudes colour a reader's perception as

much as they do a writer's. The reader carries a whole baggage of expectations and assumptions into a text. Therefore when a reader reads a text, she/he reads much more in it than the text itself. The themes which mean much to the readers in the original language may mean nothing to the reader in English; nor can the controversies and issues that are part of the text for the readers in that society, the stylistic devices and innovations in language that are exciting to them, be translated into English. The tone of the work, pitched perhaps just right for the readers of the language, may seem odd to the reader in English. (Which, if I am to be honest, is something that happens to me. Often, the florid style of our languages falls oddly on my ears, tuned as they are to English writing.) And besides all these things, for a reader in the original language, the writer and her/his place in that literature are as much a part of the text as is the story, the characters, the issues the book deals with and the style.

Translations are necessary, as much for readers within the country as for those outside. It is using translations as a weapon in a battle that is the problem. Making a crusade of it is as problematic as creative writing being made a crusade. Like good creative writing, like the best criticism, translation is highly individualistic, arbitrary and unconcerned with the market, with trendiness and political strategies. All books do not travel well; just as the translator has no choice but to accept the losses which are inevitable in the process of translation, we need to accept the fact that some books are indeed untranslatable. Which does not reduce their value or significance to the reader of the language they are originally written. A Kannada story, taken up by a friend for translation, seemed to prove this point. This story, A Piece of the Wall by Mohamed Kuin, which touched on the knotty issue of Ayodhya and Babri Masjid, gave a picture of this issue with all its ambiguities, complexities and uncertainties which was, to me, so much more true than a black and white picture of Hindu fundamentalism set against Muslim fundamentalism. But the story is hard to translate and one knows that a great deal of it - the humour, the dialects, the understanding of the context of a small town life - would be lost in translation. The translation will not be able to convey what a delightful story this really is. The fact that short stories work better in translation than novels seems to me to be part of this problem; it is more difficult to convey the complicated social structure of our lives, or their often unspoken details - things which a short story may bypass, but a novel rarely can.

I am not against translation. But it seems to me that in trying to prove the quality of our literature through translation we are on the wrong track. There is also the problem that in this process of creating translations for the world, we are subjecting ourselves to the same pressures, the same forces that English writers are subject to. These translations will be judged by standards that are alien to the literature and the culture of the writer and the book. When we make New York or London the centres of recognition for our literature, it is inevitable that this literature - whether original or translated - will take a different shape. Like it is with original English writing, where availability gives some books the significance they would not really have otherwise, translations too will highlight books that may not have the same significance in the context of their own literature. Add to this

the complicating factor that the power relationship between the languages being what it is, the English translator may become the face of the text, rather than the original writer who, because of lack of access to English, will continue to remain unknown.

Both as reader and writer I am deeply suspicious of the word "global" as applied to literature. Literature can only be universal. The best books can cross over all boundaries and reach people anywhere. But these are books that are at the same time deeply embedded in their own cultures - like Anna Karenina, for example, or Pride and Prejudice. Even for books which have not attained the universality of these and their like, there is always a reader somewhere who will find in a book something she/he will identify with. Who will read it not as a book about an exotic culture, or "about India", who will take the differences in her/his stride and read the book straight - as a good, bad or indifferent book. To consciously shape one's writing for a reader is to show a lack of faith in the reader. Such a thing may make marketing sense, but it makes no literary sense.

Besides, globalisation implies a two-way connection, a flow both ways. But I have yet to hear that there is any writer in the West who is waiting with trepidation to hear what a critic in India has to say about her/him, I have yet to learn that an Indian critic can make or break a book that comes from the West. No, we continue to be disadvantaged. One of the results of our Colonial heritage, of being exposed to English literature, has been our ability to accept what Gayatri Spivak calls "a belief in the normality of the other". (Though it happens to be only the "English other" for us.) But this is not true the other way round and therefore the need to "present India", therefore the need to explain India. Why does it never occur to us that if we can read Hardy's painfully rustic dialects, if we can read all the ramifications of Russian society in Tolstoy, if we can read the Latin American writers, surely a reader outside India can read an Indian writer in the same way? Why don't we realise that what our writers, what all writers as a matter of fact, really need is a reader who, quoting Spivak again, is "listening with care and patience"? A reader with a sensitivity to the voice that is speaking, to the silences that are part of it and to the echoes that it contains as well. Only with such a reader can there be a bonding of writer and reader, a coming together in the text.

(The author is a well known novelist who stays in Bangalore all the year round. Her next novel is likely to come out in June.)

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