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## Seeking a moral base

Literature presents reality not just a mirror image. It goes beyond to highlight the complexities of human existence and through all this the moral voice remains a steady, consistent factor. Well known novelist SHASHI DESHPANDE analyses the connection between literature and morality.



LITERATURE began with religion, with being, in fact, its vehicle and the first writings were religious texts. Even if, with time, literature moved on to centre around human beings, morality remained part of it. But human ideas of what is moral do change, depending on the social, cultural and geographical context. There are certain absolutes - the unpardonable nature of killing another human, for example; but even here, there are exceptions which vary in different places and times. And each age has its own dilemmas as well. We consider ourselves more humane today and our ideas of morality have widened to include fresh areas; yet we have newer problems to contend with. Euthanasia. Life support systems and the dilemma of brain death. Organ transplant. Surrogate motherhood. All these carry tangled threads of right and wrong within them. Literature, too, takes its colour from the times that produce it. "The Mahabharata", for example, was produced in an age of confusion and turmoil and therefore, perhaps, the endless debates, the questions about what is Dharma. A book, moreover, is the vision of one human being, and it is this person's idea of morality that the book will contain. But what has remained constant through time and space has been the human consciousness of something that exists beyond this mundane existence, beyond mere survival. The human quest for something that gives meaning to this life, an understanding that there is the possibility of a better existence, that there are better selves concealed within us, a voice that speaks to us of these things and of right and wrong: if these vague ideas haunt all humans, it is the writer who gives expression to them, who creates another world in which these ideas live.

But is this what writers write for? Is literature written with the conscious intention of conveying moral ideas? "Why do you write?" is a question that

is often asked of writers, one that most writers find impossible to answer. One does not know the answer oneself. There is a mystery at the heart of creativity; to try to pierce this, to rationalise the process is, most writers feel, to destroy the creativity itself. Nevertheless, some answers can be hazarded; for example, that it is a means of creating a world over which one has more control, or, that the writer is a rebel and a social reformer, using writing as an instrument of change. The truth is that writing itself is an act of protest - a protest against the state of the world as the writer sees it. Camus sees writers as rebels who are rebelling against reality. Yet it is not a rejection of reality or an escape from it, because the artist is constantly engaging with the world. Even in rejecting it, the writer is responding to it, even when speaking against it, the writer is speaking out of it. But does this make a writer a social reformer? I am not so sure that writers are social reformers, or rather, that this is what they want to do. It is true that writers want change and their writing is a plea for that change. But do I write because I want to change the world? I would like to change it, and my writing does come out of a dissatisfaction with the world. But I know, and I think most writers do, that no writing can change the world. I can, at the most, raise questions and doubts about things. I can communicate certain ideas about the world we live in. I can offer my meaning of life, my attempts to understand the relationship between human beings, between a human and the inner self, between humans and society, the physical universe and the other unseen universe we know we are also part of.

Writing then is mainly to communicate. But communicate what? Camus puts it best when he says that the world of the novel is a rectification of the world we live in pursuant of a man's deepest wishes. What are these deepest wishes? "The fete called him like innocence". These words which begin Graham Greene's novel, *The Ministry of Fear*, in which Arthur Rowe, burdened with the guilt of his wife's death, looks wistfully at a fete which brings back to him the innocence of childhood - these words are to me evocative of the deepest desire of humans, which is innocence. A life untainted by the guilt that comes from the transgression of a moral law. Looking at all the serious literature through the ages, one cannot escape the thought that our deepest wishes are connected to a moral world. Even if we are unable to inhabit or to possess the moral world, we know it is there somewhere, the world of perfect happiness, the Garden of Eden, the Ramrajya which we continue to yearn after, a world in which we can live untrammelled by sin. It is this vision of a moral that lies at the core of all great literature and it is because writers have written of this vision that it has entered our human selves and become part of our aspirations and our dreams - become, in fact, almost a reality for us.

It is the literature which contains such a moral world that John Gardener, in an article I read many years back, calls "moral fiction". "True art is moral", he declares. "It seeks to improve life, not debase it". While I agree with his view that great literature has a clear moral base, I find the world "seek" a little troubling. Does this mean that the writer, like the social reformer, sets out to improve life through what she/he is writing? Is morality then the purpose of literature? Is this its goal? Does this mean that writers lay down doctrines, or that, in other words, they preach morality? As a critic, refuting

John Gardener's theory, said, if true art is moral, how is it that authors have created such immortal, never-to-be-forgotten amoral characters? How is it that they manage to attract both sympathy and a sneaking admiration for the villains?

According to the dramatist Arthur Miller, art is not founded on morality, but linked to it; there is a moral world we believe in and our writing is linked to this. This, in truth, is how it is. The author does not set out to preach a moral life. What an author does is to present the struggle of a human to get closer to the moral world. The failure to do so, the straying away from it, are part of the struggle, of human existence itself. This conflict between the belief in a moral world and a denial of it is at the heart of all serious literature. But no serious writer starts off with a doctrine. Any fictional writing that sets out to prove a truth rarely works; it is inert, dead. It works differently.

As Gardener says, "moral fiction communicates meanings discovered by the process of the fiction's creation". One is constantly making discoveries during the process of writing; these discoveries are what make any literature alive and vital. When I begin a novel, I never start with a plot. There are only people. I know them, or at least their predicament at a certain given moment. I do not know what will happen next. The events unfold in accordance with people's natures, with their desires. I am often surprised at what happens, occasionally I am reluctant to put it down the way it seems to be happening. But one has no choice. Anna Karenina, we are told, changed in each of the successive drafts that Tolstoy wrote. In an early one she married her lover, but as Tolstoy went on working he made discoveries about his story, about Anna, so that finally he had to deny Anna that happiness. The author had to be true to himself, to the character, even if it meant that she strayed from the moral path. Which, however, does not deny the existence of this path. The tragedy is that the characters stray, the tragedy is that they fall from grace, that they fail to get to the moral world, although they know it exists.

This is the tragedy of Anna, of Karna, of Othello. Morality is never the purpose of literature, it is the guide, the marker, the lights that show where the runaway is. The death of a good character is not a defeat for morality. Literature is riddled with the death of the innocent and the good. Tess dies, Cordelia dies, but this does not mean that goodness is defeated, it does not spell out the triumph of evil. As Arthur Miller said, the fact that Oedipus breaks a taboo proves the existence of that taboo, he proves a moral law at the cost of his life. And this is the victory.

Yathecchasi tatha kuru" Krishna tells Arjuna at the end of The Gita. The creator gives humans the right to choose. So do writers. Characters are not tied down to the right choices any more than humans are. They may desire the right choice, but circumstances, or their own natures, may make them opt for the wrong one. But this choice does not come without a struggle. It is this struggle that is the truth of life. To present a life where the moral choice is the easy one would be false. The writer Ernest Hemmingway when asked "what is the function of your art?" said: "From things that have

happened, and from things as they exist, and from all things that you know, and those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation, but a whole new thing, truer than anything true and alive and you make it live and if you make it well enough, you give it immortality'. I think the words "truer than anything true and alive" say it all. Literature presents reality, but it is not just a mirror image of reality; it goes beyond that to present the hidden truths, the complexities of human existence. And the moral voice within remains steady and consistent through all the confusion.

There is something more to great literature than just presenting the struggle, the success, or, more often, the failure of a human being to attain a moral existence. To me the point of great literature is that, even if it presents truthfully and with great conviction, the difficulty of humans to live a moral life, it never justifies a moral wrong. The characters who make the wrong choice know they have failed to measure against the moral yardstick and they pay for this in some way or the other. There is some atonement, a kind of redemption. "I imply there is a moral purpose, a chance of salvation in every human life," Evelyn Waugh said about his novels.

Is writing which is committed to an ideology, to social justice, moral fiction as well? Is not the furtherance of social justice a moral cause? Yes, certainly, but I am troubled by the theory of committed writing which declares that the art does not matter, that the aesthetic values are wholly unimportant. In India, we have had and still continue to have a debate about this. Obviously in a country like ours, filled with such glaring tragic disparities, commitment to social reform will be the driving force of much writing. Obviously too, the theory of art for art's sake cannot really be satisfactory in such a context. Nevertheless, writing written for the furtherance of social justice may be linked to morality, writing written for the furtherance of social justice may be linked to morality, but it cannot be great literature or serious literature unless it is shaped so that it is aesthetically convincing. For one thing, without this it will fail to communicate what it wants to. Undoubtedly, the core of all great literature is a moral vision. But this moral vision has to be conveyed in the right form and every serious artist is conscious of this. No artist ever disdains the form, no artist is free of the inner pressure to shape the art, to put what she/ he is saying in the best possible way. Why do we write and endlessly rewrite, why do we struggle so much over the choice of word, over the shaping of a sentence, even over the punctuation marks? A semi-colon instead of a comma, a colon instead of a full stop - these become important decisions we spend much time and thought over. All this is part of the process of writing, as much part of it as the creative urge, as the first spontaneous burst of writing. Even the context is important. Would The Gita have been the same if it were for the context of imminent battle and anguished choice it is set into? However, committed the writer is to what she/ he has to say, there is a joy in the creative process which makes it impossible for a writer to be satisfied with just saying things; one has to say them in the best possible way. We can sense this creative joy even in religious texts. The metaphors, the rich images and the choice of words make them a joy to read as well as edifying. "Man that is born of woman is of few days and full

of trouble." How much more we will remember this sentence than if it was put as "Man's life is short and troubled"! Aesthetics is an important part of literature even if it is, possibly, not as crucial as what the author wants to say. Finally it is a matter of balancing, as Camus says, between the values of creation and the values of humanity. If the aesthetic values are wholly ignored, the work obviously will not survive, for bad art, mercifully, does not live very long; whereas form without content is a bubble, gone in a moment. The truth is that the style comes out of the content; in going against this, the writer is being a traitor to her/ his art. If the author makes you extremely conscious of the style, it is an author who is saying "look at me," rather than "listen to me". In my opinion, commitment to the art and a faith in what one is saying are both part of the morality of literature. I have often wondered about the weepy and weak images of goodness one gets in the movies; why are the good always so feeble? And so stupid that they fell into the traps laid for them by the villains without any hesitation? When I contrast this to the vital and joyous image of goodness we have in the Sri Krishna of "The Mahabharata", I know what the weakness comes out of a lack of true faith in goodness. Morality lies not in trying to prove morality, but in being true to one's belief. I have often spoken of Jane Austen as the perfect writer, because in her I see integrity. The integrity of the author, which involves being true to oneself in the sense of having faith in what one is saying, as also true to one's art, is the greatest part of the morality of literature to me. I see the artist as a medium. The medium needs to be clear, to let the art flow unimpeded, to reach the reader/ listener/ viewer unsullied.

Do we still find a connection between literature and morality? Each age has conflicting ideas about itself: while, on the other hand, it thinks very well of itself, on the other, when it looks back, it considers the past as having been better. So too today; while we are convinced of our greater humaneness, we also think, because of the wars, the genocide and the increase in crimes, that there never was an age as violent and cruel as ours. Certainly, in no age have humans been so exploded to cruelty and crime as they are now. TV and the movies present us with uncensored pictures of all the horrors in our own homes, creating eventually a degree of desensitisation, so that we seem to have grown inured to cruelty and horror. The line between good and evil is getting blurred as we continue to find fresh excuses for evil. And in an age of permissiveness, adherence to political correctness makes it difficult, if not impossible, for a person to categorically say - this is right and this is wrong. Such a stand is considered an aberration, often looked down upon with scorn.

If this is so, why then was I surprised and shocked to hear the writer Norman Mailer state that violence is the last frontier of literature? Why did it hurt me to read the statement of a critic: "The struggle for truth is by no means a negligible concern, but it does not hold the power it once did?" These are, possibly, the beliefs of our age and writers are, after all, as much a product of their age as anyone else. But I wondered - is this true? Or is it a fearful cynicism? It seems significant to me that in an age when the writer enjoys greater freedom than ever before, while writers continue to fight against any hint of censorship, we rarely find them talking about their

responsibilities. I would not like to make sweeping generalisations and say that writers have abdicated their positions as the conscience keepers of society, but certainly the writer today is a bewildered person, confused about ideas of good and evil, embarrassed about crying out against evil, wary about judging humans. There are many reasons for this. No age has seen so many changes and such rapid changes as our has. The dizzying explosion of information makes it difficult for us to stand steady and think out our ideas, to take a stand. It has also added to our confusion that the world has opened out as never before. And above all, there is the media, which intrudes on the writer's presence and takes away, in one way, the writer's freedom. Writers become celebrities, they are expected to take a stand on everything under the sun - these things impinge on the writer's liberty to ask questions of her/ his own self, to doubt, to pursue ideas, to develop them, to change them sometimes. Besides, psychology and the science of genetics have changed our ideas about evil. Both these, to some degree, rationalise crime as well as excuse it. It seems to me that the role of being the chronicler of the fight between good and evil, of the moral dilemmas that face people, has been taken over by the crime writer. Contemporary writers of crime novels do not draw back from spelling out the existence of evil; their novels convey a chilling sense of evil abroad, evil which must be fought and vanquished. It was a kind of confirmation of my idea when I read in an essay by a writer Andrea Goldsmith that when it comes to the darker side of the human psyche, it is the genre forms - the thrillers, science fiction ... - that claim the territory. The genre form, according to her, protects its novels from serious consideration while, at the same time, allowing them more scope. This is a luxury the serious literary novel no longer has; to take a stand is to lay yourself open to "shrill protests."

In any case, does it matter what writers say? Has literature changed anything? For some of us, it seems when we read something that touches us, we can never be the same again. But has it changed the human mind, or the course of human actions at all? A very telling example is "The Mahabharata", in which the word Dharma resonates throughout, and yet, at the end, the author cries out, "I raise my arms and I shout, but no one listens."

Fortunately, no writer thinks of these things, or surely despair will set in. And there is no need to despair, either. When you write, you make things clear to yourself, you express ideas that had remained inchoate within you until you began the process of writing. 'Through writing', Naipaul says, "I arrived at an idea of my writing and the world". And so, indeed, does the reader - not, perhaps, the same idea the author arrives at, but certainly to a slightly better understanding of oneself and one's world. And, through the setting out of ideas which eventually find their place in the human understanding, ideologies are created. Whether it is religion, Marxism or feminism, the texts created the ideologies. And more, "Behold there is no calling that is without a director except that of the scribe and he is the director." The quotation comes from ancient Egypt and the words are true even today. It is the writer who is the truly free person, a freedom that is much more than just legal freedom. For, when writing, the writer frees

herself from the human condition by standing aside from the spectacle of humanity, she sees it from the outside and from this perspective tells us about ourselves, our reality, our possibilities, our dreams and nightmares. It is with this freedom and the urge to create that the writer begins to write. And if the writer is able to create something "true and alive", it will survive.

I said a little earlier that the process of writing is one of making discoveries. Even this little piece seems to have become a small journey of discovery for me. For, when I began I never realised that I would reach this point which I now have, which is that you cannot separate the creator from what is created. Morality in literature, therefore, comes from the author, from the philosophy of the author which is the foundation of all that she/ he creates. But there is this too - if the writer does not have integrity, that is, faith in what she/ he is saying, if the writer is not free, there can be no moral literature.

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