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Resistance In Indian English Writing

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Abstract

Resistance, Opposition, Hostility and Conflict are words strewn across the media constantly in the present times. There are many strife-torn regions across the globe, where war and bloodshed have been the norm since eons, with no respite in sight. The source of conflict could be religious, political, social or cultural but the base agenda for any ethnic group is to fight for hegemony over the rest. In this exercise for dominance amongst themselves or against the State, untold miseries have been borne by the masses, and yet they persist, trudging wearily and painstakingly, maimed and mutilated towards a Mirage of Peace and Realization, which keeps eluding them. There are horrendous tales of killings, deaths, abductions, disappearances, torture and rape which are poignantly chronicled in the literary works originating from these regions. These works are an engrossing source which recount the occurrences feeble by the passage of time. In India while delineating state borders after Independence, ethnic and cultural specificities were grossly overlooked which led to a lot of resentment and unrest. Almost all separatist or ethnic conflicts in a multi-cultural society is rooted in the issue of affirmation of the identity. The 'I' and 'We' against 'They' and 'Them', process of identity formation in one's culture and collective consciousness, asserts visibly how someone is different from another. But in most cases this activity of 'Othering', leads to abuse, misinterpretation of culture, aggressive nationalism and physical violence. Assertion of one's identity leads to legitimization of savagery in most cases. Nevertheless, the works of Art that emanate from these areas ought to be esteemed and preserved, for their historical and humanistic estimate. This paper is a brief compilation of works, from the erstwhile state of J&K and the Northeast, that reiterates that human trauma can be transcended and transmuted through works of Art. It could serve as a ray of hope and change from the labyrinthine darkness and disillusion that many of our fellow beings find themselves in by a bad twist of History and Geography.

Keywords: Resistance, Oppression, Strife, Hostility, Conflict, Identity, Violence, Literary works

Introduction

Arundhati Roy had observed, "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard". We have come across innumerable instances of oppression, discrimination and exploitation around the world. The masses have suffered across continents at the hands of the State, Military Dictatorships, Autocrats and Capitalist Behemoths. How do the people react to this? Do they simply reconcile to their fates or do they rebel? In certain instances, we witness the commoners taking to the streets amass and

protesting, at times they resort to violence, which is then brutally suppressed by the State, sometimes they get so used to subjugation that they all end up in a comatose state. Which is exactly what the powers that be, demand and propagate. Passive acceptance is expected and encouraged in such circumstances. But even in such dire conditions we witness some Bravehearts who strive to awaken the common public from their self-induced coma, depict the reality that is being smoke screened and mobilize the masses to endeavor for a liberal tomorrow. Chiefly amongst these flagbearers we find creative artists, who through their works of Art, stir the public imagination and propel them to think out of the box.

India has a colonial legacy, looted and plundered by foreign powers for centuries and a consequent partition in 1947. Partition resulted in a period of carnage and bloodshed. There were violent protests on either side, immense loss of life and property, slaughter, rape, dehumanized and demoralized citizens in the aftermath. The borders were heavily militarized, in spite of which we had incursions and unwarranted activities across the Line of Control. The states which share an international border with Pakistan have been flashpoints of violence and terrorism at some point, be it Punjab or Kashmir. In the process of imposing a larger nationalist identity, the Indian state too has been ruthless in its approach to the insurgents, which was nevertheless necessary to consolidate and unite, the new emergent India. In the process of accentuating uniformities, safeguarding the unity and integrity of the nation and overarching centralizing tendencies, we are guilty of disregarding the Diversity that is the bedrock of our nation. Nationalist zealots tend to ignore this legacy that is unique to India. The consequence we see, is a never ending cycle of suppression and rebellion.

To counter these hegemonic forces and dominant discourses, we find the unassuming man either up in arms, bewildered, dumbfounded or giving vent to his anguish and resentment through his works of Art. In places around the globe, where there has been turmoil, strife, curbs on freedom and brutality, we have noticed the evolution of writers, film makers and other creative artists, outpouring their agony, vehemence and observations, through their Craft. In Literature it is termed Resistance Literature, which is found predominantly emanating from the conflict zones across the world. In a creative manner these artists portray the conflict they witness. Even with creative artists we have two types. The conformist and the non-conformist. French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser had developed the theory of Ideological state apparatus. It states that the Bourgeois maintains power over the Proletariat by two means. The Repressive state apparatus and the Ideological state apparatus. The Repressive state apparatus includes the Army and Police which uses force to impose an ideology in the name of the rule of law. The Ideological state apparatus constitute institutions like School, Church, Family which through education, religion and family values transmit the State ideology by indoctrination, making us falsely believe in its authenticity. So, the conformist writer is the one who confirms to this ideology and facilitates its proliferation and the non-conformist writer sides with the victims of repression, lending a voice to the voiceless.

In literary studies, Resistance Literature is a branch that deals with literary works which can be vaguely termed as socio-political. They confront and defy the normative, regulating, standardizing norms and ideologies that promulgate gender, caste, race, religion and color based oppression. They speak of the atrocities borne, liberation struggles and sacrifices endured in their long and arduous path towards Emancipation, which still persists in many a case. In India we have seen an outpour of literary works from the conflict zones, be it Kashmir and the North East. They differ in myriad ways, be it their beliefs, customs, religion or political leanings. But the common thread in both cases has been the inability of the State to accept the otherness in their cultures from that of the mainland, leading to forceful acculturation and assimilation in the name of national integrity, which in turn breeds rebellion. Michel Foucault, the French Philosopher, Writer and Activist justly claimed, "Where there is Oppression, there is Resistance".

KASHMIR

Agha Shahid Ali a Kashmiri American is the most empathetic writer Kashmir has ever produced. His long poem “The Country without a Post office”, is considered his masterpiece. It takes its title from the Kashmiri Uprising of the 1990’s that led to the closure of all the post offices there for seven months. His works poignantly depict the devastation of his homeland at the hands of the state and the precarious lives his brethren lived. Mirza Waheed in his famous novel, “The Collaborator”, has veered away from the steady rhetoric of India and Pakistan, and has affirmed with great sympathy and rage, how it is to reside in an area that is considered by India as the Enemy within, and by the government next door as a strategic Puppet.’ The Collaborator ‘, is a heart wrenching tale of a young boy of 19, who is chosen as a collaborator by an Indian Army Captain, to rummage through the corpses strewn on the valley floor, and collect ID cards on them. It could be later used for PR purposes to gloat over the militants killed by them. The distressing predicament of the boy scouring through the bodies, forever tormented by the anticipation of finding one of his friends amongst them, is grippingly portrayed. Basharat Peer in his pioneering memoir on Kashmir, “Curfewed Night”, has given a true yet crude account of what goes on in his Homeland. Behind the touristy moniker, ‘Paradise on Earth ‘is a ghastly reality that would distress even the lion hearts amongst us. He achingly writes, how embarrassments, defeats and losses are compensated for, when one becomes a segment of something greater and larger than life. Those who suffered untold personal losses and yet found themselves helpless and powerless to retaliate, joined the armed insurgency to seek some kind of Retributive Justice. The militants who crossed over into PoK for guerilla training were welcomed back as heroes and how,” like almost every boy, I wanted to join them”, says he.

When confronted by an ethnic group seeking Independence a state’s response is determined by the external security implications of secessionism. India’s trouble-torn borderlands have forever presented a precarious condition for the mainland. This in turn has for years led to the political establishment treating the people of these areas with suspicion and contempt. There have been innumerable instances of human rights abuse by the security forces in these places because at times it becomes difficult to identify the subversive elements from the general public and so invariably, all are subjected to a blanket repression which is loathed and challenged by the natives of the land. It further strengthens the feelings of separatism. Traumatic experiences leave a deep scar on a sensitive mind. Children who are born into this violence, know no other reality. They are defined by the conflict. Either they get sucked into the whirlpool of violence to lend potency to a cause that has gone out of hand or get engulfed in the interminable silences of their own minds. There seems no way to elude or evade the stark and intimidating reality they find themselves in. In such fierce and grave circumstances, there are those who conjure up the pent-up emotions from the inner recesses of their minds and pen poetry, memoirs and stories of what they have witnessed and endured. These works which are documentary and evidentiary in nature is History.

THE NORTHEAST

Northeast is unlike the other regional territories in numerous ways. It has an in-built multiplicity which is unique to the region. The tales, the voices originating from the land is as diverse and different as it could be. The folk and the modern, the myth and the fact exist syncretically in the narrative of the region. Literary history of Assam and Manipur dates back to the 10th century AD. The mainland Indians have been guilty of seeing them as the ‘Other’. The mongoloid racial features adding to their woes. The mainstream ideas of Nation and Nationalism adds much pressure to their collective psyche. They are much conscious of their ethnic roots and identity and they continuously struggle against the imposing and assimilating force of the mainland India.

Societies with a prolonged history of socio-political conflicts like the Northeast, literary discourses are more effective than historical narratives in portraying conflicts. Literature gives a percipient glimpse of the raw and the invisible. Political and Academic writings concentrate on establishment centric policies whereas literary works are a more progressive and evaluative response to any social phenomenon. Their humanistic and

holistic techniques to chronicle, inspect, interpret and respond to the matters of peace and conflict, equip people to deal with strife constructively and scrutinize the pros and cons of the issue. The memories of the violent conflicts are retold by the victims long after the agonizing events get safely entombed in History and is no longer accessible to the present. People forget the origin of trauma, yet they recall it through the literary mediums of poems, songs and stories.

The Northeast Indian literature usually interpreted as a 'Literature of Terror', is ridden with conflict. The largest concentration of indigenous people is in the eight states of Northeast India. More than five decades of political turmoil, revolt and belligerent conflicts have seeped into the subject matter of the literary works from the region. These writers, mostly women, are predominantly into the genres of short story, novel and poetry. Women being victims, survivors and even wagers of armed conflict, are the main stakeholders in the resolution of conflict. Women are more susceptible to abuses ranging from sexual exploitation to psychological trauma. In moments of collective violence, it is the systemic abuse of women that stands out. Their bodies provide a space on which the ruthless exploits of Men are carried out. The trauma inflicted on them, raped, mutilated and harrowing experiences are recollected and manifested in the literary works. They are also very conscious of their ethnicity and identity to oppose and confront the imposition and assimilation perpetrated by the State. It is the double jeopardy of the Extremists and the Security forces alike that accentuate their woes. The Northeast has undergone not only the brutality unleashed by the State's security forces but also the domestic rivalries of their homegrown sub nationalist forces. It is a vicious cycle of misuse of power at the hands of both, in the name of patriotism and liberty. Culture is manipulated and utilized for selfish gains in the identity discourse, which is a growing hazard for the general masses. The zealous rush to ascertain ones' nationalism, ethnicity and identity by belligerent means leads to affliction. In the chaos that follows, there are no Victors but only Victims, and the losses can be calculated only in human terms.

Identity without Humanity is a malady that afflicts the combatants in these conflict zones. They get so blinded in their mad pursuit that they inflict untold miseries on their own communities. The Northeast women writers endeavor to verbalize the agony borne by their sex, Live and Loud. Prolonged exposure to violence and torture leads to a condition of emotional numbing. Thousands have to reside in the refugee camps as they are the displaced victims of ethnic conflict. Women and Children have to bear the brunt in the prevailing warfare. Silence becomes a weapon of resistance against oppression. Wallowing in the infinite darkness of their existence, some of these women conjured up the remaining vestiges of their indomitable spirit to outpour the anguish and ordeal they have endured and witnessed, into creative works that are a part of our history now. Some of the prominent women writers of the Northeast are Monalisa Changkija, Easterine Kire, Temsula Ao, Ningombam Sunita, Arupa Kalita and many more.

Many of these communities are patriarchal and the men folk are assigned superior roles. There are customs specific to the tribe. The state of Nagaland itself officially recognizes 16 Naga tribes. Every tribe is distinct in its practices, laws and customs so as to constitute a nation unto itself. So, for many to comprise and adhere to a common identity has been an arduous task, invariably leading to inter tribe conflict for self-assertion. The narratives emerging from this region is deeply rooted in the history of the community. They have been traditionally an oral society and speak distinct Tibeto-Burman languages.

The bond these tribes share with Earth is not mere worldly but encompasses the moral and the ritualistic as well. The Mother Earth is not just a means of livelihood and survival for them. It was entrusted to them by their ancestors and it becomes morally binding on them to conserve it and pass it down to their descendants. When they are threatened by forces who try to subjugate them to beliefs and practices alien, they revolt and rebel, trying with all their might to safeguard the only reality they have known and cherished. Temsula Ao writes that their strong and secure hills are being traversed across by strangers who want to keep them chained to be tamed, to keep them

the way the nation wants. These strange intruders were beginning to script a new history. A History unknown and foreign to them, a history which wasn't and could never be their own.

“We will gather around the fire

On moonlit nights as did our forefathers,

And silence the gunfire with our songs,

Loud and clear across our green hills,

In rhythm with all humanity,

To keep our date with destiny....” (“One of these Decades “)

Monalisa Changkija.

The silent resistance in the above lines are evident. These strong literary voices, well aware of the lack of opportunities available to their ilk in social, political and economic decision-making aspects, in the patriarchal society they inhabit, turn their passions to creative writing. Women face violence and disgrace first at the hands of the enemy and then become an object of shame within their own communities and homes. In the recent clashes in Manipur we have seen how women were brutalized in full public view. They were stripped naked, paraded around by a mob and later gang raped in the nearby fields. What was their fault? What had they done? Belonging to a certain ethnic group opposed to the other doesn't warrant a desecration of their bodies. It is not a space meant to settle scores. But women over the centuries have been subjected to this dehumanizing assault on them by men who see it as a factor that demoralizes the group opposed to them. Women never seem to have a right over anything, not even their own bodies.

Easterine Kire in “Our Story “, reminds us about the violation of 5 Naga girls at the hands of Indian army men on the altar of the Yankeli village church.

“Tears of a people forced,

To witness the methodical

Desecration of their God's abode,

By the pain, the blasphemy

Of their virgins done to death,

Upon the altars of churches,

Transformed

By Indian Soldiers to altars of Lust.” (Our Story)

Over the years in areas of internal strife in our country, there have been countless allegations of Torture, Rape, Abductions, Encounter killings, Custodial Deaths and Forced disappearances. These are perpetrated either by the security forces or the indigenous clans at war with each other. In the chaos that's befallen them all this becomes commonplace. Lives of the ordinary people are strewn between the violence of the extremists and the security forces. They have the twin perils of gender disparities within their own communities and a strife prone society to contend with.

“Why my brothers don’t carry water from the distant pond...

Why men sit and drink from morn till dusk

As their women sweat silently...

Why women only cry.”

(Poem-Womanhood)

-Rosemary Dsuvichu.

The voices of resistance emerging from these conflict-ridden lands should not be stifled and subdued. It is the bare truth that needs to come to the fore. These works of Art are part of our rich legacy spread far and wide across the Indian tapestry. Works of artists have to be promoted and protected. It is through Art that Life unveils itself in all its myriad shades, to the common man. The intricacies and complexities are laid bare. Writers have the power to disrupt society for the better. Their words confront social oppression and work to create a positive social change. Writers and Artists want to express as honestly as possible, give in to their creative urges and impulses. All this intimidates the powers that be. They use tactics to control and silence the population. Around the world we have seen this happen, be it China, Iran and the likes. Repressive regimes want their subjects to be submissive and benumbed, it serves their purpose to rule unabashedly. Great men over the ages have recognized the significance of Artists and Art forms. Einstein had said that, True Art is characterized by an irresistible urge in the creative artist. Picasso had opined, “Art is Chaos taking shape”. From this chaos will emerge a society that is Dynamic, Alive and Spirited.

Salman Rushdie in his speech On Censorship, at the Pen World Voices festival, had said that Original Art is never created on a safe middle ground, it is always at the Edge. Originality is Dangerous. As, it challenges, questions, overturns assumptions, unsettles moral codes and so on. It can be shocking, ugly and controversial. But if we believe in Liberty, if we want to freely express our views, want our voices to be heard, seek our space in this big wide world, then this is the Art whose right to exist we must not only defend but also celebrate. We should lend our support to these writers and artists who strive against all odds to bring the truth to the fore, lend a voice to the voiceless, who speak for the silenced subalterns. It’s important that these voices are heard so that we can bring about a notable change in their lives and the society we exist in. Misogyny, Bigotry, Cultural and Religious Fanaticism are the evils that plague our times. So, an equitable tomorrow for all our fellow countrymen, shouldn’t remain a pipe dream. Quoting Salman Rushdie once again, “Art is not entertainment. At its very best, it’s a Revolution”.

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