

Interliterariness and Representation of Consciousness

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Marian Galik in *“Interliterariness as a concept in Comparative Literature”* defines “interliterariness” as the: “basic and essential quality of literature in an international and inter-ethnic context that in a global process.... leaves aside the purely ethnic or national aspects of Literatures... and focuses on trans-ethnic, trans-national and lately on the geoliterary development as a whole.” (Galik, 35)

Interliterariness is primarily concerned with a literary fact or a phenomenon as the most basic element of literature and of its study and is produced by an ‘extra-ethnic or extra-national character, surpassing the confines of ethnic, national or single literatures. Since literature written by, for and of the marginalized, encapsulated the fundamental questions of human life, dignity, repression, resistance, agency and identity, a comparative reading of such literatures of, for example African-American and Dalit literature, reveals their value as literary texts that articulate parallel experiences of dispossession and struggle. It also reveals the interliterariness that has become the focus of comparative literature today. While both countries have distinct trajectories of historical, political, economic and cultural development, both societies are marked by extreme inequality.

The institutions of slavery and racism in the United States have their parallel in the caste system and notions of untouchability, purity and pollution in India. Although the socio – political structures of race and caste operate differently in the respective societies, the resulting effects of discrimination, humiliation, unequal opportunities and subordination affect the lives of the disempowered in similar ways. However, just as African Americans are not the only minority group in the USA that bears the burden of historical subjugation, Dalits in India are not the only group that faces discrimination in India. Nevertheless, it is informative to comparatively study these two groups’ experiences not only because of the actual historical

exchanges between scholars and activists from these two groups but also because racism and casteism tend to inform the received interpretations of these two countries histories.

The historically suppressed groups live the legacies of exclusion based on race and caste. Their identities are refracted by the histories of their oppression in their respective societies. They were forced to subscribe to damaging notions about themselves and their heritage. Devoid of right to cultural and political representation, they found themselves muted against inhuman atrocities. In such a scenario the responsibility of an unbiased representation falls on the academic/intellectual. Without the intervention of the intellectuals, like the subalternist historians, the marginalised narratives, may be lost forever. The role of the representer, both in the capacity as subaltern participant as well as a scholar critic, becomes important because ignoring the silenced involves perpetuation of oppression. By ignoring or silencing the less articulate or weaker members of the oppressed group, the speakers of or from the same groups cannot serve the purpose of alleviating the condition of the groups.

The intellectuals must be alive to the delicate balance they must engage with when they begin to re-present their fellow subalterns. While Spivak insists that the intellectual should not “abstain from representations” he or she must not essentialize the subaltern experience or consciousness, as it runs the risk of silencing the subaltern voice. An essentialist representation, with all good intentions can jeopardize the subaltern voice or agency. Essentialism in this context, is the reduction of the indigenous people to an essential” idea of what it means to be through a very subtle play of language, which one does not realize at a cursory reading but it successfully influences the psyche of the reader. Ralph Ellison is his book “Shadow and Act” acknowledges this subtle dynamics of language. He states: “Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word.”(Ellison,50).

He further acknowledges how the white American artist or cultural critic encloses African Americans within a limiting and dehumanizing stereotype. Often specific themes, fears, forms of consciousness and class relationships are embedded in the use of Africanist idiom and Dalit context to establish difference. The dialogue of black characters is constructed as an alien, estranging dialect. Class distinctions and otherness is reinforced to assert privilege and power.

The narrative meant to represent them is appropriated and used for discourse on ethics, social and universal codes of behavior and definitions of civilization and reason.

In the tussle between varying power structures operating within the community, their narrative gets appropriated. They are often portrayed as characters who failure to speak and represent themselves. Thus reinforcing the power equations. Such writers as warned by Spivak, fail to grasp the delicate balance that involves fair representations and end up appropriating their protagonists voices. What is largely missing from their fiction is the direct representation of the African-American and the Dalit angle of vision. Their representation of an African American and a Dalit falls into the category of “Darstellung” or simply “placing there” as different from “Vertretung” which is “stepping into someone’s place....to tread in someone’s shoes”.

Representation in this form is “political representation” or a speaking for the needs and desires of somebody or something. (Spivak,108) She also addresses the problem of speaking in the name of”;

“It is not a solution, the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others is a problem.”(Spivak, 63)

Spivak recommends persistent critique” to guard against “constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on” (Spivak, 63)

The need to bridge this gap, this difference in being and to willfully assert an identity that does not get misconstrued leads to acts of self-representation. African Americans and Dalits feel that fair portrayal can only come from those who have lived the painful experience, as M.S Patil states: “Being Dalit is significant, because it gives a distinct shape to consciousness.” (Patil, 22)

The same sentiment is repeated by Alain Locke when he plainly requested “Let the Negro speak for himself.

This need to write themselves into being, allowed them a way to express all the pent up rage and resentment to record voices that went unheeded and to remember their collective history and stop its deliberate erasure. While critics recognize the need for greater recognition of African-American and Dalit literature, culture, Gates

advocates against a “separatist” black canon. Rather, he works for greater recognition of Black works and their integration into a larger pluralistic canon. He argues that a separatist Afrocentric education perpetuates racist stereotypes. He maintains that it is ridiculous to think that only blacks should be scholars of African and African-American literature. At the same time supporters of Afrocentrism such as Molefi Asante and others assert that the approach of Afrocentricity is critical for setting up black people as agents of their own history. Dalit critics like Nagaraj, Limbale, Valmiki and others claim similarly, that only Dalits can write Dalit Literature. Valmiki points out that;

“If the non-Dalits are unfamiliar with the burning miseries of Dalit life, it is because of the distance between Dalits and non-Dalits that has been created by the Indian social order. When they do not know the reality of this Dalit life, whatever they write about it will remain superficial, born out of pity and sympathy, and not out of a desire for change or repentance. (Valmiki,34)

On the one hand this debate is reflective of the ongoing issues of representation and the power equation it generates.

Audre Lorde points to the responsibility each member of any oppressed group must take in order to bring the cycle of repression and violence to a close. It is not enough to resist the oppressor; it is important to pay heed to the silenced among the oppressed.

In order to gain a better understanding and to find a way to control blinding rage to turn it into a creative force, African American and Dalit writers delve into their past history and culture that is authentic and unique. For this they employ an aesthetic and language that does not conform to the received so called “elitist” standard. By refusing to conform they challenge and displace standard language while trying to reflect a distinct cultural outlook. In a different yet relevant postcolonial context Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffins give the above mentioned process, the terms ”abrogation” and “accommodation”. Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or “correct” usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning “inscribed in the words”. Appropriation is the process by which the language is made to “bear the burden” of one’s own cultural experience. Language is adopted as a tool and utilized to express widely differing cultural experiences. Such critical manoeuvres act as tools of liberation from oppression inherent

in language. It helps in reconstruction of a self that demands and asserts its rights and challenges the edifice of dominant culture. Employing this manoeuvre, African American and Dalit writers delve into a language rich in folk songs, stories and idioms. They learn from their ancestors and simultaneously transform the stable centre of folk wisdom through constant conversations with the world. In doing so, these writers bring social consciousness to the forefront.

In her Nobel Lecture, an allegory about language and the creative process, Morrison speaks about the ways in which language differentiates and sometimes divides humans:

“word-work is sublime..... because it is generative, it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference.” (Morrison, 22)

In the Nobel Lecture, reflective of her ongoing concern about difference, she explores the fissures that divide us, the conflicts that frustrate understanding and potentials for co-operative sharing. Through an allegory she raises the crucial question; what can people on opposite ends of a cultural divide learn from each other? The allegory enacts divisiveness by unfolding structures that explore the ethics of understanding through the aesthetics of difference not necessarily or compulsorily confirming other’s perception of language or culture. Susan Bordo, in speaking about the importance of trying to connect with other cultures, points to the importance of;

”recognizing, wherever one goes, that the other’s perspective is fully realized, not a bit of exotic difference to be incorporated within one’s own world. The world travelling thinker thus must be prepared not only to ‘appreciate the foreign, but also to recognize and nurture those places where world’s meet’(Bordo, 287)

This mixing and overlapping of multidimensional aspects of culture is like the warp and weft of a fabric, each strand of thread unique and important in its position and complementing the whole. Fair representation, according to me, would come from appreciating the difference in language and culture, not coercing the ”other” to speak according to the accomplished centre of society, but to enable and nurture ways that makes that stand at the margin, the centre itself. For the marginal line that circumscribes the so called “centre’, too, on an infinitesimal plane comprises dots or points, each containing within it, the full potential of turning into a centre itself. It is not easy to challenge this duality of margin and centre, but by affirming the position of different

others by legitimizing their ways of knowing, their collective history we can easily bring the centre to the margins and vice versa, to build as Foucault wisely proposed, a dynamic network of non centralized forces. It cannot be ignored that representations affect the ways in which individuals are perceived. Although many see representations as harmless likenesses, they do have a real effect on the world. It is an ideological tool that can serve to reinforce systems of inequality and subordination, or in the right hands, with great amount of effort, can dislodge dominant modes of representation and challenge hegemonic ideologies. Self-representation may not be a complete possibility for everyone yet is still an important goal. Any kind of representation is always a construct and hence subjective and relative. It is open to multiple perceptions. How people define themselves in relation to others, greatly influence how they think, feel and behave and is ultimately related to the construct of identity. Self development is a process that continues throughout the lifespan of an individual. It is the ability to evolve and the indomitable spirit of man that fuels this unending quest.

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