

ROLE OF PROGRESSIVE WRITERS

(M.N. Kurup of
Deshabhimani Weekly
in conversation with
EDASSERI)



1

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I read the article titled "Progressive Literature and Communist literature", written by E.M.S Namboothiripad which appeared in the Republic Day special issue of the Deshabhimani weekly (1971). In that essay, he has written thus;

"There is no dispute that a writer's creativity is subjective. As such it is imperative that such erudite writers enjoy personal freedom - this is the foremost fact to be highlighted.

At the same time any writer however erudite may be, is the creation of the society of which he is a member. He is part of the 'collective conscience of the society' which is nurtured by the society. It is this ability to truthfully portray either a fragment of or a larger chunk of this collective social conscience that makes any brilliant writer popular. In other words the best writers are those who do creative writing by subjugating themselves to social life, its thinking and emotions".

I felt like applauding E.M.S who wrote this. The raw material for my writing is the thoughts and emotions of the society of which I am also a part. No matter whether I write about the past or of a future that I can only imagine, it is impossible for me to escape from the reactions which the contemporary events generate in my mind.

But what such reactions would end up as, when they confront the writer's stance, depends on the writer's personality. Different viewpoints, pro or anti, could possibly get adopted. Whatever may it be, it can but arise from his reactions to the society's day-to-day activities.

What is the so called Progressive Literature?

It is inevitable that the thoughts and emotions of the contemporary society would cast their influence on the poet. If he is adopting a indifferent attitude towards it, then he ceases to exist as a real poet. He may turn out to be a Brahmgyani (one who has gained knowledge about Brahma, the ultimate) or someone like that. So, when one enters into creative writing under the influence of the thoughts and emotions of society, one cannot but help introduce certain novelties in writing both in form and content which were unknown till yesterday.

In a society, that is rampant with social oppression and exploitation, it is natural to get involved in the hardships of the society and at the same time visualise a society devoid of such manmade sorrows. When both these views are put into practice, a novel creation emerges with a rare combination of form and content. But here also, the important consideration is whether there is poetry in it or not. Not that whether it is contemporary or eternal; and I believe that even if the theme is contemporary, the creation will stand the test of time and attain eternal relevance.

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2

While we talk about Reactionary literature, let me at the outset; provide an example for such a literature;

"Ah! Caste, the sound emanating from hell,
A Word from the folio of devil who devours the world"

If I remember correct, above lines were written by the great poet Vallathol. At that time, I have heard that someone making its parody:

"Ah! Caste, the sound emanating from heaven
A word from the folio of God supporting the earth"

These two - the original and the parody- were written at a time when India, because of the malice of the caste system, had lost her freedom and was reeling under British rule. Hence, looking at the parody, I do not dare to say that this is not Reactionary literature.

When does literary work gain popularity?

We respect a literary work when it contains the stream of thoughts that flow in unison with the emotions and thoughts of the society. If one takes a retrograde path from those lofty thoughts in the name of religion or customs, we have to despise it.

Today, India is said to be a socialist country. Consequently many people are unhappy, right from the kings who lost their titles and wealth down to the common men who lost their tract of property. This grief should also be viewed as sympathetically as any other grief. But if this prompts me to create a literary work which helps in completely restoring the lost privileges and wishing perpetual bondage to crores of people in India who are prepared to do hard work, the literary merits of such a work notwithstanding, I would consider it as reactionary. On the other hand, with the same theme, if the literary work contains any suggestion for interlacing these losers harmoniously into the social fabric; then such creations shall be considered as progressive.

What is your opinion on making the tenant the legal owner of the land in which he has put up his hut?

This is not the epilogue of change; but prologue. In a way it has seeded unrest. There are two issues before him. For the first time, he has become a person with rights to something on this earth. This means that he has become a real citizen.

Second - he has to retain that citizenship now. It is clear as daylight that the ten cents of land will not earn him sufficient income to maintain his family or even adequate to construct a house.

Each of those huts, now owned by the occupant, is about to be exploded with the number of people living in it. It may explode any moment now! It is inevitable that at least a few will have to go out. Those who leave cannot expect to get another ten cents of land. And they are not going to live in the open either. The society does not have the moral right to declare that 'we have gifted forever, everything that is due to you.' Because this is not a gift; this is only an acknowledgement of their rights. They are not begging for mercy.

"When the landlord extended mercy,
Labourer fought for justice instead"

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3

This is the real issue.

What is your opinion about "ultra" modern literature?

To a certain extent I am with them. But it is an absurd proposition of the modern writer that they have for giving expression, only the 'instincts' or 'perversions'² that are sedimented in the subconscious. Psychologically there are arguments to buttress this.

Such pervert thoughts may be sedimented in everyone's mind. But, like poison is used for the treatment of diseases, such perversions shall only be used for the upliftment of humanity. If there is no such aim, I am against the exposition of such unreal perversions in the name of self expression.

Issues related to sex and sex aberrations occupy an important place in life. However, one cannot hold a view that those are the only concerns of human life. Writers should consciously set as their goal, the upliftment of mankind, while they deal with such subjects. There is great bliss in something known as "Living For Others." For people who think in those lines, life is not a tragic play. They consider this world itself as objective reality as they derive bliss from this world itself.

Can you explain the "theory of melancholy" in literature?

I have a strong feeling that the cause of melancholy is an excessive craving for the fulfilment of undeserved wishes in life. I mean the poems of Edappally.

What do you mean by 'Human Upliftment'?

What I have in mind is the attainment of the goal in life in a natural manner. We may conceive of a person who himself lives and at the same time helps his fellow beings to live.

A life in which a person gulps his own pain while remaining sympathetic to others suffering from pain is a Sublime Life. What I mean by sublime life is that which shows compassion towards the pain of others while absorbing one's own. When you reach that stage, your worry will be about what you could not give to others, rather than what you couldn't get. There, a father's or a mother's purity and love surfaces; and there won't be space for any grief!

It is not good to exhibit the inscrutability of mind. But, if it is necessary in writing, there must be some benefit arising from it. For example, it is well to understand the state of mind that prompts a thief to steal. But that knowledge should be used to eliminate the tendency to steal.

You had said a little while ago that you are with the ultra modern poets to some extent. Can you elaborate a little?

I like the 'form' they are using though I don't believe it is wholly perfect. But it is a welcome experiment. New forms and styles are required for literary creation. Jettisoning of metre cannot constitute a new form; nor metre is an integral part of a poem. There are certain poems which are not confined to meters, but at the same time they are distinct from prose as well. For example prose translation of Tagore's Geethanjali in English. No one will say that it is not poetry.

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4

I have not seen many such successful attempts in Malayalam. Yes, one translation is there. It is the interpretation in Malayalam of "Megha Sandesam" by Kuttikrishna Marar. Pure poetry, you can say! In brief, when you are about to write a poem the deciding factor will be whether there is poetry in it and not whether it is done to metre or whether old, modern or post modern. If poetry is present, anything goes.

Is figure of speech essential in literature?

Figure of speech in literature is for the convenience of expression. Figure of speech helps in conveying certain ideas or emotions, the way how narration helps in communication. See the following instance as an example.

Uma is in deep meditation for winning Shiva for marriage. She took severe penance. Days and months passed by and after a very long time a sage arrived there and asked, "Why are you taking this penance?" Her maid said, "She is doing this to get the great Siva as her husband." The sage ridiculed Uma and also said in detail all bad things about Siva.

Finally, it was too much for Uma to forgive and she started arguing. And she was so overwhelmed with the sage's bashings that at a certain point she had to finally talk like an ordinary woman. Take me as maliciously self-willed, but I still love Siva!

"But cease these idle words, - though all be true,
His failings many and his virtues few,
Still clings my heart to him, its chosen lord,
Nor fails nor falters at thy treacherous word."

Uma turned to go after saying this. But, suddenly the sage turned into Siva and presented himself before her. Only Kalidasa can portray Uma at that point of time. He did not try to portray what Uma did at that point of time; but what she did not!

"She saw, she trembled - like a river's course,
Checked for a moment in its onward force,
By some huge rock amid the torrent hurled;
One foot uplifted - shall she turn away?
Unmoved the other - shall the Maiden stay?"

(Translation: Ralph T. H. Griffith, M. A. of Queens College, Oxford)

What she did not do is portrayed in this. Uma was transformed from an individual to a feeling! As such there is no meaning in describing what a feeling did. Instead, the tempestuous situation was portrayed by figures of speech. This is the relevance of figures of speech!

The new generation lament over the lack of power of language to portray the complex emotions of the present day individuals with the same intensity. It will be worthwhile for them to study how their predecessors tackled such situations.

Of late there is an increasing trend wherein the new generation writers intentionally make mistakes in grammar or turn verbose, in a bid to articulate their warm expressions of emotions. But there is a problem with this style of writing. Instead of highlighting, say, grief, it

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5

might betray humour, which the writer must not have intended for that particular situation. It will be like the audience bursting into laughter when an actress weeps on the stage to convey grief. In other words such efforts may convey a meaning not intended by the writer.

Translated by Edasseri Trust Team

Note: We feel that this is not complete. We request our readers who have a copy of "Deshabhimani Weekly" in which this essay must have been published to kindly forward scanned copy to the following e-mail address. We shall update as and when we receive the full essay.

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For ready reference:

Edasseri Govindan Nair (1906 - 1974)

E.M.S Namboothiripad (1909 - 1998)

NOTES:

1. An all-India Progressive Writer's meeting was conducted in Lucknow in 1935. It was declared that progressive writers should create literature that will assist the struggles against British imperialism. The association of progressive writers was conceived in order to carry out certain historical social necessities and to accomplish renewed responsibilities of transforming cultural aspects. The Jeeval Sahitya Prastanam in Kerala also acknowledged this declaration. Kerala Jeeval Sahitya Sanghom (Life oriented Literature Writers Association of Kerala) was established in 1937. In 1944, at the instance of E.M.S the name of the organisation was changed to Purogamana Sahitya Sanghom (Progressive writer's Association) in tune with the all-India practice.

2. "Instincts" or 'vasana' refers to the latent tendencies in one's nature. "Perversions" or 'Durvasana' refers to the evil propensities present in man that induce even the most controlled of human beings to err and succumb to temptations or compulsions at times.