

The Writer's Voice to the Reader's Ear; can diverse works be fully accessible to all?

By Saad Z Hossain (Bangladesh)

The short answer is no.

In compensation, however, the reader has a chance to explore alien lives and mythologies, to see the language itself become larger to accommodate these alien worlds.

In my specific case, I am using English to write about cities in South Asia, and my home culture in Bangladesh, a task which the English language is not designed to do. The structure, the vocabulary, the metaphors of the language resist this intrusion.

I understand that many aspects of my world building will be lost on American readers. I understand that sometimes the words themselves will have less impact.

I therefore build my stories in layers from most to least accessible. The idea is to find a balance where I offer an authentic experience, but the work is still enjoyable to an average reader with no specialized knowledge.

I know plot is out of fashion, but the first layer for me is always plot and character development. Classical plots cut across all cultures; anyone can identify with a villain, a hero, the need for vengeance and love and redemption. I spend a lot of time and effort on this, because these elements are the essential vehicle for the story, and if nothing else, I want each book to stand alone as a good story, at least. I want readers to enjoy the story without any stress, to read it for pure entertainment.

My second layer is world building. I write near future dystopian science fiction. Inside a dystopia I can freely criticize any political regime, any economic system, I can exaggerate current trends to absurdity, I can reflect on how technology will be used against us. For the story to work, this layer has to be understandable to all readers. However, here, inevitably, references will begin to creep in, unfamiliar to many readers.

In my books I show security forces acting with impunity and rampant corruption. Authority boils down to force, there is no justice for the poor, and my characters have to struggle through this miasma of hopelessness, because they are always the losers, the broken, the lost. The struggle against authority is universal, so it is possible for all readers to appreciate this, without fully understanding the specific issues I'm talking about. For example, we had a revolution in Bangladesh on August 5th, where students overthrew a 16-year-old dictatorship. At that point we were under very real censorship; any online post could lead to

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arrest. Dystopian SFF allows writers to bypass these constraints.

The third layer is geographical, and here, the street names, the plant life, the weather, the heat and dust of the tropics; all of this is flavor for the story. When you write about New York or Tokyo, people have a concrete image, because even if they haven't visited, these places are well represented in different media. Dhaka is a vague place, unknown, unseen, you only have my word for it. I have to use language to bring it to life for you, I have to invent words and phrases to describe this place so dear to me. Here, too, some of the references are lost.

For example, in Bangladesh there are two main cities, Dhaka and Chittagong. Naturally we have a healthy rivalry. So in my books I make Dhaka this amazing, vibrant place, and I make Chittagong a victim of rising waters, slowly sinking into the sea, her people leaving in droves, abandoned even by Karma.

The final layer is actually just references to the urban community I live in, and this satire is built into which neighborhoods people come from, the character names, their family backgrounds, the arrogance of the old rich, the pompousness of the nouveau. All of the locations, the corporations, even the names of minor characters are real. For this kind of pettiness, I use the names of my friends, my enemies, my family. This is a gift to the Dhaka I live in, because even in a single city, there are countless versions superimposed, and I would like to represent the one that I know and love.

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The Writer's Voice and the Reader's Ear

Yu Yoyo (PRC)

In China, starting from elementary school, everyone is obliged to study the Chinese language and enhance their reading comprehension skills. During exams, there is a predefined question that requires students to write, essentially to elucidate what the article aims to convey. This was the question that I dreaded the most as I frequently got it wrong. My interpretation of the article's meaning often deviated significantly from the provided answer.

When I became a writer, I once heard a friend mention that one of his articles was utilized in a reading comprehension exam, yet he couldn't answer a single question correctly. The author of the article actually answered the questions about his own work inaccurately, as the answers given by the exam creator were contrary to his intentions. It sounded absurd, didn't it? Even more ludicrous is the notion that reading comprehension can have a standardized answer. This was something that perplexed me during my school days, which led me to have a particular dislike for exam-oriented education.

Traditional literary interpretation often endeavors to discover the "correct" understanding, and this correctness is typically based on restoring the author's intention. Therefore, the author's voice is accorded significant importance, and the core meaning of the work lies in comprehending the author's background, motivation, and emotions in order to disclose the true meaning of the text.

For the author, the writing process feels like self-discourse, similar to playing a game with oneself. We are both the author and our own initial reader. When the mouth and ears exist within the same entity, it achieves a flawless output and reception of "voice." We can assert without hesitation, "I write for myself, and what I 'hear' is precisely what I desire to express." All of this appears so reasonable and beautiful.

However, when Roland Barthes proposed the theory of the "death of the author," the authority of the author was challenged. He contended that the interpretation of a text holds countless possibilities, and these interpretations should not be restricted by the author's intention. Each reader, based on their cultural background, life experiences, emotional states, and more, can assign diverse meanings to the text.

Sometimes, the author's voice resonates impeccably with the reader, evoking emotional or intellectual resonance. The reader's ears will "tune in" to the same frequency as the

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author's voice. This harmony enables the reader to deeply comprehend the author's intention and might even result in experiences that surpass the author's original design. Other times, due to the reader's own conditions, what they receive, understand, and perceive may differ, creating so-called misunderstandings and ambiguities, or even introducing new interpretations to the text. Occasionally, the author's voice might not be immediately "heard" or understood by the reader, failing to produce an instantaneous strong resonance, but over time, that voice may reverberate and ferment in the reader's mind, generating new feelings or understandings. This delayed reaction reflects the enduring and deferred nature of the author's voice.

In specific historical or political circumstances, the author's voice might not be entirely lucid or straightforward and might instead convey information through reticence, ambiguity, or indirect approaches. When we exist under rigorous censorship, the author's voice is highly regulated. Silence turns into a symbol and technique with multiple functions. It is not merely a rhetorical device that enables rich emotions and thoughts to be expressed via omission, blank spaces, and unuttered words but also a means of reflecting social power, historical trauma, and cultural repression, expressing complex emotions such as suppression, protest, pain, and reflection that cannot be openly verbalized.

Silence does not equate to voicelessness; it becomes a distinctive mode of expression. The author's voice and silence are mutually compatible – we are silent while speaking, and we speak while remaining silent. If speaking is the controlled aspect, then the inexpressible aspect is the pursuit of the creator. Silence, in contrast to speaking, is a more abstract form of expression. It becomes a way to break through the limitations of words, the freest element that cannot be deprived, coerced, or censored.

Through silence, we frequently convey deeper connotations that language fails to reach, prompting readers to actively reflect and interpret the gaps in the text. These mysterious, concealed elements are assigned renewed significance. Literature, employing its unique artistic techniques, expresses what cannot be uttered. The unuttered parts thereby become the manifestation of the author's skill and thought. At this juncture, the reader's ears must become more sensitive to capture these "unvoiced sounds." These unspoken, hidden voices leave ample space for the reader's reflection, encouraging them to explore and speculate.

At the same time, we cannot disregard another situation – our works might be overly

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politicized in their interpretation. What the reader desires to hear always appears to be associated with the political symbols and bases of reality encompassed in the work, while the artistic nature of literature itself is seldom given due attention. Under such scrutiny, the creation is not treated equitably, and at the very least, it indicates a lack of respect for art. What I hope for is that everyone approaches art with the same pursuit and reverence. I write merely because I want to explore the boundaries of creation.

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The Writer's Voice and the Reader's Ear

Kei Okamoto (Japan)

The question is whether it is possible for people from different cultural backgrounds to understand the works of different cultures. This is especially the case with poetry. At the same time, I think there are big differences in how individuals perceive things. Today I decided to use a projector and sound because I thought that this experience might help us to answer the topic. What I am going to show you is a video and audio clip that I shot and recorded this summer by myself, and also a quote from newspaper articles. A very short video is played at the beginning and the end. The audio clip is from a sightseeing bus in the rural part in Japan. In that bus the automatic guidance has been played since probably the 1980s or 1990s. While I play the recording, the translation for Japanese voices will be projected. And it is also written on a handout. There are three parts of the translation, but only two parts will be played. For me, what I am going to show is something that can be called poetry. But even among Japanese poets, I am sure there are differences of opinion about this.

July 31, 2024

My seven-year-old son is tired from the trip and is sleeping in the seat next to me. There are only a few buses a day. Only five passengers on our bus. The bus goes up to Fear Mountain (恐山 Osorezan). Fear Mountain is famous for spiritual mediums known as Itako (イタコ women who were blind or had poor vision often took the job). There is no actual mountain called Fear Mountain. The collective name for the mountains are Fear Mountain. There, people who have lost children are said to pile up stones for the memorial service. A brightly colored pinwheel is also offered Fear Mountain, and its dry sound is said to attract the dead and comfort the dead children.

Voice guidance from the bus 1

In addition, the construction of a nuclear power plant and other developments are underway. However, even in the dynamic Shimokita Peninsula (下北半島), natural beauty is the primary selling point. We recommend that today's visitors to the Shimokita Peninsula, a national park, also visit Fear Mountain (恐山 Osorezan), Shiriya-saki (尻屋崎), Yamen (?), and Hotoke-Gaura (仏ヶ浦).

-The next stop is Futamata (二又), Futamata. Please press the "Get off" button to exit the bus.

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Voice guidance from the bus 2

We will guide you. Nambu (南部), Fear Mountain, the mountain of Buddha, rather than lamenting that you miss your parents, come once, and you will meet them again. Fear Mountain represents the hell and paradise of the Buddha's teachings. It is a place where all the anguish and suffering of the human world can be immediately delivered if one prays with one's palms in prayer. It was about 1120 years ago, one night while Master-Jikaku (慈覚大師円仁) was undergoing religious training in China. A fire raged in his dream, and a holy monk suddenly appeared and told him. If you return to your country and go to the east for 34 days, you will find a sacred mountain. Build a Buddhist temple there. Master-Jikaku immediately returned to Japan and toured many states. He built Seiryuzan Zuiganji Temple (青龍山瑞巖寺) in Matsushima (松島), Risshakuji Temple (立石寺) in Yamagata (山形), in other words, Yamadera (山寺 famous for Basho's haiku about cicadas). Finally, he had come to the Shimokita Peninsula, the northernmost tip of Honshu (本州 main island of Japan). He wandered through mountains and rivers, avoiding the rain and wind, and finally collapsed, exhausted in mind and body. By chance, however, a believer named Fujiwara Umon (藤原うもん?) passed by and helped him survive after providing a great deal of tender care. It is said that one fine day, after his recovery, Master-Jikaku climbed up to the left side of Mt. Kamagaseyama (釜臥山) with Fujiwara Umon as his guide, from where he discovered Fear Mountain.

-The next stop is Nagasaka (長坂), Nagasaka. Please press the "Get off" button to exit the bus.

Voice guidance from the bus 3

It is firmly believed that the spirits go to Fear Mountain. Until the beginning of the Showa period (昭和 1926-), this road was inaccessible to automobiles. People visiting Fear Mountain from Tanabu (田名部), Ohata (大畑), and Ominato (大湊) chant the name of Buddha, ring a bell, and join hands and shoulders of men and women, young and old, dressed in white handbags and white leg bands.

-OLD SONG (This part is a bit old and I couldn't understand what they were singing about.)- Singing like this, they visited this mountain path with the light in their hearts of faith as their only reliance.

-The next stop is Hiyamizu (冷水), Hiyamizu. Please press the "Get off" button to exit the bus. Please do not cross the street immediately before or after the bus...

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Article from Tokyo Newspaper July 5, 2024

written by Yuzuru Miyahata (宮畑譲), Naoaki Nishida (西田直晃)

Spent nuclear fuel is stored at nuclear power plants. While some nuclear power plants are approaching their maximum capacity, an “interim storage” program is about to begin in Mutsu City (むつ市 City where Fear Mountain is located), Aomori Prefecture. This is an attempt to bring in spent nuclear fuel and temporarily store it until it is reprocessed. Last summer, the idea was floated in Kaminoseki Town, Yamaguchi Prefecture, but if it takes shape in Mutsu, it will be the first interim storage outside a nuclear power plant site. However, local residents are concerned that the site could become a final disposal site. Furthermore, the waste to be brought in will be from the Tokyo Electric Power Company's Kashiwazaki-Kariwa Nuclear Power Station. People in the Tokyo metropolitan area cannot remain indifferent.

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The Writer's Voice and Reader's Ear by Hatice Açıkgöz (Germany)

Whenever people ask about my writing one question always comes up: Who do you write for? In their eyes I can see, what they want me to say. That I write for the little girl I used to be, that did not see themselves represented in literature neither as author or character. They want me to say for all people with a migrant background in Germany, they want me to be in tears about having opportunities, want me to say how incredible it is, that someone like me can write at all.

But I have to kill their joy once again. Because I don't write for anybody but myself.

Yes, I write for the little girl I used to be, but I don't have to write for her, because she already did that herself. I don't have to write for all other people with migrant background in Germany, because they already do it themselves. Only because of people like Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Fatma Aydemir, Mely Kiyak or Mithu Sanyal, who fought for themselves and with their fight also fought for me to have a place in literature, am I even able to sit here right now.

When my short story "*An Octopus has Three Hearts*" was published I thought nobody will see that it is actually autobiographical. Nobody will understand what I am saying, nobody will understand or reflect on the issues I am discussing in this 18-page story.

Instead, something incredible happened: the story landed in the hands of the right people. Not only did it start a serious career in writing for me, but people wrote me messages about how I made them understand. How I made them finally understand racism in Germany with just one little scene, where my character talks about being well adjusted to Germany and Germans because she valued what they value. Rules, organization, grammar and manners. Something I thought my Turkish family lacked. I was a complete fool that had been tricked by the original-Germans. They made me feel like my culture is "*asozial*" a German word, that was invented only to use on us. On the people in Germany that are poor, ugly, hairy, uncivilized and - of course – Immigrants.

Germany has become an unsafe space for people like me. Germany has become an unsafe space for writers who write against or about fascism. Germans are too scared to ever say anything. They listen to our theories; they know all the definitions. They might give you space in their agency so you can write about the *AFD*, or they might even give you a book deal. But they will never be loud for you.

So, I have to scream for all of us. My fellow writers in this program may have already noticed that I am not silent when I see something happening, that I find unfair or sexist, even if they tell me, it is rude or I could have said it in a nicer way. Because I don't care anymore. I don't care if somebody doesn't like me. I don't care if I don't look pretty while I scream. I don't care if my language is not ladylike. I am not aspiring to be palatable or likeable.

I aspire for women not to be killed every second day. I aspire for women not to be raped by their husbands for ten years while being unconscious and I have to admit, it is a nice bonus to have certain men be terrified to even talk to me. (I think we all know that men talk way too much.)

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What the reader hears, when I write is actually none of my business. I can just make sure, that I said everything I wanted to say. I can only make sure to continue being loud and actually be much, much louder than I am right now.

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