**Chandramohan SATHYANATHAN**

**Not Writing the Self**

Why is it important to discuss the not-self at this juncture? Because in an increasingly multicultural world, every writer has many components in him/her self. This multifaceted self is even more pronounced when a writer’s oeuvre is inextricably intertwined with activism in more than one social-political cultural movement (the example that most readily comes to mind is that of black feminists in the United States). This question warrants much more scrutiny in the times when lack of solidarity between various movements may have contributed to a dramatic upsurge of right–wing political sentiments worldwide.

The inability to understand the soul of the other can result in appalling consequences. Rap music, which is widely praised as being an expression of resistance by African-Americans, is often loaded with misogyny and homophobia. These loaded words can blunt the progressive impact that rap and other radical forms of art can embody.

The impact on a writer when he engages with the other is that he learns a new language—a language sensitive to the taste buds of the other. Learning this language helps prevent a process of de-humanization, and the writer might learn to evolve him- or herself into a writer of more inclusive language. Most activists/writers I know of strive to construct a language which has breathing space for all. The “all” is an attempt at universal inclusion—especially inclusion of the margins.

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*What, if any, is the writer’s responsibility toward representing the “other” accurately?*

I would imagine that the writer—any writer—should first listen to the tonality of writers from the other with patience and evolve one’s own perspective as a response to it, being careful never to deprive them of their agency. The common errors are that many writers indulge in “epistemic violence”—a term coined by G. Spivak for the infliction of harm against subjects through discourse—or they eroticize the soul of the other, or they perpetuate a victim narrative.

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*What effort, in understanding, empathy, research, may be needed? Are there comparable challenges for one writing from a “marginalized” position?*

One challenge is that we marginalized writers are often reduced to mere spokespeople for the community. Another challenge is that we are often forced to be “politically correct” by the dominant positions articulated from within our community. Another challenge the process of naming oneself that may provoke how we are related to the “other”–resulting a radical reconstituting of the other.

After the rise of identity politics, the right to speak for the other is often highly censored. Those with privilege have a responsibility to express their views such that the dominant trends from marginalized groups cannot be contradicted. Being a Dalit writer in English, I have often observed that the portrayal of Dalit lives by non-Dalits leaves a lot to be desired. Most non-Dalit writers do not capture the spirit of our struggle. The spirit of our struggle is strive for an alternative sense of aesthetics. This applies, too, to scrutiny of Dalit writing in translation. For example, there is a short interview of Devanur Mahadeva, an Indian author whose opinions are mediated by the other, in which he struggles to explain his stand in English. The whole process of translation should be dealt with prudent care since it is a form of engagement with the other.

In my writing, I have sought to engage with the other by reaching out to the issues that plague Muslims world-wide and in my part of the world. India is caste ridden--people assume that I am Hindu and I am vegetarian, and by making this assumption, they are trying to determine if I am Brahmin or a variant of brahminical caste. When people assume I am Hindu or Brahmin, they are systematically “othering out” the Muslim and anyone who does not have a “mainstream identity.” Many Brahminical nationalists also use riots against Muslims as a fear-tactic to temporarily unify non-Muslims across castes. Thus, Dalit writers who believe in Ambedkar’s vision of annihilating caste can undermine their subversiveness by engaging with Islamophobia.

I would like to end by sharing excerpts of a poem I wrote to engage with the other, part of a series of poems that attempt to look at beards and burkinis through an objective lens.

**THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACK BURKINI**

(After Wallace Stevens)

*“I created the burkini to give women freedom, not to take it away “-*[*Aheda Zanetti*](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/aheda-zanetti)

1
Burkini is a language
Terrifying those ignorant of its text.

2
Cops patrol her tan lines
Like dams patrol
Rivers flowing above danger marks.

7
Bruises sustained from frisking
Metamorphose into festering wounds.
Gangrene could gnaw at your surname.

9
Do you remember the first corpse
The sea sucked off a turbulent beach?
The sea spat it out after three days of frisking.

11
During this conversation
Some territory has been ceded across
The tan lines of your body.

13
History will catch up with you
Through your rear-view mirror
Even if you are full throttle in your
Pursuit of happiness.