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Writing in a Culture in Conflict

Earlier in the year, I took a sabbatical from writing weekly articles for a newspaper, something that I had done religiously for years. For anyone who is not a professional journalist, it is important to take a break from regular periodic writing in order to give yourself some rest, time to recollect your thoughts and to pre-empt any stagnation setting in. But it appears that one major reason for me to stop writing for some time was the realization that my every other piece had actually become an obituary: obituary of a friend, a colleague, a human rights defender, a political worker, a civil rights campaigner, a trade unionist, a professional or an ordinary woman or man—all of them either targeted or killed randomly by terrorists. Or there were obituaries of people killed together in large numbers: factory workers burned to death in an act of arson, worshippers blown up while praying in a mosque, young military recruits assaulted at their passing out parade,¹ passengers on a bus fired upon indiscriminately, etc.

My articles were not meant to be obituaries, except for an occasional piece on someone I would know personally. But I saw myself writing obituaries of young and middle-aged women and men all the time. I was writing about schoolchildren, some of whom were not lucky enough to survive like Malala Yousafzai or like two writer friends of mine who also survived attempts on their lives. The only images in my mind were those of blood, bullet-riddled bodies, ambulances, hospitals, morgues, funerals, chest-beating women, crying children and weeping men.

But when it comes to poems, reading those of others or writing my own, there is no escape. There is no regime to be followed, but there can be no sabbatical either. Poetry is the only consistency in my tumultuous life. I write less than many others, but my being hinges on reading and writing verse. With either visible or subtle political content, I saw myself as a romantic poet. I believed in what I had heard as a child—all poetry is love poetry. However, now when I review a large part of my work, I can see that it is elegiac in nature. In my later work, the mournfulness in themes, characters, idiom and rhyme continues to fight with the old poet in me who was an incorrigible optimist, who at times was sad but not morose, melancholic but never morbid. Perhaps I am still not morbid. But bereavement has come to stay with me. The sun of grief never sets. It burns my heart and my soul, each day and every night.

The circumstances in which we live, however difficult they may be, could not force me and many of my fellow writers, poets and artists in Pakistan to start viewing the world ‘through the corner of the admiral’s eye’ (an expression I borrow from my Mexican poet friend, Karen Villeda). I wrote poetry when Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, when Malala was shot, when Hyderi Mosque was bombed, when the church in Gojra was burnt down, when a young Hindu labourer was lynched for loving a Muslim girl, when 140 schoolboys in Army Public School were massacred, when scores of doctors belonging to a minority sect were targeted and killed, when mutilated corpses of young political workers were found in Balochistan, when the sitting governor of the largest province was assassinated by his own security detail on trumped-up accusations of irreverence to religious belief because he had shown solidarity with a poor Christian peasant woman who was charged with blasphemy and thrown into jail. No wonder that the assassin survives but the judge who passed the sentence against him had to flee the country. No wonder that the

¹ The ‘passing out’ parade is a ceremony to recognize the completion of a military course, such as basic training. In other parts of the world, it might be known as ‘marching out’ or ‘graduation.’

poem I wrote for the woman has not been published in the last three years, even by those literary journals who keep insisting that I send my work only to them. Not that I do not understand this being a matter of life and death, rather than simply avoiding a controversy.

Also, during this period, the suffering of today has somehow brought back to me the suffering of the past. The eternal symbols of struggle and sacrifice in my imagination, beginning from Ali and Hussain, have become green yet again like our collective unhealed wounds. From the tyranny of colonialism to the mindless violence and migration during the Partition of India and creation of Pakistan in 1947 and then during the dismemberment of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh in 1971, history has begun to bother me and appear in my work like never before. I am rooted in South Asia, but the suffering around me has widened my embrace for suffering anywhere. However, far from being the harbinger of hope and cherisher of beauty that I would have liked myself to be, in recent years I have become a spectator of violence and a chronicler of pain.