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Conflict with the Self in Arts

Culture is discursively constructed. Art is not. Though it may seem that art follows culture, it is indeed the culture that follows art. Considering the spatiotemporal sensitivities—culture is curated by the practices and discoveries of artists and artisans whose ideas have been adopted into our everyday lives. How the artists themselves arrive at what may in the future be a part of the culture is a complex, internal and meditative process. The assimilation of the existing knowledge of the theories and practices in arts brings the artist to the point of choice they must make for their art's sake and about which school of ideas they wish to take forward.

What is art? Personally, I examine and seek this statement every waking moment. Is this a question? Or an answer in itself, which leads to despair, and somehow that despair feels home of the art. Should I pick 'hibiscus,' 'rose,' or '*malli poo*' for a certain poem? What image should I choose— 'river' or 'sea?' The choice to wrestle with images before the writer settles for a certain one has personal, social, and political implications.

There is a world of conflict in defining what constitutes the arts. Is it all about aesthetics? What about the intention of the artist? What about protest art? What is it about Duchamp's *Urinal Fountain* or Warhol's *Soup Cans* that change the art game? For the purpose of my own writing, performance and curation too, I believe that art has moved from "appearance" to "conception," and it reflects in my work. Though I cannot say that that is all I believe, there are no absolutes. Art is much like a river from Heraclitus' statement. *No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.* The meaning of art itself is ever transient.

Is art personal or political? All art reflects the political stance of the creator. I have come across many artists who express that they are apolitical. That itself is a political choice, my love. A ticket of privilege. I find myself closer to Lorca's words, "The artist, and particularly the poet, is always an anarchist in the best sense of the word." An artist and a dear friend Neelim Mahanta got arrested last week in Arunachal Pradesh for making a huge mural saying, "No More Dams" on a government wall that already had a beautiful mural depicting all indigenous people of the region titled "Wall of Harmony." Though he got released a few days ago due to the support from the artist community and public. The question remains, did he defame the wall, or was he trying to make a point? On release, among the first things asked by a journalist was, "So going ahead, would you call yourself an artist or an activist?"

What can poetry do? Page vs. Stage

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, April 8, 2022

Tariro Ndoro (Zimbabwe) / Felix Nesi (Indonesia) / Raghvendra Madhu (India) / Pamela Rahn Sánchez (Venezuela)

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I am somehow, always, inevitably interested in what poetry can do beyond a page. I find it okay on a page but now that it is born, what can it birth. Auden famously said that poetry makes nothing happen, but there is no harm in hoping it can. The oral recitation of poetry has been universal to the world for centuries. The origin, evolution, and the process in which spoken word poetry has become a global phenomenon are radically distinct and relevant to the contemporary societal context.

I have tried to practice my ideas of taking poetry into people's lives by organizing over a hundred poetry readings and art workshops in schools, colleges, juvenile correctional facilities, and community groups in urban and rural spaces of India. I curate nature-poetry hikes in the woods and hills neighboring Guwahati as a mindful art engagement for anyone who wishes to step outside their stressful lives for a weekend. We just walk around quietly, find some quiet, scenic spots, and read poems by Kabir, Raymond Carver, Langston Hughes, or Mary Oliver.

The competing ideas of accessibility vs. complexity of a poem also take up some of the vast acres of conflict in my mind. Should the poet be more inclusive or exclusive, complex or simple, direct or indirect with the use of language? Like many other countries, India has had an ancient and rich culture of oral folk songs, stories, and poetry in their own regional languages. That means poetry has long been, in some form or other, in the daily lives of people, and I would love to see our everyday language and actions guided by poetry.

At times, I exercise tremendous effort in keeping a poem simple and direct but of course, not all poems seem to budge. The last lines of one of my poems support the premise of this idea: *I write about little things so that every time // I sit by the fire in some unknown village // to share their food, and their children ask me // to read poems, I don't want to tell them that // they will not be able to understand what I write.*

One of my upcoming books of poems, titled 'Trash Poetry,' is conceptualized around excessive consumerism and plastic waste. The poems written are in mixed medium—cutouts from everyday plastic waste placed on a page juxtaposed with text. Is this poetry? Is this not poetry? Is this a poem performing on a page? Only time can tell.

The song for which *Arooj Aftab* got the Global Music Grammy 2022, comes from a poem by Hafeez Hoshiarpuri written in 1921. It has been sung by many great musicians in the past like Medhi Hassan and Iqbal Bano. '*Mohabbat karne waale kam na hoñge // Terī mehfil meñ lekin ham na hoñge*'. Maybe this is what I want for my work, to be sung again and again when I am no more in this *mehfil*. I refuse to sit on a bookshelf.

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