

9/29/2023: WRITING THE NOT SELF

In one way or another, writers can't avoid creating some characters different from themselves. When such a character is depicted as "belonging" to a distinct, recognizable group—perhaps a minority—what if any is the writer's responsibility toward representing the "other" accurately? Are there comparable challenges for an author writing from a marginalized position?

1. Azhar NOONARI (Pakistan)

And cried; "Now mark how I do rip me: lo!
"How is Mohammad mangled: Before me
Walks Ali weeping, from the chin his face
Cleft to the forelock; [...]

— *Inferno, The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, trans. Rev. Henry Francis Cary

'You have the bangles for Jugga?' 'Yes. A dozen of red and blue glass.'

'Juggu Singh's searching hand found one end of the cord of her trousers. He pulled it with a jerk.'

— *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh

It was already there: the concept of an imposter, a liar, a schismatic. And it was regulated and circulated through medieval institutions, statements, and texts. Yes, what Dante says is unthinkable, unimaginable, and unsayable for a Muslim. He received it, what was outside, in the discourse, in the concepts, he followed the correct ways of thinking, strictly adhering to the culturally constructed notions of true and false, good and bad, correct and incorrect. This was the way of thinking, perhaps the correct way of thinking. A European writing for Europeans, sealing the convictions and beliefs, unfiltered, exactly the same way as they were outside; what preceded the *Inferno*.

Wearing bangles on the Indian subcontinent is associated with women. And there is a very popular phrase: 'Go wear bangles and sit at home'; a misogynist epithet, relegating someone to the status of women and associating them with staying at home, confining them to a fixed position. In Pakistan, women political leaders once hung a bag of bangles on the door of their male political opponents, speaking in what Derrida would have called 'the language of the master' This locution persists and circulates in acts, deeds, and concepts everywhere. *Train to Pakistan* gives it literary prestige, as if the saying had a basis in an ethical position.

In an otherwise biological act, positions have been assigned; in the language of Foucault - the subject and the object. The subject performs the action, and the object is the recipient of the action. I don't know how it is in the West, but in the Indian subcontinent, symbolism intervenes extending the signification, giving the privileged position to the subject while ridiculing the object, relegating it to a

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lower status, debasing and humiliating it. There are two binaries, equal in the natural act but unequal in the cultural sense - one privileged and the other unprivileged, one elevated in status, victorious, and the other beneath, defeated, perpetually passive within the realm of symbolism.

Nooran, a Muslim girl, and Jaggu, a Sikh, asserts his Sikh masculinity over a Muslim, symbolizing victory and dominance, as if saying, 'We have done it, with you, your girl, your honor.' This starts a war, reminiscent of Clausewitz's aphorism, 'War is the continuation of policy with other means'—a literary war in an unliterary way.

In the movie *Gadar*, an Indian Sikh man enters Pakistan and takes away a Muslim girl. Then, there is a reply, in *Tere Piyar Me*, a Pakistani movie, where a Muslim man enters India and brings a Hindu girl to Pakistan, responding in kind - a girl for a girl, contributing to the circulating symbolism that already exists in the discourse.

Language carries within itself a lot of racism, sometimes so subtly hidden and concealed that it escapes common observation—sexism, ageism, classism, ethnocentrism, heteronormativity, religious bias, regional biases, and much more. Lacan says, "man is born prematurely," when humans grow, much damage has already been done; things have been set and fixed, with established 'correct' ways and notions of normal and abnormal.

All comes with language. Our understanding of the world is profoundly shaped by language and interpretation. To me, a writer is not merely an observer or a sincere reporter who documents everything as it appears, but rather, a writer is an intellectual and a philosopher. Hence, a writer's primary responsibility lies with language; it must be purified, scrutinized, selected, and corrected before it is granted literary prestige. A writer is a creator, someone who constructs, makes choices from a vast array of possibilities, measures, and adjusts. There are many ways, numerous alternate paths, and inexhaustible possibilities...

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