

Writing and Politics: A Few Passing Remarks Thachom Poyil Rajeevan

I stand as witness to the common lot,
survivor of that time, that place.
-Anna Akhmatova

Politics and culture are appositional in all discourses. And, when it comes to literary writing, this apposition always turns into a sort of predation of one upon the other. Hence, throughout history, there is a carnivorous gleam whenever a politician and a writer come face-to-face. So, one has to sincerely disbelieve the camaraderie that Fidel Castro is said to have with Garcia Gabriel Marquez and one has to doubt Atal Bihari Vajpai, the former Prime Minister of India if he says that he writes poetry and signs the files on nuclear tests with the same hand, left or right.

Is poetry such an idiotic medium that it would cohabitate with an atomic reactor, even though the latter says that its radiation is for peace and self-defense? Is Havana a Macondo? Will Fidels tolerate Marquezes in their republics? It is not long since V S Naipaul, a perennial critic of the Indian inability to keep up the legacy of imperial cleanliness, was given a red carpet reception by the xenophobic Bharatiya Janatha Party whose vote banks are on that unclean land. So, what might be the new attraction a Naipaul-like intellectual finds in a hardcore Hindutva politician like Lal Krishna Advani of India?

The time we live in, which theorists call postmodern, has finally disposed of all that may appear hypothetical in questions. Hence, the new politico-literary allies, like the ones shown above, contextualize certain shifts in paradigms that have taken place in the opposition of politics and writing as two major spheres of intellectual and societal influences in the process of history. The *advaita* (not two, but one) philosophy of the individual and the writer being one has become irrelevant. The divorce of word and deed is complete. That poetry can do nothing is doubtlessly proved. So, if Osip Mandelshtam were writing poetry today, he would not have to go to Siberia, and Pasternak, if asked about him, would not have to stammer to Joseph Stalin: "Yes, he (Mandelshtam) can write, I think he writes wrong, but he can write and he is a great writer."

Perhaps, two anecdotes, one from history and the other from the classical repertoire of writing itself may help unravel the ambiguity of the present and differentiate it with the past concerning the politics of writing. The first is a question that impulsively came out from Thoreau's throat, targeting Emerson: "Why are you there? "

Thoreau, it is rumored, asked this question of Emerson from behind bars. He was in jail for not paying tax money as part of his civil disobedience against racial discrimination. "The just place of a just man in an unjust country is prison," he believed. And he was living in keeping with his belief.

Emerson, on the other hand, had paid all taxes and hence was a free man; but he had enough camaraderie with Thoreau to visit him in the prison and ask: "Thoreau, why are you there?" Thoreau played handball with that question, passing it back onto Emerson himself. "Emerson, why are you there?" Its echo still persists. It is fissional. The question as such has no meaning other than a weak metaphysical ejaculation. But when asked from either side of a prison wall, it acquires meanings based on the side of the speaker

and side of the listener. And, as in all great questions, the question itself becomes the answer. The answer that defines the ethical position behind one's being "there." It is this ethical positioning that always reflects itself as aesthetics.

There are no aesthetics without ethics. Always, it is the ethical content of a work of art that decides its beauty. A sculpture can be carved out in wood, stone, wax, metal, synthetic fiber or glass. It can be made more perfect if it is chiseled out of human bones; but, once the onlooker identifies what it is made of, it will begin to horrify him or her. So, "what it is made of?" is not an extension of "why are you there?" Rather, it is the same question. Aesthetics is just one of the functions of ethics. It functions with time and space as its two limits: the zero and the infinity.

The second anecdote is from the *Ramayana*, the Indian classic in which the conflict between personal ethics and the social ethics dig up epic dimensions. The hero, king Rama, abandoned his wife Sita, the heroine, simply because his subjects had reservations about her chastity. She was sent out of the country with nobody there to rescue her. Valmiki, the saint poet of the place, who wrote the epic *Ramayana*, gave her shelter in his ashram. If he hadn't given refuge to the outcast heroine, he wouldn't have written the epic. This is part of the epic. King Rama had no misgivings about his wife, but he had to submit to the social ethics of a king. The poet Valmiki didn't have to. By giving the forsaken queen asylum in his ashram (and in his writing as well), he was challenging the king and his politics. The writer in him was performing the role of the opposition. A dissent.

Just compare this epic story with a contemporary episode, also from India: a prime minister's widowed daughter-in-law was thrown out of the prime minister's residence at midnight, hardly a week after her husband's tragic death simply because the PM, her mother law-in-law, nurtured a different sort of personal ethics. The PM saw that the outcast daughter-in-law was not given shelter anywhere in the capitol, even in a hotel. What followed was a parody of the epic in real life. A literary debauchee took the role of the saintly poet and gave her a space in his filthy write-ups. The forsaken modern 'princess,' instead of going to the real wilds and the natural companionship of animals as the epic heroine did, founded a society to protect street dogs and other stray animals. Her safe haven was not a sagely ashram, but a motley political party that upholds the ethics of a king who deserts his wife to safeguard his image of public ethics.

This episode shows how difficult it is in our time to make meaning from the ongoing puzzlement in which the grave becomes the silly and the silly becomes the grave. In this confusion, the position a writer occupies is always oppositional with regard to the power structure. Right or left, he or she will be in permanent opposition provided that the opposition is part of the power display. But this opposition also offers choices and a multiplicity of meanings. And that is the democracy of aesthetics.