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Breaking Taboos or Claiming Well-deserved Space?

When I was reminded of the topic I am supposed to deliver my paper on, titled “Emancipating Bodies; Encountering Taboos,” I thought I would discuss the role writers of the subcontinent have played in presenting an alternate reality to the political, cultural, religious, and mainstream social discourse. I grew up admiring and reading Mirza Asad Ullah Khan Ghalib, Sadat Hassan Manto, Meer Taqi Meer, Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, Sara Shagufta, Wajida Tabasum, and Salman Rushdie and a list of other writers forced down the lane of the margin, because they touched upon literary, cultural, political, and religious taboos, which were too objectionable to be deciphered and accepted by mainstream society.

But then when I read Toni Morrison’s collection of lectures, *The Origin of Others*, it expanded my understanding of the overlapping social and political problems between the United States and subcontinent. I started thinking about writers raising their voices all over the world and, maybe, that was the moment of realization. I realized that it was not only in Ghalib’s time that the religious discourse was subverted and challenged by his usage of extraordinary metaphors. It was not only in Sadat Hassan Manto’s fiction that the entire patriarchal setup is challenged by his depiction of prostitution and women’s economic stability as an answer to the male privileged society. I realized that, it was not only Amrita Pritam who crossed social boundaries, like the concept that ‘women shouldn’t be involved in politics,’ and who wrote one of the most politically charged poems, “Aj A’akhaan Waris Shah Nu Kitho’on Qabran Vicho’on Bol,” contemporaneous with Partition violence. These issues relating to religion, patriarchy, gender, and minority’s political marginalization also appear in Toni Morrison’s representation of the struggle against the institutionalized hegemony of power–structures. Be it radicalisation of power through sex/gender, colour of bodies, or religious and economic classes.

As a young researcher and victim of such power-structures, I can see the margins and minorities of my society in equivalence with what Ta–Nehisi Coates describes in his foreword to *The Origin of Others* as “other to exist beyond the border of a great ‘belonging,’” which refers to minorities as “the kind of economic anxiety’ that appears a major threat on the politically destabilized system. The system that increasingly utilizes religion as its main tool to exploit the majority as well as the minority. At this point when the intolerance prevails and dominates the pragmatism of living together in difference—if not equally, then tolerantly—I find literary protest to be the best available option.

Resolving these problems is not as simple as it may appear. I may interpret a naked woman standing on the road as a silent political statement or maybe as a metaphor of beauty in my poetry but the society that is trained and groomed in utilizing and interpreting that body as an ‘abject’ (Julia Kristeva) would never allow those interpretations to make a room for themselves. Hence, either they’d be buried under the manuscripts of social morality or they’d be celebrated only within margins. In both situations, I find that my works served the purpose of subversion. I am fully aware of the fact that it will take more than centuries to fully understand what we call “emancipation” but still, as a writer, I feel, I can stand with Nina Simone to sing ‘Goddam Mississippi,’ for whatever it is worth, and I can join the spirit of Amrita Pritam, Sadat Hassan Manto, Mirza Ghalib and Wajida Tabbasum claiming a well-deserved space in political,

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economic and social setup at times, not all the time, referring to my body, which remains a strong metaphor in my work.

References

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