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War, the Literati and Responsibility

Can literature accept social responsibility?

Some say that the arts should be purely arts--nothing else, that writers should only serve the gods of beauty and joy. In some cases, this makes sense, particularly when art assumes the status of propaganda in the service of a specific ideology--some religious poetry of eastern literature, for example, or the writings of some followers of Marxism, or the classic poems of Afghanistan written in praise of the monarchy.

Here though, a question arises. Can literature stay true to beauty and joy when there is war? Beauty reaches sublimity when it satisfies the emotions, intellect and conscience of the reader, as well as of the writer. Even if it has beauty and literary importance, the work of a writer will fail to touch a reader's heart when it is not in accordance with his conscience.

Writers tend to be people of great sensitivity. "A poet doesn't have skin, so he feels everything acutely," says Ghani Khan, the great poet-philosopher of Pashto. A historian records incidents with an eye to the political, the historical, but the writer touches the emotional, human aspects. The historian may record numbers of people killed, but the writer tells their sorrowful stories. The historian can tell us who won the war, but the writer gives us the tears of the women, and the suffering of the children.

In this way, literature accepts responsibility in times of war.

What are the responsibilities of writers in countries at war?

There is much for a writer to learn in times of war. In war, people are not their normal selves because their world is not normal. Displacement, loss of family and friends, constant hunger and deprivation, destruction of property, fear of torture and death are all elements in the lives of war-affected people. How do they stay alive, stay safe, protect their children, help their neighbors? On the other hand, the writer can also observe and analyze the psychology of how a "normal" human transforms into a cruel beast, getting pleasure from torturing and tormenting others, or how a man becomes addicted to bloodshed. Like the situation they are faced with, the reactions of war-affected people to incidents are sometimes unexpected and unusual.

It is said that a 'good' end of a story should be unexpected but logical so it makes sense to the reader but causes them to think. A writer can find a suitable end for his stories if he observes these incidents with keenness.

All people--writers, politicians and common men experience both ups and downs in war. These 'ups and downs' can shape an interesting novel, full of suspense, as well as provide 'raw material' for non-fiction genres. People take interest in memoirs, biographies and autobiographies of officials, politicians and insiders because usually many facts remain hidden from common people during conflicts and crises.

A writer in a war-torn country is, unfortunately, never at a loss for subject matter. But it is important that these stories be told. Though stories of war can remind people of their own bitter sufferings in times of war, sometimes knowing they are not alone can be comforting. People are stronger when they know others are struggling with them. So these stories serve an important purpose, providing solace and courage.

What are the compulsions of writers in war-torn countries?

During the past thirty years in Afghanistan, a large number of writers and poets were attached to militant jihadi organizations as a sort of cultural wing, promoting the jihad and showering praises on their respective leaders. On the other side of the divide were the writers and poets promoting Marxism and Leninism under the aegis of the Afghani "communist" regime. Most of this was not literature. This was propaganda. During this period in our history, many writers forgot their three commitments: to themselves, to society, and to literature. Often forced to write things they did not believe in, they gave up their commitment to self. The stories they wrote had little or no literary merit, being written only for the

glory of their group,--thus, no commitment to literature. As far as a commitment to society, their writings often prompted more, rather than less, killing and destruction.

Thankfully, with the ouster of Dr Najibullah's government, many writers from both the sides of the divide decided to move past their political differences and reaffirm their commitments to literature, forming literary organizations like Afghan Adabi Baheer, Rashaad Kara Katana, Benawa Farhangi Tolana, etc. From within these groups, Afghanistan has seen the birth of numerous masterpieces of Afghani literature such as the poetry of Darwish Durani, Karwan and Oman, and N.A. Ahmadi's, S. Shpoon's, and Asadullah Ghazanfar's short stories and novels. These literary associations are playing an important role in training beginners in literature, a group that includes me. New writers and poets can learn many things by reading criticism by other members, and attending their lectures and poetry reading sessions. Keeping all this in mind, we are able to reach the conclusion that literati in war-torn countries have a great human responsibility, which is 'serving life'. A writer can create feelings of sympathy and love in the hearts of people through his writings. A writer can depict the negative aspects of war. He can extinguish the fire of revenge, hatred and prejudice in the hearts of people by appealing to their emotions. Darvesh Durani says:

"Like a mountain, I have plenty of stones in the hem of my shirt
But I don't pelt anyone with them."