

## LITERATURE, CULTURE AND SOCIETY: A WRITER'S RESPONSE

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As a writer of some fifty years standing and having had to face and interact with different kinds of readers (who are the truly the real justification for a writer), I must say that I am saddened when I reflect upon the relationship of literature and the possible slackening or heightening of forces of change or dynamism of Indian society. Maybe I can't call myself a valid representative of all writers of this country. My language which is Tamil is spoken by over sixty million people and can claim an antiquity of at least two thousand years of literature. In a sense, the language has maintained its contemporaneity with a minimum of modifications over these centuries. It is difficult to say that the literature in Tamil has been a faithful recorder of change but one can see it rather obliquely done, in certain works. The Siddha literature beginning with *Sivavakkaiar* and for a few years afterwards does tell the forces of dynamism or change. But probably that spirit could not prevail continuously and consistently because the major parts of Tamil Nadu came under rulers of non-Tamil origins and it is very likely that factor delayed a further flowering or development of the Siddha literature. Though its one aspect is strongly spiritual, the other is the social aspect that rejected the Brahminical outlook or attitude.

So until about the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the literature being mainly ethical and didactic and again mostly in verse, reflection of social change at different periods could only be inferred. It is with the beginning of secular writing, especially creative writers in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the dynamics of society came to be inevitably ingrained in the creative works. So in these one hundred and fifty years, the writers could be faulted for incomplete pictures, bias towards one or other community or sect, but the creative writing in Tamil has nurtured itself upon the dynamics of social change.

But having asserted that the writers had not failed the society, what has been the response of the society? Here again, I limit myself to the language I belong to, i.e, Tamil. What in an assembly like this would be

considered a worthwhile book of fiction or a collection of poems doesn't reach beyond a few thousand Tamil readers. Some fifty, sixty years ago when the modernist phase of writing was pursued rigorously by the Manikkodi group of writers— to name some of them , Ku Pa Rajagopalan, Padumaipitton, Na Pichamurthy, C.S. Challappa -- it was realized their writings enjoyed a readership of about ten thousand readers. Ka Naa Subramanian, who was most active as a writer or critic from 1936 to 1990 in a span of close to sixty years – for all his forceful advocacy of the better class of writers and denouncement of what was escapist or non-literary, felt that response from Tamil society for better creative writing always hovered around a few thousand readers.

Now more books are being written or published and it must follow that they are sold, and the purchasers read them, but the writer is always in the back rows of society. I once again remind you that I am referring to the Tamil society. But in other aspects, the Tamil society has been most progressive. It is only when it responds to creative writing that one feels a little depressed.

There has been an explosion of Indian writing in English and some truly wonderful work is being done by the writers in the last twenty years. And they are from very different language groups though they write in English. Recently I happened to read a few books written by Indians in English—these writers are all quite young—may be thirty or forty years younger than I—and their books are very good. The *Better Man* by Anita Nair, *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur, the latest book of Amit Choudhuri (which won the Sahitya Akademi prize) are some of them. And of course, Arundati Roy and her works. But for each of these works, I can think of an equally good or better work done in my own language. We would say if we had a common critical aesthetic, all these books will become as celebrated as the ones written in English. But in reality, it does not happen that way. One who displays a heightened sense of critical faculty in the case of books in English, doesn't evidence the same calibre when it comes for a work done in Tamil. A standard solution offered is, get your books translated into English.

There really is a boom as regards translation from Tamil to English is concerned. And a few publishers are sympathetic for these translations. Between 2000-2002, I would say more than a hundred books from the Indian languages have been translated into English..

These days most newspapers or magazines publish a list of *best sellers*, the data being collected from reputed bookshops. Whether it is Bombay or Hyderabad or Chennai, I am yet to find a translation in the *best-seller*

list. The books written in English, yes, but not those translated into English from the Indian languages.

But probably literature is not and cannot be a trustworthy index of a culture or society. Literature is one of the manifestations but not necessarily an all-embracing one. Even those wonderful books written by Indians in English show a world that looks like Indian society but one also has a lingering feeling that it is not adequate. RK Narayan wrote nothing else but about the small world he lived in. There are flashes of truth but not totally satisfying.

For a writer, I have talked too much. For all my efforts all my life to annul what is called the self, it is that self that gets through to sustain my work. And I find that the discipline of creative writing – if it be called a discipline— seems totally unsuitable for me for comment upon the important topics that are taken up for deliberation in this assembly. The scholars and researchers are better placed in this respect. People may not agree but that is the truth.