

THE WRITER AND HIS COMMITMENT*

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Involvement is a better expression than commitment. As you get involved with a character or a relationship, a process begins in which there is enquiry, discovery, the pursuit of the underlying truth or reality. You are thereby understanding truth or reality, character or relationships, and so on, more and more fully, till a time comes when the character for you assumes an independent existence. When a writer says that he does not know which way his character will go, what he will do next, this reflects how the author's deep involvement with his character has imparted to the latter an independent identity. Commitment, to my mind, implies a certain rigidity of the mind in which everything to do with a character or relationship is predetermined and fixed from beginning to end. This hampers the growth of the individuality of a character and tends to make him or her two-dimensional.

Further, the writer's involvement is with life. It is life with which he deals, from which he picks up the raw material for his stories, his characters, situations, experiences. This raw material may get transmuted into a piece of art in his hands when his creative imagination works on it and his craftsmanship gives it a form. But he cannot do without this raw material. However abstract and fantastic a piece of literature may be, it is still somewhere related to life and has a bearing on life. The writer's domain therefore is the vast world of human experiences, of relationships, human impulses and aspirations, of joys and sorrows.

Since he goes to life for his raw material, it is always better for him if he goes to it in a receptive frame of mind, opening his mind to impressions and influences. Of course, later on he has to sift and choose and select what suits his requirements and what fits in with the surrounding reality, but he cannot go to life with his mind already made up. If he does that he will be mentally resisting the impressions as they come to him. It is always more gainful for his art if he goes to life with an open mind. Otherwise, if he sees in life only what he wants to see, he will be narrowing his vision and imposing himself on life rather than receiving from life.

In another sense, too, going to life with an open mind helps his art. It makes his art more authentic, more

true. If you go with any preconceived notions, the danger is that you may be presenting a very subjective and one-sided picture of life which may not hold true. Here I would like to give an example. Tolstoy revised his novel *Resurrection* several times. In the original version *Katyusha*, the central character of the novel, is presented as a person of low character, capable of committing any crime. But in the final version of the novel we find *Katyusha* more sinned against than sinning, a person who has been badly treated by society. As Tolstoy went deeper into the story he shed his preconceived ideas about the woman and found her, in the larger context of social reality, an innocent person cruelly wronged by society.

But this dictum of going to life with an open mind is easier said than done. There is something very individual about the way a writer looks at life or the way he picks his material from life. No two writers write in the same way. Suppose a street accident takes place and two writers happen to be around and see it and are struck by something significant in it and regard it as fit enough material for a story, and both work on it and produce their respective stories, the stories would read differently. Not only in style and language, the very conceptions may be different. One may see in the incident something as significant, which the other may not. It is the inner personality of the writer, his mental make-up, his values, his likes and dislikes, his understanding of life, that give him his perception. It is because of this that what one writer sees in a street accident is different from what another sees in it.

Now, this inner personality of the writer is very important in the creative process. The observation 'style is the man' is very true. Every writer develops his own perception of things by his experience, by what

he reads, what he observes, what he is taught, family influences and the like. And this is where ideologies come in. His individual perception as it develops includes in itself his sense of right and wrong, his sympathies and antipathies, his likes and dislikes, what he regards as significant and what he regards as trivial, what he accepts and what he rejects.

Now, if he falls under the influence of a powerful ideology his perception of things may undergo a change, even a radical one. He begins to see things in a new light. An ideology thus may

have an illuminating influence on the writer and may begin to serve as a great inspiration in his creative work. This has happened very often with writers. Gandhian ideology served as a great inspiration to some writers, including some of our best writers. The earlier work of Premchand is imbued with the Gandhian spirit and values. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is, to my mind, a direct product of Gandhian ideology; the central character is conceived as a replica of Gandhiji. Such things have happened all along in literary history. Buddhist ideology had also once swayed the minds and hearts of some sensitive writers and artists. So had the ideology of our saint-poets like Kabir and Nanak. And who can deny that our art and literature have been the richer for it? The same can be said of Marxist ideology. It has inspired great poets and writers like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Nazim Hikmet, Pablo Neruda, Agostino Neto, and earlier writers like Maxim Gorki. To my mind, every ideology which cherishes the well-being of man gives a new dimension to humanism and humanism, is the bedrock on which the citadel of literature stands.

But in this, somewhere, there is a catch. Times may change and an ideology may begin to lose its relevance and validity or may get

institutionalized and in course of time may develop its own contradictions. Or new forces may begin to assert themselves and the ideology may not be able to cope with the demands made on it. Such things have happened in the past too in human history.

However, where a writer is concerned, such developments are not of primary importance. What is important for him is that he should not allow an ideology to become a dogma; rather, it should help him see reality in a new light. It should not so colour his vision that he loses his own insight into things. If this happens, the ideology begins to exercise a stultifying influence on him and incapacitates his ability to see things for himself in the context of life's reality, and the seeker in him becomes a passive conformist whose pen loses its own creativity. The writer begins to scribble things mechanically.

I believe that ideologies, even after they become obsolete, retain something of abiding value which continues to enrich human culture. Gandhian ideology may have lost its validity in the context of our socio-economic programmes and planning, but the Gandhian spirit still serves as a beacon on the path of human progress. Similarly Marxist ideology continues to highlight the need to evolve a system which is free from exploitation and based on social justice and equality. I believe the same can be said about earlier ideologies such as Buddhism.

Where, then, does the writer's commitment come in? I think that if we must use the word commitment in the sphere of creative writing, though I personally do not regard it as a suitable word, the writer's commitment is to life and not to any -ism. Ideologies may help him develop his insight and perceptions, but it will ultimately be the writer's own inner personality that will confront life and seek the truth in it. And since humanism is the sheet anchor of literature, the contribution of ideologies becomes valuable for the writer where they strengthen his faith in humanism and human values, on which his literary endeavours ultimately stand.

*This is the text of a lecture delivered by Bhisham Sahni, who is a National Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study.