

The Secondary Writer

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Abstract

This paper attempts to build an understanding of the writings of the “secondary writer” in literature by establishing and decoding the relationship between three interdependent entities – the oppressor, the oppressed and the spectator (or the secondary writer) and how the experiences of the oppressed versus the spectator differ to create separate oeuvres which consist of vast, fundamental differences in style, subject matter and genre used by the author, employing various different texts; critically analyzing and drawing comparisons of each with the other.

Keywords: oppressed, oppressor, spectator, secondary, writer

INTRODUCTION

One of the few questions one may ask themselves, which becomes pertinent whenever examining any relationship of an author with their work, a character in a story or a moment in a poem is, can the oppressor ever know what the oppressed feels like? It is impossible for the wielder of power to taste the dust of being thrown to the ground, but then one may also question, is empathy and sympathy evoked in spectators of such heinous crimes, be of a magnitude so profound, that one may replicate the experiences of the oppressed to such an extent that it seems to become the spectator's own?

We may start by examining the relationship between the oppressor, the oppressed and the spectator, and the beings as standalone entities. I would like to firstly define what would be meant by spectator throughout the rest of this essay; spectator here would refer to any person who is not a member of the oppressed group or has faced any discrimination or abuse on the basis of their identity, but is a witness to the aforementioned and has either heard, read or seen (has been intimated with) the kind of discrimination and abuse faced by the underprivileged or oppressed group and person. The oppressed shall be the person or group facing the discrimination and abuse inflicted upon them first-hand by the oppressor, who shall stand for the person, group or institution inflicting the previously mentioned pains upon the oppressed. If the oppressor exists, the oppressed

shall naturally follow and the spectator to the relationship between the first two groups shall then exist as the uninvolved third-party. The position of the spectator isn't necessarily natural. When one speaks of relationships between binaries, there is no space for any third element; Claude Levi-Strauss came up with the notion of binary oppositions such as man-woman, day-night, left-right. In a culture, one of the compositions of this binary will acquire power over the other, and anything that threatens this structure is called taboo. One of the binaries shall always have dominance over the other, which is unconsciously preferred by any one of us, for example, in the relationship between absence and presence, presence is more dominant and absence is characterized by the idea of taking away presence, by the lack of presence of something, but if it were the other way round presence would be characterized as the absence of absence. This belief of a preferred binary is termed as logocentrism and it implies that humans might unconsciously side with one concept of the binary opposition. Therefore, we may also infer that even the spectators align themselves with either the oppressed or the oppressor. This is something to keep in mind as we explore the writers and their works on the basis of their caste, gender and race.

The spectator, thus, dons on the role of the secondary writer; secondary, for the role they hold is that of someone living the experience through the primary source, and not as the primary source itself. Another way to understand this is how the secondary writer is very similar to an actor, where one is attempting to understand the character by adopting it. Perhaps one may also state that the reader of the work is a spectator. Which directly means that, readers of a specific incident, imbibe the workings of the incident in such a fashion that they are able to reproduce the work, using the worlds and words of another being. The reader as a spectator thus becomes another secondary writer, secondary creator of the stories as well.

With regards to Maya Angelou, she, an African-American woman belonging to the category of the oppressed, possesses the personal experience that the spectators lack, which in my opinion, does affect the writings of both the categories in different fashions. The emotions of the oppressed do not feel secondary in nature as compared to the spectator, for example, in the poem “Bosom Friend” by Hira Bansode, one can see the poet's, and not just the narrator's pain; the poet seems to be giving vent to her feelings through her work. There is a certain sense of

intimacy with the subject which gives the writings of the oppressed an air of solemnity which the works of the spectators do not possess; a certain driving force behind the words which express their personal experiences. Their language is unapologetic, bordering on radical, as in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, which reminds us of Ambedkar's *Bhimayana*, both being really strong narrative agendas of Dalit autobiography, which contest the claim that discrimination on the basis of caste no longer operates as a social force in modern India. Speaking of Valmiki's *Joothan*, one of the most powerful lines which blatantly expresses the difference between the writings of the spectators and that of the oppressed are, "If I repeated his[the upper-caste teacher's] abusive words here, they would smear the nobility of Hindi. I say that because many big-named Hindi writers had wrinkled their nose and eyebrows when I had a character in my short story "Bail Ki Khal" (The Ox Hide) swear. Coincidentally, the character who swore was a Brahman, that is, the knower of Brahma, of God. Was it possible? Would a Brahman swear...?" The last line characterizes the feeling of disbelief felt in spectators of the crime; writers blind to the atrocities. As I stated earlier, one will always align themselves with one of the binaries, one shall always be dominant; no matter how sympathetic one is with the other group. The influence upon the writers is clear, does this not evidently mark the difference between the spectator and the oppressed. The spectator possesses a certain privilege which the oppressed lacks.

Furthermore, another aspect of interest to note is the notion of there being a "you" and an "I". Once again, classification of the binaries as two separate entities, there is no "them". This can be seen in the works of the oppressed groups, which cry out with a desperate need to be recognized - "Still I'll rise" (Still I Rise), "I was ashamed, really ashamed" (Bosom Friend), "I am African" (Telephone Conversation). These are instances of more than just first-person narratives, these are honest stories with vulnerable moments which speak of horrors felt, not merely imagined. Unlike the spectators who are much more muted, subdued with their feelings, wishing for change, but only wishing.

One of the most salient inferences to note, I believe, is the distinction between the genres of writing which may be employed by the spectator and the oppressed. A spectator shall never be able to pen an autobiographical account, in fact, the spectator shall always have to rely on figments of their imagination, therefore they are confined to fiction as in "Deliverance" by Premchand and "The Exercise Book" by Rabindranath Tagore, or as a person associated with the oppressed, a second-hand relationship with the woes of the oppressed, through having a direct relationship with them, as in "A Prayer for My Daughter" by W. B. Yeats. A non-fictional account that relays any personal sorrows shall not be penned by them and on the contrary, there is another

disadvantage to their position in terms of the authenticity of the words they are writing; that may be one of the most prominent distinctions between the writings of the oppressed and those of the spectators.

We may compare the poems of Yeats and De Souza to better understand the implications of being a part of the oppressed group. When Yeats writes his poem, there is a sense of melancholy to his words but the poem as a whole cannot be called progressive in any way; one may infer, it is only after the birth of his daughter, Anne Butler Yeats, that the poet himself reflects upon the kind of life that may be led by his daughter, yet at the same time he maps out the conventional path she must follow in order to "be happy still" (A Prayer for My Daughter, Line 73). In fact, in the final stanza we note how the poet declares, "And may her bridegroom bring her to a house/ Where all's accustomed, ceremonious; how but in custom and in ceremony/ Are innocence and beauty born?/ Ceremony's a name for the rich horn/ And custom for the spreading laurel tree." (A Prayer for My Daughter, Line 74-80). Custom is what marks a woman's life, it is tradition that shall dictate her and mark her, which is something Yeats actively seeks for his daughter, which compared to De Souza's silent plea to introspect upon the same traditions and customs, is in strong contrast. "Marriages are Made" by Eunice De Souza, clearly shows the double standards a woman has to face in her lifetime, via a small event in her life; her marriage. Being a woman, De Souza is highly sensitive to the undercurrent of inequality rampant in Indian homes, which is expressed in her writing, as compared to Yeats. It is quite interesting to note these different views on marriage. Even when we look at the colonizers of India, women weren't treated with equality, an example of which can be seen in the *Comedy of Manners, The Rover* by Aphra Behn, in which Willmore the rake declares, "Lead on, no other Dangers they can dread, /Who venture in the Storms o' th' Marriage-Bed"

(*The Rover*, Act V, Scene 1). De Souza's account of her cousin, Elena's marriage, is almost poignant, where we see her prodded and examined like a commodity. Even when we read Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl", there is a terrible anger which is evoked in the reader to see the gender-stereotypes being imposed upon the young girl in the poem by the elderly women of her family, a man shall never have to worry about any of the tasks described brilliantly in the poem; the most hard-hitting line defining this separation being, "you are not a boy, you know" (Girl, Jamaica Kincaid). Yeats is a man, and his words, "Helen being chose found life flat and dull/ And later had much trouble from a fool,/ While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,/ Being fatherless could have her way/ Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man/ It's certain that fine women eat/ A crazy salad with their meat..." (A Prayer for My Daughter, Lines 25-31) and "An intellectual hatred is the worst,/ So let

her think opinions are accursed.” (A Prayer for My Daughter, Lines 56-57) portray the poet’s ignorance and insensitivity towards the opposite sex. He is but a spectator, and this instance shows how sometimes there is more to a world than the eye can see, the observations he deems as absolute are in fact tainted with his own prejudices and the concept of “correctness” he has adopted as a man, towards a woman’s way of life. Sometimes the spectator is not cognizant of certain issues the oppressed may face because the oppressed’s way of life is unknown to them, it is a second-hand experience they are relating via their writings. The same issues are addressed differently.

I would now like to compare Premchand’s “Deliverance” with Maya Angelou’s “Still I Rise”. The difference in the gravity of the concerned authors’ pieces is blatant. Maya Angelou is not only a woman, but she is an African-American woman, which places on her shoulders the burdens of two oppressed classes. In Angelou’s own words, “All my work is meant to say ‘You may encounter defeats but you must not be defeated’. In fact, the encountering may be the very experience which creates the vitality and the power to endure.” This vitality and power to endure the crimes inflicted upon the oppressed is something which Premchand does not reflect in his story “Deliverance”. There is a sense of defeat and acceptance which laces his words, there is a sense of helplessness the reader feels while reading the story; Dukhi is Dukhi, sad and miserable throughout the story. There is no hint of a brewing revolution in Premchand’s work, the story is a third-person narration, there is no intimacy between the author and the words he is penning; it seems he is merely relating the touching account of Dukhi and his fate, he is just portraying the realities of Dalit atrocities, there is no power behind his work, he is not “revolutionary enough for the Dalit cause”. Premchand is a spectator. Dukhi does not fight back. What may the story have been like if Dukhi, the fictional protagonist, could write it himself, in reality? That is a question we must ponder upon, because the difference would be great.

Speaking of a revolution, the very title of Angelou’s poem is a call for the same, “Still I Rise”. Comparing it to “Deliverance” or Sadgati (a good death), Premchand’s title seems meek in comparison. The poetess shall still rise, even if she is knocked down and discriminated against. This sense of revolution is missing from Premchand’s account. The repetition of the words “I rise” echo the true sentiments of the poem and most importantly throughout the poem, Angelou questions her oppressors. She questions the racism, the sexism, the discrimination that had been meted out to her, and expresses how despite everything she has faced, she would rise.

She would not simply die, she brings neither hope with her, harbouring it in the recesses of her mind, unlike Dukhi, whose dark mind cannot be pierced by reason nor any hope for the future. “Did you want to see me broken?/ Bowed head and lowered eyes?/ Shoulders falling down like teardrops,/ Weakened by soulful cries” (Still I Rise, Lines 13-16), is this not the description of the mannerisms of Dukhi? The response to the inhumanity of Pandit Ghasiram is death, deliverance from the cruelties of this unfair world. The only hope is death then that is what Premchand’s work seems to suggest, “When he was alive nobody cared a straw about him. Now that he’s dead everybody in the village is making a fuss about him.” Do these lines not relate the same to us? There is no cry for change, unlike Angelou, who in the face of oppression cries out, “You may shoot me with your words/ You may cut me with your eyes,/ You may kill me with your hatefulness,/ But still, like air, I’ll rise” (Still I Rise, Lines 21-24). She shall live to see another day because she shall not stand the oppression. She shall rise unlike Dukhi who is left dead on the ground.

CONCLUSION

One can see that there is an obvious and palpable difference in the writings of the oppressed and the spectator, which has been expressed in this essay using various examples and comparative analyses. Issues when observed as an outsider (the spectator) tend to be imbibed, consumed and written about differently than the words which come from the mouth or pen of someone who has faced the oppression (the oppressed); the very impact of their work is different. It is clear therefore, writers who are part of the oppressed groups write in a different way from writers who are not members of oppressed groups but sympathetic to them.

REFERENCES

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