

THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

WRITERS' DREAMS AND RESPONSIBILITIES IN CREATING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING **Nabaneeta Dev sen**

I am very fortunate indeed to be here with you all to share the thoughts that I am sure all of us are bothered with every morning when we open the newspaper. What is this world coming to? What inheritance are we going to leave for our children? A planet full of violence and hostility, a world full of distrust, mistrust and breach of trust? A world of hatred and fear? Is this world worth living for? What are our children going to look forward to, hope for, work towards?

As far as I can see, there is just one answer to these questions at the moment. Money. Money has become the only aim in life. No doubt, a most flimsy aim. Money, we all know, does not help when the world comes to an end. A Tsunami or a marauding attack on the World Trade Center has taught us how useless money can be when either Mother Nature or human nature falls out of sync with the rest of the system. How easily we have forgotten Hiroshima Nagasaki! How easily we have closed our eyes to Dachau and Auschwitz! How we have forgotten the picture of a shocked, naked child burnt by a napalm bomb screaming and running down the street of a village in Vietnam! We have a very short memory indeed! And we are not teaching our children the history that matters, the history of human flaws that will make them stop and think. Instead, we are leading them down the blind lane of material ambition towards an inner emptiness that a thousand malls and discotheques will not fill up.

It is because of this shortness of our memory that we need our historians, our philosophers, our scientists, and especially our writers to remind us of the honest human condition through their work. I said, especially the writers, not because the rest have less responsibility but because literature reaches out to the common man much more than academic writings do, with a fixed circle of readers according to their specific area of interest. Literature's sweep is far more extensive as it touches readers from all walks of life, the scientists as well as the shopkeeper, the porter as well as the priest.

Literature includes everyone and belongs to all. It is everyone's property that speaks on behalf of all mankind. All you need to appreciate literature is a genuine love of life and a reading habit. I believe, it is therefore important that the writer does more than just entertain the reader. It is also the writer's responsibility to highlight the values that matter, and good literature can do it without preaching. It can achieve this purpose just by being truthful and honest about life, and by sincerely trying to search for the aim of human life. I speak to you today not as a Professor of Comparative Literature, but as a humble writer who is aware of her responsibilities, and also as a grateful reader who has gained a lot of strength and courage from literature and has, therefore, much expectations from good literature.

Crisis in civilization and a writer's alternatives It sounds like an old-fashioned cliché if someone declares today that the aim of all arts including literature is to seek a world where mankind can coexist with nature in an atmosphere of fearless warmth, trust and freedom. True. But finding joy in the simple things of life and compassion for our fellow creatures are the ultimate teachings of all religions and probably the ultimate end of civilization itself. But that is also the secret of creative energy.

Creativity is God's gift to mankind. It cannot grow freely when it is used as a tool for hatred, as creativity is, by definition, contrary to destruction. Awareness of the responsibilities of being human and of our human failures are the foundations upon which creativity rests. It leads us to a quest for peace and brings a natural aversion to hatred. What we are doing to ourselves today throughout the world is driving this planet towards the final moment, when all creation ends and total destruction takes over.

We are here to discuss how literature can help us to build a united world, a world where harmony and

understanding reign over hatred and hostility. In order to do that, I feel it would be better not to generalize and grope in the air, but to take specific examples and try to examine how far a writer, as a sensitive, creative, responsible human being, can foresee a moral crisis in human civilization, a failure in human understanding, a breakdown of trust and self-respect. And how he can think of possible alternatives to counteract the dangers. A poet, because of his inner eye, is a visionary; he has positive dreams for this universe. And because he cares for this universe, he is also practical and pragmatic.

With his knowledge of the past firmly rooted in reality and his imagination and instinct flying out far into distant future, he has a shrewd understanding of the present moment and can gauge the course that human history is about to take. So he is pained and worried about the future of mankind that his poet's vision can foresee. Let us take a familiar example, I mean Rabindranath Tagore, to examine how a writer can try till his last breath to build a world of human unity and understanding. Whether he succeeds or not, is another story. Our duty lies in the effort.

Rabindranath's role

Our poet used his visionary imagination to predict and offer solutions to the dangers that Western civilization was creating for itself and for the rest of the world, because the East too was blindly emulating the ways of the West, partly by choice and partly through values imposed by colonial educational policies.

The so-called mystic saint could very clearly see the logical, practical conclusions of a dangerous process that had already begun its course. And he tried to find solutions, tried to change the course of history as far as he could by spreading his anxious thoughts through speeches and writings and by actively working with the people.

Today we see Mahashweta Devi as an activist working with the Kheria Shabars in Purulia. Rabindranath was also very much of an activist, as we understand the term today, working with the local Santhals of Birbhum; he even began cooperative banking for them in rural areas. An incorrigible pacifist, he protested against all war and violence, denounced terrorism in every form, even when it was used as a device to achieve national freedom. He wrote against nationalism as a dividing and restricting force and suggested internationalism in its place at a moment when British India was experiencing the fervour of the nationalist movement.

Rabindranath was also one of the earliest environmentalists who initiated the process of afforestation to protect the land from erosion and to protect the earth from being polluted, and made planting of trees into an annual festival. He has a piece called 'A Message from the Forest' to mankind. A secular educationist per se, he did not want festivities of any formal religion in his ideal school at Santiniketan Ashram, for these festivals often differentiate, rather than bring children together.

Therefore the poet invented new secular festivals for the Ashram-seasonal festivities where everyone could participate wholeheartedly. These festivals included Barsho Sesh and Naba Barsho for summer, Barshà Mangal for monsoon, Shàradotsab for autumn and there was the Paush Melà, the winter fair where the tribals from nearby villages and the Ashram residents took part with equal interest. Then came the Basantotsab at Holi Purnimà (full moon day when Doljatrà is observed) to celebrate the appearance of colourful spring. Thus, a festival for every season, a festival for every child was conceived. Only a poet can visualize such a plan and execute it too.

Alternative education system

In his school, Tagore offered an alternative, indigenous education system, as opposed to the Western system. This he did because he felt children were steamrolled into an artificial discipline in a foreign mode quite unsuitable to their traditional cultural surroundings and kept away from the valuable touch of Mother Nature. In his school students walked barefoot to enjoy the touch of the grass and pebbles, to stand firmly on the ground, and classes were held under the shade of trees in mango orchards.

Music and art were a must for all.

He had encouraged the preservation of tribal culture while educating them in health, agriculture and other practical modern ways of survival. He wanted to give his people the best of both the worlds, the East and the West.

Yes, a poet, an intellectual, a writer could dream of all these; he could create visions for others as well, and take on all these responsibilities and more. His eyes travelled well beyond his little Ashram, and surveyed the whole world. Tagore had coined a wonderful word, a new term for mankind, the World-Man or Vishva-Màrab. And what can tell us more about world unity and international understanding than this single, tiny word? It contains everything that we might wish to say to each other at a moment of distress. Had Rabindranath been alive in 1989 he would have responded strongly to Fukuyama's 'End of History', an 18-page English article that Fukuyama wrote sitting in the airconditioned office of the Rand Corporation and published in The National Interest in the US in 1989.

Tagore had been writing for a very long period, and through a variety of literary genres in Bengali language sitting in the boiling heat of a remote village in British India. At times he did express his ideas in English as well, but in a rather elaborate poetic diction, cluttered with a heap of unfamiliar imageries which only helped to make the pieces unattractive to English language readers, and did not draw the attention of the Western world.

Concept of nationalism

As early as 1916 we hear Tagore lecturing in the U.S. on 'Nationalism', rubbishing the concept of 'Nation' as a harmful, selfish product of Western technology that promoted suspicion, competition and coercion instead of spreading the zest for cooperation, communication and consideration. Nationalism, he felt, was harmful to world peace and world unity. He called it a notion that breaks up the indivisible chord of the humankind by creating artificial barriers and whips up violent passions and hostilities under the guise of nationalism.

The concept of the nation breeds differences. It promotes war by encouraging man's hunger for power; it turns people into parts of the machine called the nation. In short, it teaches a mechanized existence. Then, when we need peace among the warring nations, we build another machine such as the League of Nations and try to produce machine-made peace that is forced upon them. Needless to say, such peace is bound to be short-lived. Thus, the present civilization which thrives on dividing up people, carries the seed of its own destruction within itself.

Tagore wrote in 1916 that race, religion and ethnicity only divide mankind and we urgently need a loose, broad, state structure, the concept of 'No-Nation' to accommodate all in their own space. Political power, he wrote, was dependent on economic power and could not be separated from it. He warned us of a world where 'the greed to possess more and more things' (the term 'consumerism' was not yet known) and a demand and supply policy that creates artificial demand among people to possess more and more material goods will bring about a day when technology will destroy the earth. He could foresee a time when Western civilization will lead itself and the world to destruction.

Tagore saw Western civilization as a civilization based on fear and not on love. A situation had been created when 'a watchful attitude of animosity against others was taken as a solution to their problems'. (Nationalism, p. 97). Tagore felt this was no permanent solution to human problems.

'We are confronted with two alternatives' he wrote, and added that 'It will be interminable competition, or Cooperation.' (p. 101). He predicted in the voice of a seer the outbreaks of racism and ethnic war, long before fascism raised its head in Europe. 'Those who are constantly developing their instinct of fight and the intolerance of aliens will be eliminated', he said (p. 101). The industry-commerce-military nexus in the Western civilization worried Tagore. He called the system 'the gigantic organization for hurting others and for warding off their blows' although he had no idea in 1916 how many billions of

dollars will be spent in the world for the purpose of so-called 'Defence' in another 50 years of time. 'Only those people have survived and achieved civilization who have the spirit of cooperation strong in them', he wrote (pp. 99-100). The idea of One World possessed him, even when India was only a colonized country.

Globalization

Then about Globalization. Yes, in 1916, Tagore agreed that technology was, on the other hand, bringing the world together. He said, 'The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you also must find a basis of unity which is not political' (p. 99). This basis, he felt, had to be a moral power which alone could hold mankind together. By moral power he meant 'the higher instincts of sympathy and mutual help' (p. 99). 'The people who are lacking in this higher moral power,' he wrote, 'and who therefore cannot combine in fellowship with one another must perish or live in a state of degradation.' (p. 99). Nearly a century later, needless to say, we are living upon this planet in a state of perpetual and pitiful degradation that seems only to increase day by day through more channels than one.

The solution

The keyword for Rabindranath to solve the crisis facing human civilization, perhaps, was transparency. Openness was all. No secret spying outfits, no shutting out of aliens through strict immigration laws, no secret societies for political activists, even if it is for human rights and the independence of a country. Open up your heart, and have an open mind, you'll solve most of your problems. Open up all your doors and windows, in your mind, in your politics, in your trade, in your culture. Let ideas freely flow through the peoples of the world, let us all be in touch with one another and exchange thoughts.

As an insignificant but sincere writer who has grown up in the shadow of this giant spirit, I accept whatever I am quoting from Rabindranath as a writer's answer to the crisis in today's civilization. I do not think the world has offered us better alternatives to make this world a better place for our children. Let us therefore welcome fresh air into our closed spaces; it will then wipe out false ideas and break down artificial barriers, because he felt, real differences among mankind should be recognized and not glossed over or bulldozed into oneness, yet an overall unity which exists should be respected.

It is the unity of human consciousness, the unity of emotional and intellectual sympathy and cooperation that we need. And this, the poet believed, was the whole object of human civilization. Without intellectual sympathy one race can never understand the problems of another. And this terrible lacuna may one day cause us to lose all that human civilization has acquired over the centuries. In this context Rabindranath juxtaposed two basic concepts that guide us today-competition and cooperation. One leads to war, and the other leads to peace.

Our bearded saint in a flowing gown had a perfect answer to Frances Fukuyama's question, that there could never be an end to human history unless we tried hard to commit suicide in the name of growth and freedom because of our relentless greed for power through economic and political competition.

The course that human history has taken in the 20th century and flowed into the 21st as well, would have pained Rabindranath no doubt, but would not have taken him by surprise. Although he had not heard the words that we live with, like the holocaust, or Hiroshima, or the 'Cold War' or My Lai, or Bosnia or Angola, or Rwanda or Tienanmen Square, or the Green House Effect, or 9 / 11, or Iraq, or Gujarat. And he did not live to see his country divided into three nations. Nor did he know of our pride of Pokhran.

He knew neither Khomeini nor Laden, neither Bush nor Modi, yet he knew exactly which route history was taking and tried to forewarn the world. He was no Nostradamus, nor a trilokdarshi rishi (a sage with a vision of the three worlds), he was only a poet, a true visionary who loved nature and mankind and wanted to protect this earth from destruction. He knew the deadly effects of suspicion, fear and

hatred among nations and communities, and the price of ethnic pride, the horrors of fundamentalism, or the danger of the planet brought about through thoughtless deforestation and poisoning of the earth, water and sky through technology (industrial wastes and nuclear tests). All these his visionary eyes had foreseen.

Positive dreams

Dreamers also have their nightmares. So Tagore tried to ward them off by implanting in our minds positive dreams. There are ways of doing it. And the poet had found myriad ways to offer us alternatives to the negative route that life had been taking. We can still listen to his call and find our path in the light of a story that he had written in 1941, just before his death. He begins his tale with this formulaic expression-Ek je achhe manush ('There lives a human being'). In narrating the story he makes two enormously important changes in the Bangla storytelling formula, 'Ek je chhilo raja' ('There was a king'). First, he changes its tense from the past to the present.

Secondly, he changes its subject from a king to a common man. Instead of 'there lived' he writes 'there lives', and instead of 'a king' he writes 'a human being.' These were the alternatives he offered to mankind in order to grapple with the crisis our civilization had created for itself, and which the world was passing through in 1941. The focus was to be shifted from the past glory to the present, not the present moment but the bartamàn, indicating the eternal presence of mankind upon this planet. And also a shift from the royalty to the common man-from the source of political power, to the source of moral strength. Not freedom from history, nor submission to it, but continuous adjustment to its needs, trying to mould its course, is what we need for the survival of the human spirit. Standing in the 21st century, when we are tormented by the course of history and we know not how to handle the pain, we can take heart from the words of a poet who had been telling the world what was needed for over a hundred years now. But the world does not listen to the voice of poets and thinkers any more, it only listens to the clinking of silver and to the booming of bombs.

We have all come across many great writers of the world who have thought seriously about a united world, about human understanding, and have expressed their thoughts sincerely in their writing. The Beatle poet John Lennon, for example, was perhaps the opposite of Rabindranath in his way of life, but in his own style he sends us the same message, makes the very same prayer in his lyrics, imagining a united world, a world without borders, a world of love and peace without war.

I chose Rabindranath as my example, because (a) I know him better than I know the others and (b) you too are just as familiar with him as I am and (c) in my modest reading experience, he is the only one with such width and depth of vision and such meticulous understanding of the future of human condition. He has dealt with the subject tirelessly over a period of fifty years in so many ways till he breathed his last. This he did through his poetry, through his songs, through his endless speeches and essays, letters and lectures, and public comments, even through his novels. Gora, for example, is an incomparable model of a united world, a world without borders where one can see the portrait of the World Man. In some respects, all great writers remain our contemporary, and so is Tagore.

It is therefore not surprising that what he has said yesterday, we are saying the same thing today. Great writers happen to be seers. They are truth-seekers and truth-tellers, and truth is not always palatable. It is a writer's duty to tell readers what life really is like. But telling half the truth is not enough. It is also a writer's duty to tell what life can be like, only if we make the effort to bring about the change. Reality is what we make real. When a world full of people genuinely try to unite in trust and goodwill, when there is no suspicion or hatred among individuals, it affects all, and perfect understanding among nations becomes a reality. That is what literature ultimately tries to achieve.

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