INSIDE . . .

Reviews, Extracts

THE HINDU
MAGAZINE LITERARY REVIEW

The spark of Nature's fire

Does the writer of today have the creative inspiration of the kind that Vyasa or Valmiki had? Does the prevailing literary climate augur well for the advent of a new century? MANOJ DAS raises these questions.

Not far from Badrinath in the Himalayas is a cave, believed since time immemorial, to have been the abode of Sage Vyasa. It was here that he dictated his "Mahabharata" to the God-child Ganesha, the former promising never to pause or falter while dictating, the latter promising never to write down a single line without appreciating its import.

Thus, in a remote past, began the significant tradition of inspired composition and its empathic evaluation going together.

Except the murmurs of a transparent stream which seemed to have sprung for the sole benefit of the occupant of the cave, no sound was heard. Amid the silver peaks farther up could be seen a small shrine, supposed to be the tomb of Draupadi, the first to fall during the great journey, the Mahayatra, undertaken by the Pandavas.

If silence can be described as vibrant, it was unmistakably there, a silence that was not only an absence of noise, but also made up of the awe and reverence with which, through the ages, admirers of the great poet had beholden that abode in the snowy solitude.

Ganesha, being a god with a subtle body, would not require even a table and a chair. But what amenities had Vyasa to help him sustain his inspiration and its articulation? Perhaps some fruit-bearing trees around the cave and the gracious stream of the Ganga were all.

Can a writer today have the creative inspiration of the kind a Vyasa or a Valmiki had in an age when there was no scope for an immediate circulation of one's work, or hope of receiving favourable reviews, no printing press, publisher, distributor, and no advance or promise of royalty – no question of commerce of any kind?

It is often said that poets like Vyasa or his predecessor, Valmiki, were inspired poets. Their creative urge was in keeping with the universal law of expression following which Nature blooms, the rainbow smiles or a baby begins to babble, but with an added higher motive, for, what they created expanded and ennobled the consciousness of humanity, informed it more about the problems and promises of life than it would ordinarily know and prepared it to face the former and realise the latter.

Such inspired works could be timeless. They could appeal to people even in a milieu radically different from that of their origin.

A dialogue that factually took place in a Mumbai household some years ago was later found to be circulating as a joke, but bereft of its subtle aspect. A young industrialist asked his little son, "What is the lesson you learnt in your school today?"

"An enchanting story – long but wonderful – called the 'Ramayana'."

"Will you narrate it in brief?" asked the father.

The son's face paled. "It won't amuse you, Father," he pleaded. But the father insisted on hearing the story and at last, after a thoughtful pause, the unwilling son said, "The hero and heroine went for a picnic to the forest. The villain kidnapped the heroine. The hero sent an SOS to a well-wisher who despatched an army with rifles and rockets as well as a battalion of guerrillas. The villain and his horde were all shot dead and the heroine rescued!"

"Good God! Is this what your teacher told you about the Ramayana?" demanded an exasperated father.

"Oh Father," said the boy with a chuckle, "Had I told you exactly as she narrated it to us, you would not have believed a word of it!"

The significant element in the incident (which subsequently got lost) is, the child had been charmed by the story, but he did not believe that his father, a man of utterly materialistic outlook, had any capacity to enjoy it! Hence his editing out the anachronisms.

But, of course, the materialist father did love the story, as did his son, the latter a product of even a denser materialistic climate.

Something obviously mystifying, if not mysterious, seems to be ingrained in such works which survive the vicissitudes of ages and changing ideas. That, perhaps, is the contribution of the genius, activated by inspiration intervening from some higher plane.

This concept of intervention is not peculiar to India. "A worthless poet may, when inspired, produce excellent poetry, while an able poet, when uninspired, may be unable to compose anything of value," said Plato. It was a tradition with poets in all ancient civilisations to invoke the Muse in some form – and that was only another way of looking for inspiration or an acknowledgement of its role.

Mystics say that the creative inspiration does not flow from any single plane. The "Bhagavad Gita" and "Moby Dick," the "Kural" and "The Old Man and the Sea" may all be inspired works, but the nature of inspiration in each case is different from that in any other. Again, much depends on the medium who receives it, his capacity to render it into a language. Can one articulate and transmit one's inspiration in its pristine purity?

The genius too receives from some high fount
Concealed in a supernal secrecy
The work that gives him an immortal name.
The word, the form, the charm, the glory and grace
Are missioned sparks from a stupendous Fire;
A sample from the laboratory of God
Of which he holds the patent upon earth,
Comes to him wrapped in golden coverings;
He listens for Inspiration's postman knock
And takes delivery of the priceless gift
A little spoilt by the receiver mind
Or mixed with the manufacture of his brain;
When least defaced, then is it most divine.

Sri Aurobindo: "Savitri"

With the passage of time the concept of inspiration seems to have become diluted and sometimes confused with the ideas of stimuli and motivation. The first two are complementary to each other and even the third, motivation, need not necessarily be an impediment to creativity. Stimuli often come from external encounters and they may awaken the inspiration lying dormant in a genius.

A classic example is that of the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, the first in Latin America to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. Mistral, after an early personal tragedy, led a rather lonely life outside her duty as a teacher. Once, while returning home, through a stretch of cornfields, she saw a labourer, exhausted after hours of hard work, resting near the fields. She was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. A few boisterous rowdies passing by made some vulgar comments on her condition and that suddenly created a tumult in Mistral. She caught the vibration of a certain helplessness that pervaded the very foundation of motherhood. That night she wrote her first poem and the theme was motherhood. Indeed, practically all her poems are on mother and child – and they are a household love in Chile.

The stimuli might have acted in other writers in a hundred other ways – a Valmiki provoked to take a hunter to task and in the process coming out with the couplet that becomes the Mother of versification, a Kalidasa aroused to avenge his humiliation, a Shakespeare to earn a living after fleeing his home town where he is a tramp wanted in connection with the disappearance of some little edible creature from the landlord's estate (alas, how many kids, lambs, and fowls

Continued on page XIX

The spark of Nature's fire

Continued from page XIII

are since stolen, but humanity is still left with only one Shakespeare), an Ilango Adigal prompted by the report of the strange spectacle of a luminous Kannagi rising to heavens, so on and so forth.

But, while the stimuli are generally a helper, the role of motivation can be dubious. Creativity, alas, can take a shady and even macabre turn when motivation enslaves inspiration and stimulation, but, of course, only if the writer allows it to do so.

Not long ago, a "successful" writer told this author, "It was an irresistible urge or inspiration that made me write in my youth. The very ability to write and to complete a novel or a short story was my joy. I don't know when I forgot that serene reward for my efforts. Today I write keeping in view the market, the possible success of my story when converted to a TV serial or a film, in other words, money. I get satisfaction, but that early joy is only a memory."

The literary comprehension of events, language and style which the first spells of creative urge help a writer to master and command, remains with him even when the character of his urge has changed and the writer continues more with his craft than his art. But sparks of inspiration, be it from a superior or an inferior plane, can still lurk behind the writer's craft, even if pale and sporadic.

We can see five orders of literature or literary expression. First, there is the inspired literature proper – immortal works of the great epics and classics. Barring a few exceptions like "Paradise Lost" where Milton must justify the ways of God to man, such works do not profess or pronounce a purpose. They simply elevate our consciousness or enlighten us about the complexities and the major issues of life or cultivate in us a sense of quest. Or, at least, as E.M. Forster saw it, "What is so wonderful about great literature is that it transforms the man who reads it towards the condition of the man who wrote, and brings to birth in us also the creative impulse." ("Two Cheers for Democracy)."

Works devoted to achieve a worthy goal, a well-intended purpose, constitute the second stream. Some 2,000 years ago Pundit Vishnu Sharma experimented with a novel way of educating three princes who behaved like bulls before a red rag the moment they saw a teacher. He began by telling them tales – tales on the ways of the world, of the kind and the cruel, of the wise and the foolish, a tale within a tale and one leading to another, each one presenting a moral, though not moralistic, the total impact of which – the compendium famous as the "Panchatantra" – was bound to graduate the listeners in dimensions of pragmatism.

The "Jataka" stories on the other hand had a pronounced didactic purpose to serve. From these works of antiquity to Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" or our contemporary Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mocking Bird" exposing the barbarity of racialism, Mulk Raj Anand's "Two Leaves and a Bud" highlighting the plight of tea estate labourers in a colonial era, are undoubtedly inspired works stimulated by a purpose. Works of a writer committed to a political ideology can come under this category, provided the writer's faith in the ideology is genuine and the inspiration spontaneous. Gorky's "Mother" could become a classic, but a fat crop of titles on similar themes of later periods looks like a stretch of dry twigs.

That drawing clear lines between literary strata can be more arbitrary than in other disciplines, becomes evident when we try to place Somadeva's "Kathasaritsagara" or Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" or Boccacio's "Decameron" in one of the orders. They carry wisdom and excellent didactic elements, yet they amuse and entertain more than they teach. With such works for its towering light-houses, there stretches the third order, the vast domain of literature meant to entertain and amuse – and they are as varied as amusement and entertainment can be, extending, from a jolly genius like Wodehouse to the needy or ambition-stricken authors of yesterday's "penny dreadfuls" and today's dollar-pound-rupee dreadfuls.

Once again one of the frontiers of this order fades into a dark continent – the fourth domain of literature or rather what masquerades as literature – where the power of literature is used to titillate and exploit by clever and not so clever seducers and tricksters posing as litterateurs. Needless to say, pornography is their forte, for, as George Moore said, "A taste for dirty stories may be said to be inherent in the human animal" and these writers thrive on their rapacious readiness to pamper and appease the animal in man.

The fifth order – it is hardly one – is literature for utility. Just as there is nothing wrong in using art to beautify a sofa set, a table or a drawing room, there may not be anything objectionable in using literary phrases and imageries to promote consumerism as long as such applications do not amount to fraud or hoax. Limited powers of literature are yoked to the service of political manifestos and commercial broadsheets.

Proliferation generally leads to dilution and in literature neither of these two trends can be helped. That poses a veritable challenge to the reader who must put to greater use his capacity for discrimination. No teacher is required to teach a child to appreciate a flower. The power to do so is inherent in the child. The analogy is not-far-fetched in regard to distinguishing literature from the abounding fakery passing as literature. Intuition and instinct apart, aesthetic and intellectual orientation can go a long way in developing a sense of literary standards. As T. S. Eliot said, "The greatness of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards." (Religions and Literature).

The challenge for a genuine writer is no less. If he has to combat a number of visible foes eager to pervert his inspiration, more invisible ones lie in ambush. We live in an age when hedonism is glorified, thanks to a consumerist culture. Envy, lust and such values which are detrimental to one's peace and sense of dignity are encouraged systematically by professionally and psychologically planned campaigns. (To be aggressive is bad; yet "aggressive campaigns" are sought to be legitimatised.)

Consumerism has an uncanny, brazen way of perverting every move to its gross advantage. For example, family planning is a dire social need and hence the necessary devices must be popularised. Out do do so, in no time consumerism can turn its campaign to a clarion call for licentiousness. While mankind is in need of more and more laws against different kinds of violence, the film and television all over the world untiringly project violence in ever more sophisticated forms and cultivate a collective fascination for it.

Can a writer get over his conscious or unconscious fear of having to compete with such rival claimants to people's attention? It is a difficult question to answer, because he cannot be blamed for wanting in the faith that a society where the majority falls for wrong values can support his fidelity to his inspiration pure.

Also, fear haunts the writer today from several other nooks and corners. Could a Kashmiri writer, even when inspired to write against the ravagement of everything good and beautiful in that valley, settle down to do so without inviting senseless vengeance from any of the gun-totting tribes?

The dormant primitivism which today finds an atavistic upsurge as varieties of political tribalism, regional, casteist, et al, and unashamed personal ambition, threatens to throttle the free emergence of creative urge and, strengthened by a ruthless hedonism, will not hesitate to annihilate it, unless a very conscious and collective effort is made to protect it.

It will be the greatest tragedy if the human spirit, if not wrecked, is allowed to be hamstrung by an unbridled upsurge of a titillating, savage anti-culture. Despite earth-shaking events, if the first half of the 20th century in India saw an epic like Sri Aurobindo's "Savitri" and works of a Tagore or a Bharati, must we usher in a new century into the swampy climate of cynicism rapidly building up in the closing years of the departing epoch? ■