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Writing in Troubled Times

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The Lancaster International Fiction Lecture is a joint venture between Litfest (Lancaster and District Festival Ltd) and the Departments of Languages & Cultures and English Literature & Creative Writing at Lancaster University.

It is for me a great honour to have been asked to deliver the second Lancaster International Fiction Lecture. I thank the members of the departments of Languages and Cultures, and English Literature and Creative Writing, of Lancaster University for giving me this chance to share my thoughts with you. I am particularly obliged to Bill Swainson for putting me at ease by clarifying the aims and scope of this lecture series.

Speaking formally is not my favourite mode of expressing myself, especially at an event organised by academics. Their penchant for theorisation is not my forte. Their discourse needs closure of some sort. Fiction, my field, is happier in ambiguity and open-endedness. That may appear disappointingly inconclusive to you.

But the Lancaster Fiction Lecture invites the writer to share her personal history and bring to the fore the ways in which the world is seen/investigated/understood in her language and culture, even as abstract issues are brought up. This is a rich way to explore how fiction as an international art form came into my language and literature, and was plagued and blessed at the same time.

I must tiptoe into the past to re-enter the present I wish to speak of. Fiction emerged in the West. In the nineteenth century it spread widely across other cultures and languages including mine and realistic fiction laying bare the society around became the need of the hour. We were then a

colonised country and the new form came as a hegemonic gift from the rulers.

Which means that fiction in my society, like in the rest of the colonised world, took birth in a relationship of inequality, never a propitious beginning for the uninhibited growth of any form. Inequality fostered inferiority, and the subject people aspired to mould themselves in the image of their masters. Their own languages and cultures began to be relegated to the margins, the alien culture took centre stage, and the discourse got increasingly derivative. What's more, the authoritarian imperialist regime sought to regulate even the imitation.

But such stories always come mixed. The relationship between the coloniser and the colonised was never one of pure adulation or pure imitation. Simmering discontent at the subjection wormed its way into the adulation, and the rich cultural lineages of the colonised cut into the imitation.

The colonial masters, true to their hegemonic mission, tried their best to encourage their native subjects to follow the prescribed western protocol and canon. They also introduced measures to come down heavily on seditious use of the selfsame protocol and canon. But literature and creativity – my concerns here – have their inner founts of independent energy and dynamics and burst forth, asserting their own grit and independence, through adversity also. Not surprisingly, then, even in subjection, writers devised their different ways to subvert. With creativity, courage and cunning they traversed the tricky terrain of writing in troubled, authoritarian times.

Fiction came to us from the West. Creativity did not. A long lineage of art and literature enriched imagination and expression here. That was not going to just die and fall away. Despite the success of the rulers' hegemonic drive, as fiction grew roots in different cultural-linguistic milieus, it underwent a multicultural fertilisation and blossomed differently. That cross-border pollination – not just geographical spread – truly gave fiction its international form.

The new 'realistic' way of telling a story, imbued with the need to reform and inform society, came in weavings of traditional story-telling, often down oral trajectories, with all its inventiveness, cadences and magic realism. Yes, magic realism I said. Eastern tale-telling employed metaphor and exaggeration par excellence, and its dramatic and colourful repertoire could make even a straight social description surreal, magic-real. That was its bare reality! In this colourful society with its endless linguistic, regional, religious, and other pluralities.

It took a while to happen. But it did happen. Creativity and Imagination, both ever self-willed and wayward, followed the dictates of the Master and the learners thus far and no further and wove their own tapestries from the old and the new.

Another messing that took place under colonialism was with language. With serious repercussions. English became the superior tongue. Good education supposedly came in it. The notion of education changed, and literacy became its defining pre-condition. Mother tongue got inferiorised or

else speciously glorified. A new sensibility emerged that treated the unlettered as uneducated, and English entered even everyday exchanges of the mundane kind.

Here is a telling anecdote from that formative phase in the nineteenth century about Debendranath Tagore, father of India's Nobel Laureate in Literature, Rabindranath Tagore. A learned aristocrat and progressive religious leader, Tagore Senior refused to receive a letter from a friend because his address on the envelope had been written in English. He could sense that this was but the thin end of the wedge – here it looks innocuous but it will slowly inch out the mother tongue to the margins.

No surprise, some of the foremost pioneers of modern Indian literature began their creative journey by writing in the masters' language. Bankim Chattopadhyay famously wrote his first novel, *Rajmohan's Wife*, in English. That one experience taught Bankim the meaning of the mother tongue, and he went on to enrich Indian fiction through his Bangla novels. For decades thereafter, until the 1930s, all the Indian fiction that is worth remembering was written in Indian languages. And despite a few good Indian writers of fiction in English, there would be no creative audacity in the use of the language until G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatter* (1948). Still later they would even invent their own Englishes and merrily turn the language on its head!

A sort of amnesia set in among the intelligentsia. A sort, because memory has a way of surviving subliminally, subterraneanly. Lore and lineage live on through osmosis.

Three trends, thus, marked Indian fiction from its inception: first, a purpose-filled literary responsibility to society and not to itself; two, a skewed relationship with language, one's own and the foreign one; and three, a political dispensation intruding upon a writer's solitude and leisure. These trends have since entrenched themselves deeper.

This is what I have inherited! Now, if fiction must be an instrument for societal regeneration, national awakening, and political assertion, and if it is the writer's responsibility to inform/reform society, pure story-telling cannot, must not, be the writer's primary concern. Further, if the regime has its Big-Brother-is-Watching ways, the writer must watch out. What's going on out there in society is overpowering and so overcrowding that it intrudes everywhere, and the private and the public, the home and the world are difficult to keep apart. It may be an exciting place where everything is a simmering story; but we are expected to feel obliged to tell these pressing stories urgently, and that makes it an oppressive place also. In which language to tell the stories, is a vexed question and adds to the pressure.

To underscore the point further let me reiterate, we were already a society whose vocabulary was without a word for privacy. Except in contexts of religious-spiritual retreat. Let me put that absurdly to stress a point – that the absent word, privacy, was yet more absent for women, in the largely patriarchal society. We were watched by the guardians of social order, and society recognised no windows and doors for shutting it out and allowing us to retire into solitude.

Add to that being watched politically, and you will get the idea. The Word, seen as always dangerous and prone to be seditious, must be checked. Subtly if possible, brazenly if necessary. But checked without fail. This is infinitely worse than the Society's intrusions because it can at any time become arbitrary and paranoid. That leads to chaos. Fear too.

This is the overarching picture and the overarching value system, not the whole truth. Women negotiated their spaces and especially in the national movement came out on to the streets as well. The writer, too, negotiates constantly and steals her moments.

Let me re-enter the present and the place of my birth and upbringing. Let me tell my story knowing it is not my story alone. My geographical locus, South Asia, North India. My time, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My mental locus, literature. That sums up my world. In another manner of speaking, that sets the entire vast world upon me! The vast world is more and more the writer's home today.

I studied – of course! – in schools where the medium of instruction was English and which were run by real Whites! That was in small towns where the vernacular – Hindi – flourished better than in the bigger urban centres. My Hindi – colloquial and colourful – came from informal and personal quarters – from my mother, popular journals and magazines, merry-making, religious and ritual performances; and my English primarily from books and a formal flawed education. In school we read Enid Blyton, at home Indian lore and writings.

I knew I wanted to write. But which language should I do it in? English and Hindi were a hodgepodge in my head. Like many of my predecessors, I did try English but Hindi chose me, like it did many of my predecessors. For creativity and anything personal, the mother tongue shows it is a prenatal connection and in one's blood, if not in one's most conscious self, and for some of us it is only about retrieving it. That is a struggle of another kind, time-consuming, but not doomed.

I wrote and it was mostly assumed it must be in English. In Hindi, people would roll their eyes wide, in horror, sympathy, amazement, what not! Why in Hindi, why not in English? To this day I am asked that, and no one thinks the question is odd: why are you writing in your mother tongue and not in the 'alien' tongue!

I also continued reading. As an adult I read much of Victorian literature. We often knew streets of London and the English countryside better than our own villages and towns! Then came Russian, French and other European, American and South American fiction. And later literature, primarily fiction, from anywhere and everywhere – Japan, China, Iceland, Africa.

World fiction – and art – reveal other ways of seeing, being, expressing. That is wonderful and, surely, hones my aesthetic sensibility.

But let me go back to beginnings which never end. I wanted to write. I wanted to be alone with myself. But even in humdrum ways the outside did not allow easy quiet.

Let me take you on a short everyday walk down an ordinary street, by reading out a few passages I once wrote, to illustrate this point.

I read: ‘It takes less than 10 minutes from her home to her studio. But still as she reaches out a hand to creak open the gate, she feels again that great wave of tiredness. A whole life-long tiredness! Or is it the dust and smoke that will lace her way at the start of the day?’

‘In this part of the world the early morning air shows up the blackness of the rest of the day even more clearly. School buses and chartered buses, milk vans and more vans loaded with bread, eggs, bananas, race along spewing smoke that is not gas but a solid block which only a knife can chip away.

‘The first thing she does is to adjust her dupatta so that it covers not just her chest but also her head and across her nose too. So that instead of that blackness, she may only inhale the staleness she exhales.

‘The street is already up and alive, and lost in the shit of humans and animals in all variety of hues and blobs strewn across the side walk, lies a forgotten dawn.

‘Boys wait for their bus and chat raucously and even in between the lingua franca of English, mouth rude abuses in Hindi. All abuses in their etymology insult the woman’s body. She has wished on occasions to stop and give them a piece of her mind, but the boys are innocent, just growing up in the casual machoness of such abuses, unmindful of their etymology.

‘And unmindful of the abuses, more mindful of the English dividing them, sit the women from villages herded here from far and near to build global apartments and offices.

Their saris hitched up to their thighs, unmindful even of the much-trumpeted allure of the female body oozing down the Bollywood film posters, high above the road just behind them.

‘It is a street where politics and the world mingle. Village and town and East and West, and animals, from the two-legged to the many-legged kinds. The gutter stinks, the refuse from it piled high and squiggling with worms and waiting for the municipality trucks to come, whisk it away. Before which the dust-laden, pollution-laden breeze will do it – whisk it not away but right back into the gutter. And everywhere! On to the road now full of air-conditioned cars, playing high quality Indian or Western classical music, if the driver is of a respectable age, and pop-filmi Indian or Western if the age is carefree and wanton. On to the tent-like shelters of the migrant construction workers made of leftover bricks, plastic sheets, tyres and tatters and rods and rubbish, the inmates sitting crouched around a television set, a top priority procurement got going by pulling, twisting, and definitely stealing wires and electricity and cable connections from nearby electricity poles and houses.

‘While their children play badminton with a discarded shuttlecock and discarded unmatching sandals for rackets. It is not by magic, but by politics that these sandals and such things can turn into knives or pistols or at least a tool not just to hit a shuttlecock.

‘She trudges past them, bag in hand, well covered from top to toe, like it is a cold winter’s day on this hot summer street. Or else like it is not mere body parts but gold and silver that she has tucked away in the folds of her clothes.

The vegetable vendor, who is hollering out creative advertisements in colloquial Hindi to attract buyers to his cart, on seeing her breaks out into an interspersed-with-English invitation, to show her he, too, is educated, has dignity, so what if he is, and she is not, a vegetable guy.

‘It is ten minutes past. She stands before the door of her studio, ready to push it open. Will it be like crossing over into another world? Shutting the door behind her and with it the world of teeming, troubled relationships of class and caste and community and gender and race and age, full of the geopolitics of the region? Enter a moment personal and hers and free?’

‘She shuts the door behind her and the first thing she does is to throw off her dupatta and breathe as if freed....’

But could she – could I – shut out that world and enter a new one? The outside enters with her and through every pore and cranny and into the room, into her soul, into her writing. Making it a site for protest.

Do I want, as a condition to the troubled historical moment and legacy I am born into, compulsory membership of a protest movement? I am disturbed by this lack of distance between the ‘truth’ and me. Restless for the solitude I am not getting. Cursed that I cannot be anything apart from my society. Desirous of a free realm of imagination, freed of this overpowering societal impingement.

I crave freedom, irresponsibility and adventure. I crave a creativity that accords language, sound, shape and story equal respect. The fun of literature, its own truth, its auto-referentiality. No court cases to be fought out here. Your

serendipitous layers speak – to laugh, to search, to discover. Without fear. In good faith and hope. Free from external prescriptions, proscriptions and censors. Discharging my responsibility to be ‘irresponsible’ and adventurous and venturing into the hidden and the unknown, to discover new things, unexpected things, hidden away things. To laugh and be playful. Never disrespectful but always and ever irreverent. A panel in a temple depicts a god pissing, and the stream is falling straight into a prayer fire lit by a fellow god, but there is love and laughter and jollity between them, no disregard or disrespect.

Where is the room for such irresponsibility, irreverence and play in our troubled times, the writer in me worries. Where is the writer’s privilege and right to be in the studio, without the world pressuring her to come out on the street and hold aloft banners and give public statements, the writer in me wonders. The writer in me looks for ways to evade the ghost looking over her shoulder and dictating what to write and what to not touch.

I constantly navigate my way through this maze. That is all I am doing – succumbing to the urgency of the world and turning back to the aesthetics and freedom of a literary time and space away from the din. My nerves are sometimes frayed by this tug of war, but I carry on.

Confused but creative.

That word reminds me of another narrative of mine. From another time. This time it is not the daily street but an overpowering drama in which my country was engulfed in riots, bloody animosity between its two major communities,

and a changing mental landscape was emerging where even the ‘educated’ were speaking a violent language of revenge. How do you ignore something so totally in your face?

So I wrote: ‘Confusion. Really that’s all I can write about. That’s all I am, we are, at the moment. A moment perhaps so fraught, so overwhelming that the distance between thought and feeling shrinks, maybe vanishes. If literature is about subtlety, understatement, deflections, detachment, then can there be literature at such a moment? When the “outside” turns so invasive that it is as if no “inside” space remains for the writer. What is the writer without solitude? I don’t know. I can’t judge. Though, when there is leisure and time for literary debate, I might say why not this kind of literature too, that there isn’t only one kind of literature, the canvas of literature accommodates many modes, many transgressions, and different times and different compulsions strain at the borders of different literary maps, reshaping them if need be.

‘I stand caught in the moment which will not pass me by. I cannot wait for heart and mind to emerge clear and apart before I start writing. It is like being caught in a storm which has to be dealt with right there and then. Right here and now. But what sense can be made of scenes whipping around in a storm?... No matter, I write, as witness, not analyst. A collage emerges where continuities crack up, stories turn upside down, dismembered objects fly, clarities are cloudy... Ordinary. Absurd.’

It became my novel, *Hamara Shahar Us Baras (Our City that Year)*. About communities going chaotic and crooked in their centuries-old relationships. Friendships turn suspicious and humourless, identities sharpen and become

exclusionary. The mob takes over the personal space and Daddu, the novel's grand old protagonist, falls and his dentures fall out, robbing him of his dignity. He retires into silence, which hangs like a metaphor through the novel.

But I want to breathe happy too. Just tell a story. No lessons to be learnt or taught. Its fun and beauty its message. Its language itself an entity, a grand, majestic, and mysterious entity.

I was sitting on a roof of the kind we have in plenty – undulating roofs, hunched close together, cascading one after another across a sprawling neighbourhood. The walls below house a conservative, patriarchal life. But you climb up from this end and me from that and we sit huddled intimately in a third corner up on the roof, so what transgressions can be checked now! No frowns here, just romance and merriment.

The novel became *The Roof Beneath Their Feet*. About two women, not a man and a woman, incidentally.

Somehow I learn on. One day breathing easier, another day breathless. But the pressure of writing in troubled times is always lurking. The world was never an untroubled place. Pain, grief, distress, suffering, they are the fountainhead of literature. But the trouble threatening literature, notably fiction, today is very different. It comes from an authoritarianism that is fast effacing the separation between the personal and the political, the home and the world, with a view to destroying dissent and imposing conformism.

Authoritarianism is on the prowl everywhere, turning the world into a scared new place. Even societies that believe

themselves to be immune to the looming threat are exposed to it. We are all too familiar with the ways in which authoritarianism everywhere is seeking to entrench itself. Coercive use of institutions and instruments of the State apart, it seeks to so control education and every possible means of communication as to indoctrinate people and manipulate their thoughts and feelings. Media of all kinds, rapidly ceasing to be the means of free and frank exchange and generation of ideas, are just echoing the powers that be. Social media is replete with prejudices and uses rumours to set off waves of intolerance. Moral policing, as a sequel, is fast gaining ground. There are instances of powerful respectable publishers jettisoning works of profound importance. They are inserting in their contracts clauses requiring authors to undertake that their work contains nothing seditious, nor anything likely to hurt people's sentiments and, thereby, disturb public peace. Dialogue as a way of expressing disagreement is too easily replaced by violence and punishment, often countenanced by the State.

Let me recount my last conversation with Intizar Hussain, the great novelist from Pakistan. I wanted to tell him I loved his novel, *Aage Samandar Hai* (The Sea Lies Ahead), which I had just read. I called him up. Someone picked up the phone and said 'Sorry, this is a hospital where he is admitted and this is not a good time.' But Intizar Saheb heard it was me. The next voice was his which did not say 'hello' nor waited for my 'hello.' He burst out in pure distress: '*Kya Geetanjali Bibi ab aap bhi Pakistan hue jate hain!*' ('What, my dear Geetanjali, you, too, are becoming Pakistan!')

I must reiterate: India, in going down the Pakistan route is but a microcosm of what is happening elsewhere in our world. The Word is indeed endangered. The need to save it is more urgent than ever before.

The writer in me worries and fears. The writer in me carries on...

Geetanjali Shree is the author of five novels and several story collections. Her work has been translated into English, French, German, Serbian and Korean. She was born in Mainpuri, India, in 1957. She has received and been shortlisted for a number of awards and fellowships. *Tomb of Sand*, translated from the Hindi by Daisy Rockwell and published by Tilted Axis Press, 2021, is her third novel to be translated into English and the first to be published in the UK. With Daisy Rockwell she is the joint winner of the 2022 International Booker Prize. She currently lives in New Delhi.