

1

Theorising Resistance and Creativity*

Resistance as a term is very hard to define; it has several shades such as non-conformism, protest, propaganda, commitment, criticism; it works in different ways for different people, adopts a variety of means and mediums, is not necessarily always a conscious move and it often ends up in censorship and controversies relating to the obscene or the absence of aesthetics. Furthermore, our responses are even more differently ranged. We react to it from our own location in history, class, religion and ideology. Neither the term nor the responses to it can be uniformly defined or classified. My focus in this paper is, however, somewhat different. I wish to explore the relationship between resistance and creativity on the one hand and the interaction between intellect, imagination and experience on the other. The latter also draws attention to the role of the individual and his socio-cultural contexts. For this purpose my references are going to be to four different artists, writers who have evolved differently but each one has resisted prevalent structures and ideologies.

Moving a little away from this, briefly I refer to the location of resistance in postcolonial studies and wish to free it from these

* Presented at a Plenary Session, Comparative Literature Association of India's International Conference at Central University, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, March 2011.

narrow confines. All situations of oppression have pushed artists to resist, if not by all else through exile. I quote only two such examples – Chinua Achebe and Joseph Brodsky. But exile does not always answer the problem. It did not do so for Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer, a protestant priest and a member of the 'Confessing Church' (formed by the opponents of Nazi interference in Church affairs), was active in his resistance to political injustice and the violence of the Nazi regime. At one point, in order to escape conscription and continue his efforts for a just society, he left the country only to return a month later. He needed to be in his country and continue his efforts from there. Followed a prison term and then death. During his time in the prison he turned to creative writing and fragments of a play as well as of a novel are now available. Both are untitled and more in the form of debates between two strangers or in the case of the novel between three – debates between people either from different social classes or from different generations. It is fascinating to look into the mind of a man who has the courage to resist and to be part of the conflicts he faced, and tried to contend with. Are freedom and equality abstract concepts not meant for the masses? Can man live alone or does he need to belong to a community? In the novel, Christoph, who is the younger man, recalls his teacher who had talked excitedly and passionately about the great revolutions but when he moved on to their aftermath, he became a saddened man. Each of the revolutions had brought about terror, disruption and fragmentation and had ended in some kind of a compromise (Bonhoeffer 226). The two men dwell on the nature of power and the manner in which it creates tyrants and ask: what right does one have to ignore the 'blood and tears of the millions' as we write history? The focus has to shift from the demigods to the ordinary lives of ordinary men and women.

In the play, Heinrich has a visit from a stranger who identifies himself as Death. This 'stranger' is perhaps Bonhoeffer himself, especially, when he says 'I looked Death in the face for four weeks. First incomprehensibly, as on a dark night ... then terror-struck, as though beneath a falling axe, then again with burning desire, ... then full of wonderment' (202). The full price which sacrifice extracts is the need to look death in the face. The two aspects of

resistance – courage and uncertainty – create havoc in the individual's mind as all values are weighed against the backdrop of history, leaving behind a feeling of uncertainty even about the nature of value. In all this one is merely trying to grasp the human. Bonhoeffer shifted the focus from religion to faith, and from war to peace thus highlighting the need for a shift in mindsets. Bonhoeffer's life (and death) and that of many of the other members of the Confessing Church, in itself offers a comment on the relationship between sacrifice/martyrdom and resistance – as does exile.

Writers and artists are hounded out through 'fatwas', forced exile, controversies, censorship and exclusion. Salman Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen are examples of one kind and M.F. Husain of another. Husain's work has for more than half a century, aroused controversy. And now for several years he lives in Dubai, has taken up citizenship there and even in the recent Art Summit in Delhi (January 2011) the inclusion of his work had to contend with both fear and opposition. In a private conversation another artist, one who had strong affiliations to right-wing ideology, confessed that personally he had never found anything offensive in Husain's work. If we turn to Husain's life, right from his birth in Pandharpur, a religious centre of pilgrimages, his early training, his readings in Sufism and the Upanishads, his fascination with the *chopais* from the *Ramayana* and the discourses on *Bhagawad Gita*, all indicate a secular mindset, open to ideas and experiences, malleable, restless, impatient to experiment with new forms and new languages of art. He painted billboards, designed furniture, organised a tableau and turned to film-making. In all this he resisted all that was 'archaic' and 'dogmatic', and what was pre-programmed and attempted to present the culture of the streets. Through newness and shock, he wished to provoke response.

To a lay person like me, the sharp lines in Husain's paintings – especially of 'Bharata Mata' and the later one of Mother Teresa, the pro-Indira Emergency paintings, the controversial ones of the Indian goddesses, Gandhi with a missing head, reflect the 'raw primitive energy of folk art'. He constantly brings together opposing styles in order to fuse them and produce something new. In 1991 he experimented with 1,500 metres of white cloth and 300

kilos of newspaper in an exhibition in the Jehangir Art Gallery. Husain called it a 'serious statement', expressing meditation and freedom for the mind (Ila Pal 248).

One may ask – why does Husain attract controversy? And why does he not stay away from religion? They are interconnected. It is the nature of creativity to clear the space around itself. Husain's whole bringing up – the environmental forces of recitations and temples, the in-between space occupied by a Suleimanis, the Indianness of folk art and its heavy reliance on religious figures all were the natural material of art working in a confining atmosphere of growing political violence and right-wing ideologies. At one time, identifying both Phoolan Devi and Amitabh Bachchan as symbols of violence, as also the act of Gandhi's assassination, his paintings drew attention to them. Husain's paintings on the Hindu religious figures are the inevitable result of growing up in India – just as the literary images of Kali and Durga are. It is here that the question which Stephen Slemon asks about the nature of resistance becomes relevant. Slemon asks whether resistance is integral to the work or located in the interpretative act. I would take it further and turn it into a statement: resistance is integral to the meaning of good/classical art, but finds a realisation of its true meaning through a responsive reading and interpretation. It is the question of aesthetic beauty vs obscenity which is located in the interpretative perspective. Any intellectual who does not respond, or does not define his position in response to his environment as he experiences it, fails in a primary responsibility to himself as well as to his art. In Husain's case his paintings are not confined to art galleries alone. His murals and public scaffoldings attracted their own audience. The visual image of a lanky, long-limbed bearded man is evocative of the sharp lines of his paintings, lines which express the cultural past. Other artists too like Sanjeev Khandekar and Vaishali Narkar in 2006 have suffered at the hands of agitationists. And Chandra Mohan's paintings of Durga, a Shiva Lingam and Jesus were destroyed and he (a student of the Baroda school of art) was arrested (Refer internet: artasia-pacific.com/magazine/54Baroda-Authoritiesjailartstudent).

The visual art and its visibility do not admit of any softening or camouflage as does the verbal art. Words have an inbuilt ambiguity and carry within them a historical baggage. Orwell once

remarked that while prose cannot escape the totalitarian eye, poetry can, because dictators do not read poetry (and if they do, they do not understand it). One could apply this to Girish Karnad's use of myth for even as he critiques caste, brahminism, religious structures, he does not attract controversy. But Karnad does resist. In both *Talé Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain* he looks at social structures, at the nature of untouchability and the inflation of the brahmanic sense of exclusion. Incidentally the nature of violence also comes in for scrutiny both as violence against the self and as violence against society. Basavanna's twelfth century rebellion against caste, the failed initiative of his followers for a marriage between a brahmin girl and a cobbler's son, the behind the stage support of the king to the movement, the violent rebellion of the king's son against his own father all lead to annihilation and destruction – the revolution fails; Basavanna, caught between his moral conflicts, leaves the village and the king is murdered.

In *The Fire and the Rain* Karnad takes up a lesser known myth from the *Mahabharata*, the myth of Yavakri (*Vana Parva* ch., 135–138), which is once again about several issues – caste, purity, power, anger and the continuity of the revenge tradition. It also exposes falsehood, betrayal and subterfuge. These acts of human beings are worked out through ritual and framed within time and mortality. Aravasu, Raibhya's younger son, is the one who is to marry Nittilai, the untouchable girl, but who ends up attending to dead people, lighting their funeral pyres and having the ritual bath and hence misses marrying Nittilai. His brother is the chief priest of the fire sacrifice. He has stolen away his father's right, who in his own turn had taken away his elder brother's right. This round of dislocations results in betrayals and in the deaths of Yavakri and Raibhya, in the guilt experienced by Parvasu and Andhaka, and in the penance performed by Aravasu. Nittilai also dies, killed by her husband and brother. The play problematises the nature of sacrifice: who sacrifices what? Parvasu or Aravasu? If the pure are to perform the sacrifice: why is it that Aravasu's sacrifice of giving up Nittilai brings rain? Why is it that he alone has the power to liberate Brahma Raksha from the limbo? And why is it that Aravasu, though a brahmin, is now an outcast?

The play works first with a parallel strand of Aravasu forming a performing troupe and this drama troupe meeting up with the fire sacrifice where the play is performed. The play itself is a satire on the behaviour of the gods, their untrustworthiness, the subterfuge employed by Indra to lure Vishwarupa and kill him. For a moment the difference between the real and the make-belief play is blurred. Aravasu enters the real sacrificial garb in his mask of Vritra, resulting in a stampede. Parvasu sacrifices himself, Nittilai is killed and Aravasu is the one chosen to be given the blessing. Finally, though wanting the dead alive, he chooses the course which closes this possibility but sets Brahma Raksha free. And then it rains! Through the course of the play's performance all accepted and stable versions of behaviour, ritual and sacrifice are turned upside down and known realities questioned.

Aravasu is left alone to face his existential loneliness. Man, in order to discover his humanity, has to strip himself of his gods. Nittilai is human; she does not aspire to be other than that. Aravasu's insistence that she think of her own safety goes unheeded as she worries about the hungry children or waits for Aravasu. Karnad's use of myth spellbinds the mind with its supernatural aura, and its familiarity as it plays with deviations; the performative act engages the viewer's attention until it becomes a participatory act. The questioning only comes at the end as Indra pronounces his boon.

But the advantages of a mythical frame are not available to the visual, to painting or to the documentary form. Films may get away with a deal of critiquing and protest but documentaries as a genre proclaim a more open nature and a direct communication with their audience. Saeed Akhtar Mirza has made several films and almost all of them are acts of resistance – *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyun Aata Hai*, *Saleem Langde Pe Mat Ro* and the like – but the narrative helps in softening the statements, attributing them to characters. Structures, dialogues, music all step in to engage the senses of the audience. As contrasted with this, documentaries as instruments of social critiquing follow Brecht's Alienation effect and aim at engaging an intellectual response, and Anand Patwardhan's more than others. One can sense both the anger and

the anguish which work behind the scenes. Resistance thus is an act of concern. Patwardhan, over the years, has displayed a wide range of concerns – Hindu-Muslim conflicts, globalisation, nuclear blasts, peace activism, environmental concerns, gender justice and prisoners of war and has debated in them the questions of power and value. His work appears to be clearly intended as a meeting point between the creator and the viewer, the opening out of a dialogue. He wants you to travel with him to listen to opposing perspectives, to hear voices you have not heard, to see what you have not seen, to know what you have not known. In fact, to ask questions, to be disturbed, not to have a good night's sleep and to realise that what is happening outside there, can also happen to you. There is no softening, no blurring, no masks and no narrative complexities. Instead there are disruptive moves which break linearity, and frames which reveal brutality.

Patwardhan sees a direct connection between violence, militancy, aggressive masculinity and fundamentalism. Acts of terror, gender injustice, sati, honour deaths and communal conflict all fall into similar patterns of behaviour. They bypass the individual as well as long-term value. Patwardhan, especially with reference to his documentary *Ram Ke Naam*, has commented that he intended it as a warning to the nation. Documentaries, however, find a limited market. Of all his documentaries only *Jung aur Aman* was released in cinema halls. *Ram Ke Naam* was telecast on Doordarshan only after a court order, and that too much too late for the public approach to be influenced positively in order to stay the flood. Such documentaries act as a counter discourse to soap operas and paid news channels. They allow us to look beyond propaganda.

The ethics of investigation require a basic statement about the differing views and perspectives, the differences which are marked by gender, class, caste, religion, profession or location. It needs to let the individual speak in his/her own capacity before allowing the collective voice to takeover. It is through these individual feelings and perceptions that a connectivity between seemingly divergent events falls into place. It is not to say that documentaries which deal with social problems present an unrelieved reality or are entirely without hope. They are not. They

can be poetic despite the struggle, can evoke admiration as well as emotional response, they underline a human concern. In each one of Patwardhan's documentaries I can recall such scenes, such events and happenings. In *Father, Son and Holy War*, when the workers of one community are building the roof of another person of the other community and also when in a group of Muslim women, one of them inspires the others towards self help and fighting for legal rights, are all scenes of coming together, of hope. Again in *Jung aur Aman*, there are Gandhi's bhajans, the Pakistan woman who dances Indian dance forms, the Peace March proceeding to Hiroshima – all these and many more juxtapose not only what men have done to each other, but also what men can do for each other. And as the number of the peace marchers dwindles, our heart goes out to them in their lonely journey. And we hang our heads in shame. How many of us have done even this for mankind, for ourselves as much as for others? Aravasu gave up Nittilai to free Brahma Raksha – not one of us. In another of Patwardhan's documentary, *Fishing in the Sea of Greed*, the underside of globalisation is revealed. The scenario moves from the tales of success to the tales of struggle, the quickly being sucked fish from the ocean waters by the huge trawlers adding to the troubles of the local ill-equipped fisherfolk. This David cannot throw his Goliath down. But then too, the camera captures the beautiful coastal line, the surging waves of the sea, the brotherhood of the community – all these flow to us as messages of hope.

Resistance in art forms is an indication that society is not dying, that there has to be a constant struggle to keep alive. It acts like a fresh infusion of blood and like a constant reminder that in this sea of change, the one constant force has to be the human and all the abstractions we have pursued since our consciousness register their value – the values of freedom, of emotion, of beauty, of love. That leads us to consider the creative and the aesthetic aspects. M.F. Husain's *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities* (2004) is a film which can be seen as an elaboration upon the creative process, the manner in which one tries to understand the other, to step across into the other's psyche and is at the same time in danger of being absorbed. It moves between experience and imagination simultaneously trying to expand and to understand the

real. Yet it too resists. Nawab is a Muslim writer, Meenaxi is a Hindu woman who approaches the writer requesting him to write her story. How does a man get inside the mind of a woman? And that too from a different background real or imagined, Meenaxi becomes a constant companion. She persists in telling him that he does not understand her, her love-affairs, her passions, her desire for adventure, the fullness of her life. Moving into these experiences, Nawab also realises the power of imagination. At one point the character takes possession of him and she goes on flouting all accepted social mores, she liberates herself from the confines of her background. The film, at heart, is about the nature of reality, of which we can perhaps grasp only the concretely possessable. It is also a search for meaning, for unveiling the invisible.

Resistance is not necessarily about 'newness' but about cleaning up all the cobwebs which prevent us from understanding the nature of reality. It is about unearthing the meaning of what we can value, of what is it that we can sustain in us in some measure. Resistance is not a search for demigods; it addresses the blindness of power. Men and women resist when it is no longer possible to endure, or to breathe pure air. And art, in its attempt at understanding the environment, arises out of it, resists its claustrophobic structures. It is integral to the value of art as much to the value of life as it brings together the individual and the social, the emotional and the intellectual, as feeling and thought are woven together.