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A Phoenix Called Resistance

Aesthetics versus Meaning*

A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people have created itself and keeps itself in existence.

(Fanon, *Wretched*, 188)

I must not suppress the voice within, call it 'conscience', call it the 'prompting of my inner basic nature'. There is something within me impelling me to cry out in my agony That something in me which never deceives me tells me now: 'You have to stand against the whole world although you may have to stand alone. You have to stare the world in the face although the world may look at you with bloodshot eyes. Do not fear ...'.

(Gandhi, 'Quit India Speech', 184–185)

Resistance discourse needs to be freed from the confines of postcoloniality and placed within the aesthetics of literature. There is a very thin dividing line between resistance and fundamentalism, between an oppositional stance and a hardened orthodoxy. When the fluidity of the first changes into the fixity of the second, the change takes place. What brings this about are time, history and location. It is proposed to look at three constructs: religion, nation and caste – as they interact and impact

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each other both at home (India) and in diasporic locations, not necessarily in opposition to colonial hegemony or oppression, but as concerns that are more intricately rooted in the individual's relationship to socio-political environs.

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In recent theory, resistance has come to be closely identified with postcolonial discourse. Jenny Sharpe in her essay 'Figures of Colonial Resistance', takes up Benita Parry's critique of postcolonial discourse as one unwilling to 'articulate a more oppositional politics.' Sharpe herself is concerned with the imposition of western authority upon non-western discourses and, in the course of her essay, problematises 'certain problems' with identifying sites of colonial resistance. Sharpe defines these sites as 'those ruptures in the representation of British colonialism as a civilizing mission', and proceeds to examine the ambivalences and tropes of this discourse, taking it from the 'mimic men' to Forster's *punkah-wallah*.¹ Sharpe's reference to Forster's *A Passage to India* raises questions of reading and interpretation and location in both time and space. The different readings of the novel, which is located in colonial India, are bound to reflect the changes in our perceptions of India's past. David Lean's film, with its overemphasis on imperial pageantry, reads the novel from an imperialistic perspective. A modern Indian reader, critical of the hollow liberal ideologies of imperial England, would look at the film as the skeleton of the novel which reveals the power and the making of power in an entirely different way leading to a total reversal of earlier readings anchored in liberal ideology.²

Moreover this reference to Forster immediately connects up with Stephen Slemon when he asks whether resistance is located in the narrative or is it embedded in the representational technologies, or alternatively located in an interpretative position:

Is it something actually *there* in the text, or is it produced and reproduced in and through communities of readers and through the mediating structures of their own culturally specific histories? Do literally resistances escape the constitutive purchase of genre, and trope, and figure and mode,

which operate elsewhere as a contract between text and reader and thus a set of centralizing codes, or are literary resistances in fact necessarily *embedded* in the representational technologies of these literary and social texts whose structures and whose referential codes they seek to oppose? (Slemon 104)

The issues which Slemon foregrounds are multidirectional. The embedding of resistance would foreground textual opposition in both theme and representation whereas interpretative acts take the production of meaning into a socio-cultural world. He draws attention to the relationship between aesthetics and meaning, and the incorporation of resistance into an oppositional poetics. None of these positions is simple or can find a simple answer. If meaning is *there* and integral to the text, thematic concerns, and authorial position acquire significance. Interpretation is an expansion which lacks stability or fixity. The reference to 'technologies' is a return to the question of the 1960s when postcolonial writing was criticised for being concerned with protest, the argument being that protest was not a legitimate concern of art and in order to validate it perhaps a different evaluative standard would have to be applied. Slemon, however, stretches it further to include oppositional poetics.

In Slemon's question about where resistance can be located, the way narrative produces its textual meaning is juxtaposed with referential meaning produced through contextual frameworks. Either/or positions cannot be clearly demarcated. The multiple ways in which meaning can be produced refute the possibility of self-contained texts. Again it is difficult to specify the exact location of resistance, whether it is in retellings, rewritings and reinterpretations, in written or oral literature, in time-bound contexts, or is it reflected in the mode of writing? A focus on oppositional relationships between the imperial and the colonial limits both literature and its interpretation. It ignores the dissidence, non-conformity and resistance within societies and leads to the framing of national discourses within narrow concerns. Fundamentalisms and resistances are both internal and external discourses; locating them primarily within postcolonialism is an

approach that seeks to define through 'difference', and any hardening of difference itself becomes a fundamentalism. One needs to remember that fundamentalism in the sense of an orthodoxy came into use only by 1923³, and is an ideological extension of the 'basic' principles. Resistance, on the other hand, has a much earlier association with power discourse. Like fundamentalism, it also implies a stubbornness, a refusal to shift from one's position or allow an imposition.

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Literature as resistance works simultaneously at several levels. In 1989 Girish Karnad wrote *Talé-Danda*, a play about a twelfth century revolution in the state of Karnataka in India, when a group of 'poets, mystics, social revolutionaries and philosophers' questioned the hegemony. The movement ended in terror and bloodshed. Referring to this movement, Karnad in his preface draws the attention of the reader to the relevance of 'the questions posed by these thinkers for our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered'. (i)

Thickly populated, the play introduces as 'sites' of resistance first death, then post-funeral rites, then an intercaste marriage and finally betrayal and murder. Struggles and contestations of principle and ego occur: the play probes the complexity of every act of resistance through its various dramatic strategies. The forces are never represented through binary oppositions of the powerful and the powerless, or the imperial and the colonial; juxtapositions, even when they maybe duplicated, are never the same. Two father-son relationships are portrayed: one of King Bijjala and his rebel son Sovideva and the other of Sambashiva Shastri (a brahmin) and his son Jagadeva (who is a *sharana* and has rejected caste). Trust and betrayal are also juxtaposed in two relationships: Basavanna, the leader of the *sharanas* and his follower Jagadeva, and Bijjala, the king and Basavanna, but the reasons are different in every case. Basavanna does not negate his own principles in the act of betrayal

whereas Jagadeva goes back on all his earlier positions. In an explanatory note to the English translation of the play, Karnad gives the meaning of the title as death by beheading. In medieval Karnataka one offered one's head 'either on completion of a vow or in penitence'. This offering can be treated as a sacrifice. In the play both Bijjala and Jagadeva die, one by murder, the other by suicide. And each death is in the form of a sacrifice.

The play opens with Sambashiva Sastri on his death-bed anxiously awaiting his son Jagadeva. Jagadeva, however, is away guarding the king's Treasury against the rebel prince Sovideva, primarily to protect Basavanna who is the leader of the movement but also happens to be responsible for the Treasury in his role as prime minister. Loyalty ceases to be a simple matter of right or wrong; its conflictual nature is obvious. The king, who approves of the revolution, is unable to join it because of his responsibility as a king. Just as the nature of power (with all its limits) and the nature of loyalty (along with its divisions and conflicts) are explored, the next act (Act-II) proceeds to examine the effect of an exogamous marriage, in this case marriage between a brahmin girl and a cobbler boy. What is desirable in principle as a way of dismantling caste constructs carries within it the possibility of unleashing violence and hatred. Both Basavanna and the king are afraid. Basavanna fears for the life of the young couple; the king for his throne. But there is a third concern voiced by others – that of the differences in their upbringing (governed by caste factors). Would the brahmin girl be able to tolerate the perpetual smell of raw leather in her new home? The two rebellions – one a movement for social change and the other the prince's usurpation of his father's authority – end in violence. But this violence links them. Ironically enough, Basavanna and the king, are both reduced in power by the end of the play. Basavanna does not want to impose his will on his followers. The king is held captive by his son. Jagadeva, apparently on a rescue mission, ends up killing the king and committing suicide.

Karnad's play, in its treatment of Indian social constructs and the Indian past, goes beyond the written text and the present

moment. The debate that marked India's freedom struggle was between violence and non-violence, the two parallel discourses that interacted every now and then, runs like an undercurrent in the play, which no serious reader in India is unable to ignore. *Talé Danda* ends with the city in flames.

A similar tale of a movement and its decline, of a city that is burnt down was told much earlier – in 1938 – by another writer, in another form. I have in mind Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, a novel about India's freedom movement. Raja Rao, in his short preface, states the need to abandon both the syntactical pattern of the English language as well as the fictional tradition. His narrator, an old woman, a witness-participant, adopts the technique of a *sthala-purana*, a narrative of the land based on a legend that is native to it. Rao uses the method of the religious kathas (oral narratives) that narrate the life of a saint or the significance of a ritual. The Hari-kathas (stories about gods) yield place to Gandhi-kathas (secular narratives). The women gather in the precincts of a temple and it is from here that they move out to oppose the British through non-violent resistance. The internalisation of this collective strength by the individual member is embodied in *Satyagraha*, the defining principle of Gandhi's struggle. Raja Rao, writing at the point when Gandhi was losing his grip over the other leaders, ends his novel by portraying Moorthy's increased inclination towards the leadership of Nehru. But Karnad has the advantage of the extra half-a-century to his credit in order to evaluate historical positions. *Talé-Danda's* violent ending, is the failure of the movement. In *Kanthapura*, however, the colonisers' violence acts as a spur to the movement.

Literary resistance, throughout the twentieth century, has been interwoven with political events and has acted as an agency both in the spread and the critiquing of ideologies. Representation of history has not necessarily been an interpretation of the past but the historical novel, in India, has outgrown the inherited limitations of the form and proceeded to use fantasy, surrealism, debate and the contrapuntal in order to become a counter-discourse to fundamentalist structures and ideologies.

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Religious fundamentalism does not exist in a vacuum; its origins can be traced to a variety of sources – struggles for power, identity and nation construction, ethnicity, a search for roots – and can be inflamed by political assessments such as Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. Resistance and essentialism are locked in a permanent opposition in an obverse relationship, which reflects contrasting mindsets. Resistance movements, often, create their own essentialisms and harden into orthodoxies as Hanif Kureishi's story 'My Son the Fanatic' (1995) illustrates. The story is about Pervez, a London-based, Lahore-born taxi driver who finds himself in direct confrontation with his young, London-born son Ali. Pervez is increasingly receptive to western attitudes while Ali turns more and more to Islamic norms. The father is perhaps looking for freedom, the son for identity and security; while one gradually moves towards acceptance and erasure of difference, the other nurses a sense of rejection. As they face each other, the son tells his father, 'You're too implicated in Western civilization The Western materialists hate us ... how can you love something which hates you'. (106) Ali is willing to lay down his life for Islam and persists in his own ways, until one day Pervez actually kicks him. Ali, through his split lip and with blood pouring down his face, asks him: 'So who's the fanatic now?' (111).

Both of them are right, each in his own way. The struggle is against two different kinds of power structures, one religious and the other racial. Courage and fearlessness are essential in these struggles. But what validates resistance and discounts fundamentalism is the nature of the commitment: is it motivated by a desire for power and supremacy or by the need to establish power in order to be equal and human, that is, is power as an end in itself or is it a means to some wider concern? But none of these distinctions are free of intention, historical context or its aftermath. Any act of questioning or assertion is a way of resistance in constant danger of freezing into a fundamentalist position. It is this fluidity which would be the basis of defining resistance against the fixity of essentialism. Kureishi's story reflects upon the condition of