



essay

A Jester in The Court of Literature: Dario Fo and the Legacy of Alfred Nobel

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WHO is Dario Fo? Of course by now, everyone knows that he is the Italian satirist who won this year's Nobel prize in Literature. But even if one acknowledged a complete ignorance of the personality and his work, this would not have constituted any great shame for the lovers of literature in a world that is getting used to unknown entities being awarded the mother of all literary prizes. After all, who among us ordinary mortals knew Wislawa Szymborska, before she became the 1996 Nobel Laureate? Compared to her, Fo is better known, having been a prominent figure in the field of the political theatre in Europe, both as a dramatist and as an actor. And yet, even here in Italy where Fo's identity is not in question, what is being asked among the literary minded, in badly hidden incredulity is: Why Dario Fo?

The surprise that accompanied the news of his victory was not so much a denial of his talents in his métier which nevertheless, does not put him on the frontline of Italy's writing scene, as much as it was a glaring reflection on the eccentric selection criteria the Swedish academy uses in its choice of recipients for the award. Much has of course been written on this, but even Fo's own reaction to the prize—"sono esterrefatto" (I am amazed)-- has made it quite obvious that there is something arbitrary in the proceedings of the Academy, and that a certain 'Nobel-esse oblige', shall we say, to what is truly outstanding in literary achievement, may not be the prime aim in the bestowing of this prestigious prize.

On hearing the news, Dario Fo chuckled appreciatively at the "joke" as

he himself put it, referring to himself as "lo ladro di Nobel", or the Nobel thief, who stole it from under the noses of other contenders, like Salman Rushdie, the Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the Portuguese Jose Saramago and the Belgian Hugo Claus.

Many of his compatriots, in spite of recognizing the honour given to the country-- for the sixth time--are uncomfortable about it. A Pirandello (1934) or a Quasimodo (1959) receiving the award would not have generated the kind of uneasy reception that has been triggered by Dario Fo. According to the Swedes, he "emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and upholding the dignity of the downtrodden". The dissenting and discerning among the Italians, who were stunned by the news, do not deny Fo's contribution to society as a jester, its his role as a literary figure that they dispute. The critics are willing, it seems, to enjoy the biting humour of the writer of the "Mistero Buffo" (Comical mysteries), to chuckle at the irreverent take-off on popes and politicians, and laugh along with him across the almost 40 plays he has written and produced; but they are not as willing to concede him a seat in the gallery of literary notables.

And yet, Fo was cited by the Nobel Academy for his, "strength in the creation of texts that simultaneously amuse, engage and provide perspectives. With a blend of laughter and gravity, he opens our eyes to abuses and injustices in society and also the wider historical perspective in which they can be placed." What better commendation for a practitioner of Literature. What other important functions can literature aspire to?

Which brings us squarely to the question of what exactly is the role of Literature,

as the Nobel Academy sees it, and as the rest of the world sees it. Is the function of literature to provide a special, stylized language which the individual consciousness uses to express its artistic urge to forge beauty and order out of the heat and tumult of private creativity and chaotic collective life, providing its unique vision of humanity? Or is its role much larger, perhaps like a magnifying glass through which one examines the world. Is its role to be the guardian of the worldly institutions, also its debunker. Is it the great leveller of society and politics? Is it one of all this, or all of it, and which particular aspect is the significant one that is considered as all important by the Academy?

The Nobel Prize was intended for those who "shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind." Does Literature provide any tangible benefits to mankind? Can it be measured? If so, how is it done? More, pertinently has the Nobel Academy devised some standards for doing so and thereby reward the achiever of this task?

Prof. Kjell Epsmark, in his book, "The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Study of the Criteria behind the choices" says: "Indeed, the history of the literature prize is in some ways a series of attempts to interpret an imprecisely worded will." And that will, in Alfred Nobel's words stated as prize-worthy, "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction." In fact this last, elusive adjectival word 'ideal' became for long, not only the touchstone for judging the candidates, but also a bone of contention, subjected by many to countless interpretations of what Alfred Nobel could have meant by it. Apparently, Nobel had originally

written the word "idealistic", then amended it to read "ideal". August Strindberg in his "Addresses to the Swedish Nation" discussed this aspect, analyzing the significance of writing "ideally" as against "idealistically" which he thought more appropriate to the will, in his protest against the choice of the first Nobel Laureate, Sully Prudhomme, whom he considered to be a materialist and therefore unsuited to the stipulation of the will. Moreover, of course, Prudhomme's selection had been at the cost of the favourite, Tolstoy, whose rejection was protested not only by Strindberg but by World opinion in general.

That, right at the onset, the literature prize should have stumbled in its choice and produced dissent and criticism, is perhaps appropriate to the nature of this award, the category, not to mention the interpretation of what is considered as an ideal at a certain point in history.

A glance at the names of those who have over the years crowded the Nobel hall of fame, will illustrate how the nature of the choice has changed to accommodate the "ideals" of the times.

In the first decade were those whom the academy deemed as the repository of a "lofty and sound idealism". From this period, among writers mostly from Europe, like Bjornson of Norway (1903), Mistral of France (1904), Henryk Sienkiewicz of Poland (1905), Carducci of Italy (1906), the only name I can actually relate to is Rudyard Kipling (1907). His idealism was considered by the Committee to contain an "almost myth making strength of imagination." In the period that followed, the Swedish Academy consciously abandoned

its European orientation and to remind themselves of Nobel's stipulation

of avoiding nationalist partiality, extended its recognition in 1913 to India in the person of Tagore.

Then came the 1920's when a more comprehensive interpretation of "idealism" seemed to cover "broad hearted humanity". But the common denominator in all the choices was a "noble style". And quite a few truly stylish writers were recognized like, Anatole France (1921), Yeats (1923), G.B.Shaw (1925), Thomas Mann (1929). The thirties seemed to mark a sway towards writers with an innovative outlook like Pirandello, Eugene O'Neill (1936). At the same time another type of writer was also cited, who reached out directly to the general public like, Sinclair Lewis (1930), Galsworthy (1932) and Pearl Buck (1938). However, the period when innovation and originality were really rewarded was the post-war period when Anders Osterling became the Permanent Secretary of the academy (1941-64) and also chairman of the Nobel Committee (1947-1970). Under his influence a glittering range of writers received their salute: Herman Hesse (1946), Andre Gide (1947),

T.S.Eliot (1948), Faulkner (1949), Bertrand Russell (1950), Winston Churchill (1953), Hemingway (1954), Camus (1957), Pasternak (1958) and Salvatore Quasimodo of Italy (1959).

The 60's, with the notable exception of Sartre (who refused the prize), and Samuel Beckett, was a time of giving the nod to the incognitos. The 70's saw attention being directed "to an oeuvre or a literary genre that has not been sufficiently regarded." The mixed bag of writers in this period contained the likes of, Solzhenitsyn (70), Neruda (71), Heinrich Boll (72), Saul Bellow (76) and Isaac Bashevis Singer (78). The 80's and 90's aimed to extend to new literary re-

gions, to cover "the literature of the whole world". Thus Garcia Marquez (82, Colombia), Wole Soyinka (86, Nigeria), Naguib Mahfouz (88, Egypt), Octavio Paz (90, Mexico), Nadine Gordimer (91, South Africa), Derek Walcott (92, West Indies), Kenzaburo Oe (94, Japan). But if there was a general idea that permeated the choices in the last fifty years, it was the emphasis on the depiction of the human condition.

So then, what is the function of Literature, specially the kind that is Nobel-worthy? It may be safe to say that it is a literary sensibility that shows a certain inclination toward an overt humanism and philosophical altruism, with a correct political orientation. What sort of political rectitude is desired is of course determined by the current mood and idealistic leaning of the Committee. But by and large the focus is on writers whose work functions as a forum where we ask questions, explore our limitations, give validity to the voiceless minorities, the displaced and exiled, and where the writer attempts to define our evolving social, political and religious identities even at the risk of moral approbation and danger to his life.

In many of the citations of past Laureates we see Literature as man's only weapon in his engagement with life; it is what empowers humanity with a voice with which to articulate its needs, protest against its injustices, question the givens of its established norms and institutions. And by these considerations, Dario Fo, rocking people to thoughtful laughter as well as shaking the Vatican's composure, is a writer who has been, in at least Alfred Nobel's words "of great benefit to humanity." If an oeuvre can teach the world to laugh at itself and to learn from its follies, then a salute to the Italian Jester!

poems

My Golden Bengal

— 1997

by Gonoful

My golden Bengal, who will love thee when your skies are filled with black smoke, and your wind burns the nose and the breath's melody is an endless cough.

Oh mother, when did the spring become so dirty and restless the noise and traffic insane

Oh mother, who will love you when your rivers are choked your fish diseased or imported and the rice has no taste nor the soil any richness and your water fills with toxins

Oh mother, your trees are cut and burned with coal as brick fields foul village air and grime masks your honeyed smiles with relentless labours and pittance pay

What happens to your students as the poor wither in jammed city spaces and Dhaka grows like a malignant cancer where "daal" is an opiate and prostitutes toil at 10 and 20 taka a play

Where is your husking sound *dheki, dheki* as the fruits of the harvest are leached by medical costs, legal cases, jails, tolls and dowries and your hard working women and men struggle to find a livelihood at the lowest wages beyond your shores

Oh mother, how shall we love you show us the way.

Goodbye

by Abu Taher Mojumder

The Cuckoo sings on The sun comes up and goes down Spreading crimson petals on her cheeks

In the lake the guest-birds Float and dive Raise frightened heads Pause and ponder and stir their wings- Fly away

A curious hand raises ripples A broken face enamours Some moments in the embrace of Narcissus A broken blue and patches of white clouds- On a long journey

Light footsteps, jingling of pebbles, The tea-boy turns round The pea-nut boy hesitates The rickshawpuller looks dubiously Leaves fall off here and there The dried ones crackle and surprise- A light touch of haunting eyes A sudden sigh

The concrete-bench under the tree Casts a longing lingering glance, The shadow touches the ground and is gone The wind sighs through the leaves And whispers into receding ears A corner of the sari tends backward The loose end of the hair longs for fond fingers

I only find torn petals of Rajanigandha And stalks scattered The smell fading to the horizon The coming night A lengthened wilderness Forlorn dreams A glance unreturning ...

A Shopkeeper's Monologue

By Arifa Ghani

Good morning, madame. You buy sari? I showing you good sari. See Bheri nice material. Wait, wait, madame, no go. I showing you more. Not much price. You buy in dollar or pound? Bheri cheap.

You not like this? Then you take this. Beautiful. Look nice. You get nice complex. You wear, everybody liking. Imported cloths, bhery fine. Only 4000 taka, not many dollar, for beautiful cotton cloths. You paying, friend making. America, Bangladesh, good friend, na? You not ispoli in shop. Madame, you go? Not like? Madame, madame. I showing more. Madame, you hear me. Madame, madame, madame....



Darling Diana

by Zakaria Choudhury

Diana you were love-lorn Child of a broken home You yearned for affection In one and many

Your love transcended all barriers Religion, race, colour and class You outstretched your being To be the queen of all hearts

How did you dare To break all barriers It was too much For the established order to bear So you had to go

The France Joan of Arc loved Put her to stake The world you Diana loved Put you to rest

Darling Diana For all the wealth And glamour and glitter Surrounding your life You were a lonely soul In the company of a soulless society

Love dethroned King Edward Love has killed you Love has sanctified you In the sobbing hearts Of ordinary folks everywhere Long live love

A Fragrance, Imprisoned

by Samir Asaf

Skies overcast, in folly all mine, For this was time, for a winter.

Even in tears, see paradise unfold, From a small moment's eternity.

Eyes speak in silent whispers, Thorns bleeding the roses, like a song.

My rainbow, hidden by clouds, So close to me now, after a rain!

Summer Feelings

by Shuvashish Priya Barua

Tonight the stars are clear in the sky. Everybody is dancing together Laughing in the currents of bitter tastes.

So close seems the world so warm... like you...

Tonight our souls are enveloped Making love amongst the stars.

A Mini Moon

By Nazim Mahmood

What a delight it is to watch A mini moon on your forehead What a wonder spot it is to match The beauty on a canvas laid What a promise for an island Afloat on the blood of a Crusoe What a pleasure to behold and stand And forever be a L'allegro.

Nostalgia

By Nazim Mahmood

Half asleep half awake In the small hours at dawn Let me alone make unmake The days with the wind have gone Backward and forward cameras zoom Taking the horizon far and near On the surface of the lenses loom Pangs in drops of many a year A boy flashes on a grey canvas With his lush green world of joy In a moment next all pass Down the stream of time in a hoy.

