

essay

Has Literature a Future?

by Ramakant Rath

Writers Philippe Sollers, Vassilis Vassilikos and Ramakanta Rath discussed the role of literature in tomorrow's world in a debate "What Future for Literature?" — the 7th in the series of "21st Century Talks" — at UNESCO Headquarters on May 20, moderated by Jérôme Bindé, Director of UNESCO's Analysis and Forecasting Office which organises these debates.

Introducing the debate, Mr Bindé declared that literature is facing several challenges: the eternal challenge of tyranny and dictatorship which "practise the censorship of books, word and writing, burn libraries, muzzle, imprison, assassinate writers and journalists." A more recent challenge, posed by the development of the new technologies involves the use of the Internet as a vector for literary creation, and, in due course, the advent of the electronic book. There is also the challenge of the opening of literature to the world in all its wealth and diversity.

I do not think a writer is equipped to discuss the future of literature. Even when he is aware that literature has no future or has a bleak future, he cannot withdraw from writing. He is in the position of one who goes to war with the knowledge that his defeat is inevitable. If he still joins the battle, it is because it holds a cause or a principle more important than his life and his death. The writer is in a comparable position. Even if he knows that fewer people are today interested in serious literature and even when he knows that what passes for literature these days is very different from the great literature of the past, he cannot give up writing because writing for him is perhaps the only means of investing his life with some meaning.

As for the future of literature, I would submit that there cannot be any future for something that has ceased to be relevant. In our present-day society, the writer has become almost wholly irrelevant. We have been told that the pen is mightier than the sword and that the writer has the capacity to change social realities. This was perhaps true in the past. Because he had this capacity, he was sometimes persecuted by the rulers of the day who naturally wanted to eliminate all challenge to the system over which they presided. The writer then perhaps had the power to move people to protest, to rebellion, and to seek a change in the system of governance. All this changed when democracy became the most common form of Government. In a democracy, change occurs only when the larger number of people's representatives want the change. As long as the larger number of these representatives support a Government, it will continue, regardless of all the critical writing produced by writers. The strategy for continuing in power or for capturing power has therefore this basic principle: to enlist the support of as

many elected representatives as possible.

It is therefore elected representatives, and not writers, who are relevant in our society. A writer may succeed in convincing people that the Government in power does not serve their true interest, but what does it amount to unless this discontent persists till election time and is translated into voting behaviour? Democratic societies therefore do not persecute writers — they may even reward them — but it is obvious that they have come to be seen as people without any influence.

There is yet another aspect of the democratic system of government. The philosophy of democracy is clearly unexceptionable. No other form of government has given individuals the freedom and self-respect democracy has given. But then several autonomous forces seem to have had the upper hand and seem to have distorted the basic philosophy of democracy. Democratic Governments have sometimes failed to punish and eliminate racism and religious fundamentalism. They have sometimes become ruthless colonialists. Democratic Governments have not always treated other democracies as

the courtroom, to death sentences, to the assassination of writers, and the censorship practised in the so-called developed countries and which strikes not at books but at the alleged absence of readers." The danger is that literature be reduced to communication. "Everybody speaks and produces literature unaware. Everybody could describe him or herself as a writer and, why not, become one. [...] But literature is not communication, it is art."

The Indian poet Ramakanta Rath — author of, among others, *Kate Dinara* and *Shri Radha*, and President of the Indian Academy of Letters and Literature — declared that the future of literature "does not bother a writer. [...] "He cannot withdraw from writing. [...] That is the only thing that invests his life with some meaning." But the writer has become totally irrelevant to society, Ramakanta Rath declared, saying that writers no longer caused change or rebellion.

The medium of literature is language, just as sound is the medium of music and colour the medium of painting. Now, the way language has come to be used in the world we live in is basically different from the language of literature. Firstly, it has begun to part company from the life of the community whose language it is and has, under the impact of globalisation which now has a field day, acquired standardised characteristics. This language does not, and cannot express the community's own style of experiencing. Secondly, it has come to be used increasingly to substitute for the real intent of the users a nobler, more acceptable intent they would like the world at large to believe in. The world at large knows that the suggested intent is not true and that it conceals the mercenary and wholly unprincipled intent of the users, but it must suffer their language, which fills page after page of all newspapers, all the same. This language is mostly the language of politics — both domestic and international — and of political leaders who now occupy the centrestage of public life.

sovereign and equal.

Added to all this is the growth of the consumerist culture in which man is judged by his purchasing power. The combined effect of all this is the division of men into a number of unequal and often mutually hostile groups. It is not surprising therefore that, in this society, literature which in all ages and everywhere has had the vision of oneness and indivisibility of all men should come to acquire an inconsequential status.

The medium of literature is language, just as sound is the medium of music and colour the medium of painting. Now, the way language has come to be used in the world we live in is basically different from the language of literature. Firstly, it has begun to part company from the life of the community whose language it is and has, under the impact of globalisation which now has a field day, acquired standardised characteristics. This language does not, and cannot express the community's own style of experiencing. Secondly, it has come to be used increasingly to substitute for the real intent of the users a nobler, more acceptable intent they would like the world at large to believe

in. The world at large knows that the suggested intent is not true and that it conceals the mercenary and wholly unprincipled intent of the users, but it must suffer their language, which fills page after page of all newspapers, all the same. This language is mostly the language of politics — both domestic and international — and of political leaders who now occupy the centrestage of public life.

He warned that, particularly damaging to literature, is the fact that language has begun to part company with the way it was traditionally used by the community. He pointed to globalised and standardised language characteristics, notably prevalent in the discourse of politics and journalism, whereby "language is being used to express not what you believe in, but what you would like others to believe in."

He argued that "two alternative ways

of using language cannot simultaneously be equally operational, equally effective." If the language of public life, heard day in day out, becomes the current language, he warned, the language of literature must disappear. "The language that is used to express untruth is beginning to replace the language used to express truth," he warned.

He also expressed concern over the declining dissemination of major writers of world literature. In this respect, he proposed and international initia-

tive aiming at rendering more accessible the works of important Indian writers in translated to date and, simultaneously, to facilitate the access of India to major texts by foreign writers.

And what if the future of literature resided in its past? asked Vassilis Vassilikos, author, notably, of *Z* and *réves diurnes*, who is also Greece's Ambassador and Permanent Delegate to UNESCO. He stressed that "the role of literature is independent of the means used to disseminate it. It is linked to myth and to history. What is important is the writer's ability to embody the mythological which remains immutable, as man remains immutable."

Mr Vassilikos considered that our age is still based on the written word, but he contended that the technique of discourse is no longer solely identified with the book. "There is a writers' crisis, no [a crisis] of literature. Its future is intimately linked to that of human

kind. As long as human beings will speak, they will want to express themselves through the world. But our technological civilisation is pushing us towards a monosyllabic culture. Everywhere the weight of the word remains intact because language is forever being reborn with the birth of every human being." But, he recalled that speaking of the crisis of literature cannot be relevant to all those who can neither read nor write. "The future of literature still holds many surprises in store."

The next "21st Century Talk" will take place on June 8 at UNESCO Headquarters and will consider the question "What Future for Human Rights?" Speakers taking part in the debate will be the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, Pierre Sané, Secretary-General of Amnesty International, and Mireille Delmas-Marty, Professor at the University of Paris I and member of the Institut Universitaire de France.

American fiction. This has happened not only in India, it has happened everywhere, including your country. Does literature have a future in the situation in which readers are systematically denied the experience of literature that explores and tries to describe the condition of man?

As the President of India's Academy of Literature, I have been pleading, without much success, for enlarging access to the best works in every language. Modern Indian literature is practically unknown in the west. The only Indian writers who are known in the west are those who write in English, and not those who have written works comparable to the best in any language because they have written in an Indian language. We know almost nothing about significant works in today's French literature and about their authors. If literature has to survive, the situation must end, and we must work towards rehabilitating world literature. Great literature does not belong to any language. Great authors does not belong to any country. The theme of atoning for past sins through repentance and surrender and entering a higher, more meaningful life through such atonement occurs in the Bible's episode of Mary Magdalene who washes the feet of Jesus by her tears and wipes them through her long tresses of hair and occurs, too, in the episode of the courtesan Ambapali who, washes the Buddha's feet with her tears and wipes them through her long tresses of hair. The vision of our togetherness and oneness must be preserved if literature has to survive. I have requested UNESCO to give some thought to the matter and consider if an intervention cannot be organised.

Indian poet Ramakanta Rath is author and the President of Shahitya Akademi (Indian Academy of Letters).

reflections

An Evening with Dominique Lapierre (Part 2)

By - Dr. A.H. Jaffor Ullah

Continued from last week

APIERRE met the great architect of this division of India, Lord Louis Mountbatten, after 20 long years in 1968. Mountbatten, according to Lapierre, had shipped all the papers relating to the breakup of India from his office in New Delhi while he was serving the last Viceroy of India. The great storyteller, Lapierre, narrated a vignette from his encounter with Louis Mountbatten in 1968. The 69 years old Mountbatten while proudly showing the boxes of materials related to breakup of India to Lapierre opened a drawer and picked up a stack of papers. He then turned to Lapierre and said, "These are very important documents — the list of cocktails served in Viceroy's residence while India was being partitioned." We all chuckled hearing this banter.

Lapierre also described to us his brief encounter with a mild manner English gentleman by the name Cyril Radcliffe. With a pair of scissors, Mr. Redcliffe was trimming a rose bush in his garden when Lapierre went to visit Mr. Redcliffe in his estate in pastoral England. Who could have realized that only two decades ago the same person equipped with a pair of scissors was cutting a country into two parts — India and Pakistan. The cost was horrendous! While Jinnah got his "moth-eaten" Pakistan and Nehru-Patel received their dreamland India, countless people lost their ancestral home and land in the due process. Needless to say, the

only person who was grieving over the whole cutting and pasting exercise was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi notwithstanding the Congress Party supporters in India and Muslim League supporters in Pakistan rejoicing over their newly found freedom.

Caught up in this division of India, the Nawabs and Maharajas were a confused bunch. The heads of these princely states could not decide whether to join India or Pakistan, or should they remain independent? [The King of Kashmir sided with India in 1947, and as a result the whole subcontinent is paying a big price for the blunder of a few. As I write this article (May 30, 1999), both India and Pakistan are waging a mini-war in the valleys of Kashmir using sophisticated air-power.] To explain the grandeur of Indian princely states during British Raj, Lapierre briefly touched on the lifestyle of Ma-

harajah of Patiala, Mr. Bhupinder Singh. In the pre-Viagra days of British Raj, this Maharajah took 365 wives to satiate his prurient desire. But the unfortunate maharajah died early at the age of 42. It was reported that the Maharajah died of "exhaustion." This persiflage of Lapierre brought instant laughter in the audiences.

The four-year research that led to the compilation of a book call "Freedom at Midnight" also yielded some dividend, which Lapierre thought to be a bonanza. The research took Lapierre to obscure towns and villages of India. He interviewed thousands of people who were affected by the partition of 1947. These research endeavors had changed his life to such a great extent that Lapierre's life was never the same. The hospitality that was bestowed upon Dominique Lapierre by people from all walks of lives had changed his occidental values

and temperament. Lapierre was gradually becoming attracted to the philosophy of humanism. Through his research on India and Israel, he has seen enough of hate and distrust among people to turn him away from violence that emanates from wars and communal violence.

Lapierre's had seen human follies during the dark days of World War II. As a child growing up in Paris during Vichy regime (1940-45) he witnessed firsthand the atrocities done by the loyal irregulars of Pierre Laval with assistance from the Nazis. So, when he was researching materials related to the partition of 1947 he saw the human follies again at this time a continent away from Paris, London, and Amsterdam. An estimated million people lost their lives in Punjab and Bengal to materialize the dream of Chaudhury Rahmat Ali, a Cambridge don. While, Jinnah

people worldwide. Being a free thinker, he gradually moved to the camp of humanism. In that speech he delivered in the evening of March 26, 1999, in the Loyola University campus in New Orleans, he came out strongly in favor of humanism. It was the force that influenced him to take a proactive role in Calcutta's *Ananda Nagar*, a safe haven for destitute of Bengal. The last page of his new book "A Thousand Suns" makes a plea to the readers by saying "By saving a child, by giving him the possibility to learn how to read and write, by giving him a training, it is the world of tomorrow that we save."

In that enchanted evening in Loyola campus Lapierre proclaimed, "All that is not given is lost."

I still wonder as how come the sick and hungry children of *busti* areas in Dhaka and elsewhere in Bangladesh not getting the attention the way Calcutta's *Ananda Nagar* (City of Joy) had drawn lately. I presume Lapierre's refine writings had immortalized the human horror stories that are far too common for the hovel dwellers of *Ananda Nagar*. We need another Lapierre in Dhaka to experience the mundane glumness of the plebian life of thousands of *Rickshawallas*, *Thelawallas*, and the street hawkers, who are too proud to beg but too poor to make theirs ends meet.

The author, a research scientist, resides in New Orleans, USA

The author, a research scientist, resides in New Orleans, USA