CHAPTER III

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The faculty which provides the writer with his insight is not for the most part an individual endowment, but derives also from his total experience, from his education, from his society, from his culture and indeed from his age – from his own age (1972) 461.

The writings of any particular era are not only the creative works of the writer who produces it, but also witnesses to their time and place and thus to the movements of sensibility that have lived up to and away from it. For example in the literature of the World War, there is an undertone of the killer war, its aftermaths, and the associated horror in one or the other way, as in the poems of Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Rupert Brooke, Sassoon, Gilbert Frankau and others.

These poets penned in touching tone the horror and trauma of the world wars. They wrote in the context of momentous events and intense national feelings. Through their poems they depicted the ‘supreme crimes’ as also ‘the supreme sacrifices of the people. Their writings are permeated by universal emotions, psychological pressures, moral dilemmas, guilt, tests of courage, suffering, loss of friends, bereavement etc, and .(www.warpoetry.co.uk/warpoets)2

Similarly the effects of industrialization are portrayed in The Mayor of Caster Bridge and Tess of the D’Urbervilles of Thomas Hardy and that of the French Revolution as in The Tale of Two Cities of Charles Dickens. Similarly many Indian writers during the pre-independent and post-independent days reflect the spirit of the Age i.e., the spirit of nationalism or the Bhakti Movement etc. Thus any piece of literature combines with it not only creativity but also the historical spirit of the era. There is always a close link between the society prevalent at the time and also the
society as depicted in the writings of the time and the writer's own pre-occupation, be it social, political or religious.

All great writers, of whatever period have been aware of this coherence between life and literature and have incorporated into their work not only a wide ranging understanding of life but the climate of the age as well. Thus a creative literary genius of any period is a sensitive point as a 'chronicler' of his society. He is valuable because he helps to bring about a quickened, multiplied consciousness through his works.

"Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape and direction and even area of concern by social, political and economic forces in a particular society. Literature both in its interpretative and prophetic segments grows out of the confrontation that the artist experiences in relation to the experiences of his society," says Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in his *A Grain of Wheat*.²

Literature, whether oral or written, is an art which always expresses the moods, aspirations and predicament of a community of which it is a product. Literature is both time bound and timeless. It depicts contemporary concerns and sensibilities in the backdrop of the vagaries of the past, if any, and suggests a future course of action for its society. Literature reflects a specific time, yet it propounds certain universal truths which are timeless and which reflect the human condition.

The writer of the Twentieth century was different from his predecessors in that he was to introduce new work and new ideas about art rather than to apply accepted standards. He had to reveal the complexity of the human personality and of philosophical enquiry emphasizing the role of the agent in giving expression to the realities he experienced. In the words of Shivarama Karanth, "A writer cannot afford
to have his mind blocked. He has to have his mind and sensibilities open to all experiences and exposures to have a better understanding of life."(1993 p289)³

In the sense, a sensible writer has to sensitize himself to all the ongoing processes and changes around him and in turn has to reflect the same with a tinge of his response and experience in his writing. Achebe in one of his interviews expresses a similar idea:

A writer is a member of the society. He must decide what role besides that of writing he can play. He must decide that himself. I decided that I could not stand aside from the problems and struggles of my people at that point in history. (1981 p8)⁴

In reflecting the Age and Space around him Karanth did have his own views. He is neither a sociologist who studies the social changes in an empirical way nor a journalist who reports in a "as is where is condition". In his own words-

Literature is not the exact replica of real life. Exact replicas can be had from cameras and dictaphones. If it is the exact replica, then the painter or an artist has no work. Copying can never be called art. A life lead, heard, smelt and digested, forces a sensitive artist to manifest the same in his work of art. So, here, persons, events and incidents coupled with the artist’s innate way of weaving lead to a new work of art, be it literature, painting or any artistry.(1993 p289)⁵

Conversely, as and when we go through the works of a great artist, we get an idea of not only the 'man' in the artist, or his 'mind' and 'skill' in penning, but also the milieu in which he lives.

A close look at the literary works of Shivarama Karanth and Chinua Achebe present a fragmented thread of commonality and contrast between the two cultures,
two languages, two races, two aptitudes and attitudes. The writings of these two writers give a hint of the distortion these two cultures underwent during the course of their colonization. The researcher's endeavour here is to prove that these two cultures were undergoing change from within.

Chinua Achebe is one of the most accomplished African writers. In the history of the Anglophone novel, Achebe comes next to Ekwensi in chronological importance, but his work is much more comprehensive and complex than that of the latter. The African novel in fact is a response to and a record to the traumatic consequences of the impact of western capitalist colonialism on the traditional values and institutions of the African people. This explains at large the African writer's initial pre-occupation with the past. To take a reference from Achebe's personal life, at the university, Achebe had read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joseph Cary's much praised Mr. Johnson) and decided that the story they had to tell could not be told by anyone else but by themselves alone. That is how he took to writing. Recalling Achebe's words, he says, "My first novel Things Fall Apart is an act of atonement with my past, the ritual and homage of a prodigal son....."(1975 p70)

In the article The Novelist as Teacher, Achebe talks interestingly of how he views his role as a writer in society:

One of the consequences of the impact of western civilization on Africa, is the disaster brought about upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races. Africans were induced to prefer western culture and to regard their own with contempt. It is part of the African writer's business to teach his fellow Africans that there is nothing shameful in African culture and tradition. (1973 p1)
It goes to the credit of Achebe who thought that Africa also had something to offer to the world, totally disputing the hitherto accepted notion that “Africa has nothing to offer but just darkness, and darkness can never be a topic of interest” (1973 p4).8

Achebe mainly aimed at the task of making his people realize, through his writings that even Africa is worthy of forming a subject of literary relevance. This is expressed by him in one of his essays:

I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach the young children that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm tree is also a fit subject for poetry. My duty is to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education in the best sense of that word. Here I think my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. (1975 p44-45)9

In defining what African literature is, at a Conference in Makarere in 1952, Achebe defined African literature in these words, “African writing is a creative writing in which an African setting is authentically handled or to which experiences originating in Africa are integral”. African literature, as ‘a new voice, coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a ‘worldwide language’. (1975 p61)10

Thus, Achebe came to the conclusion that the African novel need not have ‘something else’ as the subject. ‘Anything and everything’ African is a subject fit for literature. In a Conference on African literature at Dalhousie University, Canada in May 1973, Achebe considers the African novel as:

The African novel has to be about Africa. Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape- it is in
fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position. (1975 p78)

Further, Achebe is a conscientious person who is very sensitive to the contemporary socio political situations of his surroundings. Achebe considers a writer as an integral part of the society in which he lives. As such, a writer can neither be deaf and blind to his surroundings nor can he wallow in his own world when the world around him is burning. He makes this idea very clear in a paper read at a Political Science Seminar at Makarere University College, Kampala, Uganda, on 25th August 1968, wherein he says:

It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant- like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames.(1975 78)

The same is being echoed by J. Issacs when he says: “The poet or writer should point out what is happening while it is happening; he is not there to deliver funeral orations” (1952 p42). Continuing further, Achebe says:

If an artist is anything, he is a human being with heightened sensitivities; he must be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations. The African writer cannot therefore be unaware of or indifferent to the monumental injustice which his people suffer. (1975 p79)

A writer in any society is not a journalist performing just the writing task, but through his writings, he tries to educate, inform and transform his readers. Another African critic Ezekiel Mphalele, considers the writer as a sensitive point of his
community. Achebe totally endorses his view and feels that the writer is not only a writer, but also a teacher, a social reformer, a social critic and an actor.

**Writer as a Social Reformer:**

Achebe performs the role of a writer-reformer in that, he tries his best to protest against the inhuman practices of the past like ‘throwing away of the twins into the forest’, and also the Osus being treated in a separatist way. He is deeply disappointed and wounded by the post independent politics of the country and expresses his dissatisfaction as:

> In *A Man of the People* the protest is clearly about the politics of the country after independence. I am protesting against the way we are ordering our lives. It is a protest not just against Europe or simply protest against local conditions, but a protest against the way we are handling human society. A culture can be damaged, can be turned from its course not only by foreigners but by its own people also. (1981 p7)\(^{15}\)

Thereby, through his writings Achebe tries to protest against the ‘unacceptable’ aspects of his society and also highlights the deficiencies. Wherever possible, through his characters Achebe suggests plausible changes for the betterment of his society.

**Achebe as a Teacher:**

Achebe asserts that he writes to teach and that the African writer should be concerned with the welfare of his community. He is one with a deep understanding and a very high level of moral commitment. His endeavour always is to think and to try to give something back to the society, be it as a writer or a civilian he feels terribly obligated.
A writer should not take for granted the relationship which exists between writers and their audience in another society, like say Britain. Because if we tend to do this, I think we might be neglecting our proper function if we take anything for granted. Instead of thinking, what exactly is our society, it is better to think what are its needs and how can I contribute. (1972 p 7)

Each of Achebe’s novels is a reflection of the African society, in the pre-colonial, the colonial and the postcolonial Africa. He views literature seriously and regards the role of a writer as very significant in creating awareness among his readers. Achebe posits vehemently:

The writer’s duty is to help the Africans regain their lost dignity and self respect by showing them in human terms, what happened to them and what they lost. The primary duty of the African writer is to arouse the conscience of the common man. The common man has to realize that he has lost something and be prudent enough to regain it. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can’t tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After the entire novelist’s duty is not to beat this morning’s headline in topicality, it is to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history. (1964 p 157)

Achebe as a Social Critic:

Achebe, no doubt dedicated himself to the essential task of reclaiming the
rich heritage of Africa. Yet, he does not romanticize the past, but criticizes certain meaningless and inhuman practices of the tradition. Even in dealing with his subjective experience Achebe maintains objectivity in his writings. Achebe realizes that the writer as a teacher must watch his attitudes very carefully. He is not a type of person who would idealize his past – 'to extol its good points and pretend that the bad never existed'. He sees the African past not as 'one long technicolor idyll', but possessing, like any other people's past, its good as well as its bad sides. (1979 p42)^18.

Commenting on the various themes handled in his novels, David Cook says,

Achebe handles the darker side of traditions as well as the better sides and leaves us to draw our own conclusions. He neither romanticizes the Ibo society nor vilifies the Christian European behavior as a whole. Achebe thus writes about a class which at the beginning thought like one, spoke like one, should a common awareness and acted like one and traces the process of the falling apart of the society and the loss of a unified pattern as outside forces play on the new generation. (1977 p67)^19

Having created awareness among the Africans, Achebe, next turns to repair his society by diagnosing its deficiencies and shortcomings. In fact, his novel A Man of the People is an authentic picture of Nigeria of 1964-1965, which exposes the corrupt, post independent Nigeria. In an interview to Kale Ogbaa at the Florida University Achebe says-

A culture can be damaged, can be turned from its course not only by foreigners. A culture can be mutilated, can be destroyed by its own people, under certain situations. Today the Igbo people are in many
ways doing as much as or more than the British ever did to destroy their own culture. (1981 p67)^20

What pained Achebe was the fact that Africa was being mutilated by her own people in the post independent period. The so called ‘intellectual natives’ failed to realize the sanctity of their independence and were driving their nation towards snobbishness, corruption and political instability. In fact it is worthwhile to quote Sri Aurobindo, the great Seer of India who observed, “Any culture that gives up its living separateness and neglects an active self defense will be swallowed up and the nation which lived by it will lose its soul and perish”. (1998, p27)^21

Obviously, the need for the writer to lead his people to reclaim their dignity is there. However, Achebe goes a step further, and says that the greatest task confronting the African writer is that he should ‘expose and attack injustice’ all over the world, but particularly within his own society in Africa. He feels that the African writers should be free and dare enough to criticize their societies. Thus Achebe assumes a second duty that of a social critic. In 1964, Nigeria was in a very deplorable condition, and this forced him to assume his second role as a critical insider. Wole Soyinka, in his novel, ‘The Interpreters’ (1965) presents the dilemma faced by the African natives in adapting themselves to the changed situation. Here he focuses his gaze on the evils inflicted on African societies, not by an alien race, but by Africans themselves. Thus Achebe plays the role of a writer, a teacher, a social critic, a transformer and a revolutionary too, through his writings.

As far as Karanth is concerned, he always believed that the writer has to perform the role of a ‘chronicler’. In fact that is what he has been doing in novel after novel. He has always been picturing rural India focusing mainly on ‘social change’. The subject of social change has been a passion with Karanth. For example in The
Return to the Soil, he depicts in a very natural way how even the priestly class, over a period of time develops fascination for English education, as in the case of Rama Ithal, the priest wanting his son Lachha to learn English in an English school and thereby get into the much revered Vakil (Lawyer) profession. It is only in this instance that we find Ithal going against his family members especially, his sister Sarasothi who is very much against Lachha leaving the family tradition of priesthood in favour of English education. This is evident from the fact that 'social change' has been one of the constant preoccupations of Karanth. V.M. Inamdar's pertinent comment in this regard justifies our stand:

The impact of social, political and economic changes in the past half a century on the life of common people and the gradual and irresistible distortion of the sense of values which the changes have promoted has been with him (Karanth) a growing concern. (1983 p80)

Having dealt with the preoccupations of the writer and his role in the making of his society, as an individual and as a citizen of the country, we can very well conclude that any piece of literature throws light on the historicity and the contemporaneity of the Age as well. And that the writings of a writer are reflections of the Age as well.

Among the several indicators of Modernity, Education plays a pivotal role and let us analyse Education as an indicator of modernity and how it affected the various societies.
END NOTES


3. Shivaram Karanth, Ten Faces of a Crazy Mind, (New Delhi, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, 1993) 289


5. Shivarama Karanth, Ten Faces of A Crazy Mind, (New Delhi, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, 1993) 289


8. Ibid. p. 4


10. Ibid., p 61

11. Ibid., p 78

12. Ibid., p 78


22 V.M. Inamdar, *Shivarama Karanth* (Mysore: Mysore University, 1983) 80