

SPEECH OF
Dr. GOURAHARI DAS
at
Multilingual writers' meet,
Pasighat, Arunachal Pradesh, 2-3 November 2019

Dear Friends,

One day Franz Kafka (1883-1924), as the story goes, encountered a little girl in the park where he went walking every day. She was crying as she had lost her doll and was desolate. Kafka offered to help her look for the doll and arranged to meet her the next day at the same spot. Unable to find the doll he handed over her a brief letter supposed to have been written by the doll. He read it out to her: "Please do not mourn me; I have gone on a trip to see the world. I will write to you of my adventures." This was the beginning of many such letters. When they met he read out to her those carefully concocted letters about the imagined adventures of the beloved doll. The little girl was comforted. When the meetings came to an end Kafka presented her with a doll. It looked obviously different from the original one. A letter attached to it explained: "I know you won't recognize me as my travels have changed me..."

Many years later, the girl grown up with the years found a letter stuffed into an unnoticed crevice in the replaced doll. It said: "You will eventually lose everything that you love but, in the end love will return in a different form." There are many versions of this story of Kafka and the doll. It may not have been written or involved Kafka at all. But that is not important. There are two important things for which I mentioned it here. One, the grief over the loss is universal. There is not a single person on this earth who has never experienced the sense of loss over certain things. It pains when we lose people or things that are dear to our heart. And the second, which is even more important than the first one is the healing power of the short-story which the man has used as a tool of consolation since time immemorial.

There is still another aspect to this small story. What's that? Let me take the help of another small one to address to this question. A young man of around 20-21 years was once interviewed by a Board of three experts for the post of a sailor in a ship. The first member asked the young man a question- "Imagine of a situation that there is a strong wind and your ship is on the disturbed waters of sea. What will you do?" The Youngman replied, "Sir, I will drop the big anchor (heavy metal object that is attached to a rope or chain and dropped over the side of a ship or boat to keep it in one place) and the ship will come to a halt. Once the weather settles down then I shall

proceed.” The second expert asked him, “OK. Imagine of another situation. This time there is a storm in the sea. It may blow away your ship and do irreparable damage. What would you do?” The boy had the same reply, “Sir, I shall drop a bigger anchor this time. The ship will come to a halt.” Now it was the turn of the third member. After two or three ordinary questions he also asked the same question. This time he mentioned that the situation was really bad. “Think and imagine. It is a super cyclone or Tsunami. It will just throw away your ship and thrash it somewhere. What will you do?” The young man without being slightly perturbed replied, “Sir, I shall drop the biggest anchor this time and the ship will remain afloat there.” The board members were naturally little annoyed. They asked this young man: “Tell us where you would get so many anchors in that deep sea.” The young man replied, “Sir, would you kindly tell me from where you are getting these strong wind, storm, super cyclones and Tsunami in that deep sea? Since you are getting them from your wild imagination, I am also getting these anchors from my own imagination. Because I have the faith that, wherever there is apprehension of despair, there is a hope for solution too. In the earlier story, the emergence of Kafka or the gentleman in that park represents this ray of hope. To me this also defines an important role of short-story or fiction. It imbibes faith. To quote Rabindranath Tagore, “Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings

when the dawn is still in dark.” In seminars or symposia or story-reading sessions like this we come across certain questions almost regularly. For example, the questions like how are modern stories different from traditional ones? And how do Indian stories stand out of the stories of West. Both the questions deserve long answers. I shall try to address them briefly. The last question first. Besides being cultural discourses the traditional Indian stories have all along laid more emphasis on Family. Two major epics of India the Ramayana and the Mahabharat are primarily family stories. If the Ramayana deals with ideal relationship among brothers, Mahabharat deals with mistrust among Kaurav and Pandavs. Another striking feature of Indian stories is that they are more or less the stories of triumph of truth over falsehood, victory of good over evil. Indian stories have faith on reincarnation of human beings and presence of gods and demons in their respective places like Heaven and Hell. Epics of West also deal with Kings and queens, wars and intrigues with the interference of both benevolent and malevolent gods as we see in Homer’s Odyssey. Short stories of western world are more recent compared to the oriental stories of Upanishad, Puran, Jatak and Panchatantra that lay paramount importance on individual rather than on society; on the microcosm rather than on the macrocosm. The occidental myth is also different as faith in the theory of reincarnation is not there. Again there arises

a question pertaining to the difference between the modern and traditional stories. The stories of today try to look more to the within or the inside than the outside of the protagonist. For it the man is more important than society. Modern stories foster strong reaction against religious, political and social views. To quote Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Prize winner of 2018: "The world is divided into two. Some people think the best idea would be to retrace our steps and try to restore the old values called tradition. Others say: No, that is not enough! We have to create the world differently somehow. The old world order destroyed the planet, introduced discrimination, and brought so many inequalities. And now we are looking for an answer." Moreover, modernism in literature believes that there is no absolute truth. All things are relative. This has no connection with history or institutions. Their experience is that of alienation, loss and despair. Life is unordered. Modernism is concerned with the sub-conscious and with the moment's reflection which invariably forms the seed of the story. Traditional literature believed that Man was the product of the environment or situations he came across. But Carl Jung's (1875-1961) theory of the collective unconscious speaks otherwise. It states that all the elements of an individual's nature are present from birth, and that the environment of the person brings them out rather than creating them. Nobel laureate Olga claims herself a disciple of Carl Jung and believes in it.

Nobel winner of 2019 Peter Handke, questions paternal heritage and chose the maternal heritage. The relation of literature with politics raises yet another question. The question is whether literature has anything to do with politics. There are two sets of opinions on this regard. A majority of creative writers have shunned politics like untouchable objects. But there are quite a few like Olga. She says, "Literature is meant to be provocative, to raise doubts and address issues that are not evident. She says, "My works do not make political demands. But politics creeps in everywhere."

To me, nothing is apolitical in our society. So it is better to fall in the line of Albert Camus (1913-1960) who writes, "Fiction is a lie through which we tell the truth." Camus goes one step further to define the role of fiction saying, "It must comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable." The question that bothers all of us is what makes a short story successful? Successful short stories where we wander to find the truth stand the test of time. They are immortal like classics. Readability comes second as what is happening in it is as important as how it is happening. Thus immortality along with readability makes a story great.

I would like to conclude quoting Lorrie Moore who said," A short story is a love affair, a novel is a marriage." As we know, stories of

love possess hypnotic attraction irrespective of their endings--tragic or otherwise. Thank you.

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