Language in the 21st Century: For Whom Do We Write?

(*A Reflective Article*)

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Introduction

Anyone who has been through Noam Chomsky's (1965) work will remember the once-famous but now-forgotten example of `*Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*'. Let me replace *ideas* with *authors* and the action of a dormant and intransitive *sleeping* with this 'agentive' verb of *writing*, and what do we get? We get a sect of social agents called *writers*, who often do not want to commit themselves politically and yet write furiously, composing all sorts of texts. These agents, like any other entrepreneurs, write their way into vast fortunes and usually possess a keen sense of the market. Some, who claim to represent the oppressed, write their way out of oppression and the ones with certain convictions know how to write beyond their dogma. False heroism abounds as false ideologies in the texts show up.

The authors are often inaccurately portrayed as solitary geniuses, and what more - many of them strongly believe in this depiction themselves. But they tend to forget that they, as social agents, are positioned, by language and society, to write "social texts" that reproduce the existing social order or the chaos that characterizes their time and space. Their responsibility is greater than those who author political polemics, often expressed in jokes, cartoons, snide remarks, WhatsApp and Facebook messages, Twitter rumours and party-talks. At the turn of 2020, when the Pandemic suggests a genuine possibility of closure of the universe of blamegames and unreliable discourse, and when language loses its ability to reason, criticize, and stand apart in and non-partisan manner, the activist concept of literary agency become important.

But let me stop complaining and ask ourselves the following questions: Do we want texts to change the world, or the world to change the texts, or both? As Ben Agger (1990) would like to say, books begin to author writers, constraining authorial sensibility and subjectivity - and introducing a socially acceptable formulation of society. We cannot forget that 'texts' are actually constrained both by *language* (Wittgenstein 1976, 1986) as well as by *social forces* that 'domesticate' writing. Since the boundary between text and world blurs to the point of collapse, reading and rereading remain the only real authors (remember Derrida 1976).

Sociology of Writing

While constructing a construct a social theory of the text, *translators* and Translation have a unique position. It is this 'second' turn to a text that helps evolve a sociologic of writing and help frame a theory and critique of ideology (see Jameson 1981). There is yet another reason for reminding ourselves of the centrality of translation. Although the French postmodernists like Derrida (1976) and Foucault (1972) would claim that 'reading writes', it is also the case that readings could *destroy* texts. The responsibility of interpreting what is `undecidable' rests on our reading. Except for a few meta-texts, all other texts seem to live a definite life and have a fatalistic self-destructing tendency. In such cases, translation seems to be the only real hope for discourses of ideology.

In a possible Sociology of Writing (and Translating), if the author is viewed as a pawn with a keen sense of the game - the game her language plays on people and on reading, she must be collecting, collating and buying things – the raw materials to create products in order to sell `her own words'. But what are these raw materials? And who sells them? Supposing we say that the author builds on top of the materials supplied by the social and cultural 'system' which always has a set of official stories to sell – those that are blared out on radio and tele-networks or smeared in ink in dailies of all hues – as well as those that are rumours and tales common man tells or offers as possible alternative narratives. Of course, there are also agencies at work in that society – I mean, group-internal, or external business interests – that would like to create their own little deviations or versions. Those who resist changes have their own myths constructed, and the advocates of change spread their own beliefs. Does the author depend on any one of these?

If, however, we believe that it is the readers who actually write, then they are free to dispel a belief, discard an approach, and dislodge a theory so as to write new versions not only of texts but also of social relations. Our Social Media and new networking seem to be doing exactly this. At this point, for the interested scholars, let me refer to the interesting text by Matthew Maslin (1996) posted on a web-space under '*Cyber Space and Critical Theory*' (cf. http://65.107.211.206/cpace/cspaceov.html), where he created a parody of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In place of Vladimir and Estragon, we find Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Derrida appearing as old friends in this text - engaged in an imaginary conversation, as they *wait* endlessly *for Foucault* quoted in detail in Singh, Udaya Narayana (2010). Thoroughly bored, they continue in the following manner to 'keep the conversation going. That way we can pass the time'. The topics seem limited as they can't 'talk about a novel yet', 'because it isn't done yet', and nor about the concerns such as 'Do you think we're writers?', because if they were not, and were 'authors' instead, they were dead 'because of what Barthes said'. In the segment on 'Writing', Derrida falls asleep as Bakhtin kicks him to warn that he 'must stay awake', for which 'we have to talk about something' such as anything. The play continues in the same multiply nested mode which made a virtue out of boredom, as Bakhtin is depicted as raising a fundamental philosophical debate on writing, morality and Plato, when Roland Barthes enters. They decide to 'write him a letter' as Derrida is reported to have said somewhere that 'writing is better than speech'. But before the two can write anything, Barthes approaches them and speaks to them. This is followed by a 'confusion' about the 'Death of an author', or what Barthes exactly meant - because 'What he said can have more than one meaning' which, too they think only 'Foucault will tell us'. The question is - to what extent, have we moved to resolve on the questions as to whether writing was good or bad, what our functions were, if we shouldn't make a confession, or do we keep waiting for a theoretician to please come and tell us how to resolve the chaos we have been accustomed to live in!

Chaos and Order

It may appear to many that 'Chaos' and 'Order' is in almost antonymic, or diametrically opposite relationship. As one digs deeper into the characteristics of chaos, one realizes that chaos too has an order. Chaos means irregular fluctuations in a deterministic system - a system that behaves irregularly because of its own internal logic, not because of random forces acting from the outside. Chaos begins where classical science and common sense end. A chaotic situation poses an enormous challenge for theoreticians in respect of predictability. A theory of chaos, or Chaos theory (sometimes known as *complexity theory*) is a discipline whose boundaries are not clearly defined. Chaos theory covers all aspects of science, showing up everywhere in the world today: mathematics, physics, biology, economics, and even in language, literature and music. Many believe that twentieth century science will be remembered for three main theories: quantum mechanics, relativity, and chaos. Prior to the development of chaos theory, the majority of scientific study involved attempting to understand the world using linear models, whereas we now know that a large number of phenomena we deal with show a nonlinear system. When systems in nature are to be modeled mathematically, we find that their graphical representations are not straight lines and that the system's behavior is not so easy to predict. The theory of Chaos has already elevated variation, change, surprise and unpredictability to the center of the knowledge process. Further, there is growing evidence now that most systems in the natural world exhibit non-linear behavior and that such behaviors vary in degree of non-linearity depending upon the bifurcations in their oscillations, cycles, periods and rhythms. Eever since Henri Poincare originally discovered the concept of 'Chaos' during his investigation of the warped periodic motion of Neptune, (which eventually led to the discovery of Uranus), the implication of his discovery had a wide repercussion.

James Gleick (1987), in his book 'Chaos,' has given an engaging historical account of the events as well as the people such as Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist, Benoit Mandelbrot, a scientist at IBM and Stephen Smale, a mathematician at Berkeley who were responsible for our understanding of Chaos. Their work converged with that of Mitchell Feigenbaum, James Yorke, Robert May, David Ruelle, René Thom and many others to give birth to Chaos theory as a discipline.

Mandelbrot (2010) had shown that, no matter what the scale of observation, noise and information were always in some fractal combination rather than separate and discrete. This insight changed our conceptualisation of the architecture of natural and social systems. Smale created a topological mathematics with which to visualize the behaviour in space of systems, which act unpredictably and still produce patterns. With this presentation, the complex and self-similar nature of systems dynamics could be seen; moreover, one could follow the similarities and differences over time to see how they converged, parted, and reassembled into quite new and unpredictable form.

It could be argued here that in our social space, a *strange attractor* is at work, the pattern of which follows a geometry that is not Euclidean. It would turn, twist, skip and reverse the non-linear dynamics of natural and social systems. This is how butterfly attractors of Lorenz with more than one lose but predictable outcome basins worked. If one were to view a butterfly attractor in the well-known time series format, one would see only disorder. But if one could view it in a topological display, its loose causal geometry would be revealed. In between the two basins is a region most interesting to social policy, management science, and economic planning and it is here that linearity is lost. The challenge before us is that given the loose causality of events, from where does come the stability so essential to planning and praxis.

As described by Dewdney (1989), David Griffeath of the University of Wisconsin at Madison had shown that the transition from chaotic to stable systems and back again was indeed curious. They noted that order grew from disorder in cellular automata in four stages and that regardless of how many elements were there in a given space, the same pattern would arise.

When free market capitalism was young, perhaps its progress was smooth. But under the irresistible pressure of psychological marketing projected through ever more powerful mass media today, demand from the ever-expanding market has soared. Under the relentless push of automation and control technology, worker productivity has also soared. However, as the capitalist is never satisfied, he pushes technology further and further and sheds more and more labour. As technology is given further push, to the lathe is added the automatic tool capstan and stock feed. To the mail is added the telegraph. To the horse and cart is added the railway, or motor vehicles with horse power. Sail is replaced by steam. To newspapers is added radio. The **k** factor is thus driven higher and higher. The curve undergoes another metamorphosis.

Now, instead of settling down to a steady limit it oscillates back and forth forever between two levels. Even after this unstable state has been reached, technology still presses onwards. The heavy trucks displace the railways. The aircraft outpaces the steamship. To radio is added television. Mail is displaced by the telephone. The computer replaces the typewriter. The Internet supersedes telegraphy. This goes on and on.

Given this picture, it is not difficult to see that because of this boom in economy, a bottomless market would suddenly materialize out of nowhere creating an unlimited need for many specialist skills. The future would begin to appear safe for them, until a crisis comes. Then just as suddenly it vanishes like the morning mist, as it happened to the dot-com crash that has had a devastating effect on the urban space of India. Like a true butterfly effect, the down-turn which originated from the slow-down in the US market which had its first toll on the Asian financial crisis. The same story of the 1990s aseem to be repeating once again in 2020.

For Whom Do We Write? / Some Reflections

Given the above dismal picture, this is a genuine question: For whom do we write? It is no coincidence that our writers have always addressed to this Urban India. For them, it is this India that lies at the center. In one of my lectures in Saarbrucken, Germany (titled 'Another India: Voices from the periphery' given in August, 2002 published as Singh 2006), I had argued that in a plural space such as South Asia, each political entity will have, at any given point of time, many centers – depending on which way one decided to assign values to one or the other cultural parameter. I had then suggested we are often unable to decide as to whom do we write for or about? Which India are we talking about?

Is India the space that gets to be seen in the words woven by our leaders, television anchors and writers who happen to write or rewrite in English? Or, the space that peeps through the texts in 'Vernacular languages' that stand on the other side of the lamp that is sustained on an English wicker? Can we talk about people who ahave decided to return home braving all kinds of difficulties that they may face in twalking the next thousand miles? I mention this only because Indian English writing allows a large part of India to perpetually remain outside the focus.

It is this modernity which seemed to be driving the subsequent generations more and more towards consumerist and materialistic western model of social organization, ensuring a permanent intellectual and economic slavery. While this was happening - not surprisingly - an insipid romanticism in both tone and tenor - had been smuggled in stylistically in the writings of many in those days getting rid of which was a problem even for an erudite The vernacular writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to the latest generation of creative writers in indigenous languages of India, it is the same complaint we get to hear. Bankim complained that neither the English neo-romantics nor their 19th century Bengali replica in Hemchandra and Navin Chandra Sen could satisfy him until he could rediscover the everlasting charm of oralcy of the vernacular poets. It is no different even now (cf. Singh 1993).

As time went by, Tagore (1929, 1941) became more and more pronounced about his own reading of his time and space and in presenting a critique of his environ. He vigorously differed from the proponents of borrowed glow of Eurocentric modernity - and charted out his own

course, digging out his own style from under his roots. Whereas the modernist would argue that the past must be stilted and stunted at some point so that one could grow beyond past, Tagore talked about looking back at one's own roots: "When sun shines mercilessly, raising mercury in the world outside, when there is not a drop of rain from the sky, at that time, thanks to our roots, we can draw upon `rasa' from the dark innermost chamber of our past."

Be that as it may, the way our writers worked to speak to their fellow language speakers within their culture space in the 19th and 20th century cannot be the model to be followed in the 21st Century. The face of our readers have changed so much that it was now impossible to imagine such changes a decade ago. Mark Nunes (1995) in an essay titled 'Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality, and Postmodernity' reports that within the first six months of 1994 alone, the number of computers connected to the worldwide network of Internet jumped by one million to a total of 3,217,000 "host" machines. Since then, the increase has been many times more and phenomenal. This reminds us of the old-world view of moving ahead in an unhindered manner – through a 'highway', rather than inching to one's goal in cityscapes on the narrow roads full of uncertainties and chaos. The twin icons of progress and freedom that a 'highway' stands for would also entail some new 'roadside businesses'. As of now, the net does more than network the globe, because it creates a metaphorical world in which we conduct our lives today. And the more ecstatic the promises of new, possible worlds, the more problematic the concept of "the world" becomes. "Perhaps more so than any other contemporary theorist, Baudrillard provides a provocative heading for "navigating" this hyperreal terrain" (Nunes 1995).

Although Baudrillard's (1988) comments refer more appropriately to 'telematics', 'Information super-highway' and 'cyberspace' are words given by him, and they have now entered into our common vocabulary. What we notice here is that the technology that aims at containing distance eventually creates a virtual world which destroys the conceptual possibility of 'distance'. He sees the world as entering an orbital era: "the perpetual tourism of people who no longer undertake voyages in the true sense, but simply go round and round in circles within their circumscribed territory" (Baudrillard 1993: 29). From this critical perspective, then, Internet collapses space in a manner that implodes all concept of distance, spacing and separation (Gane 1993).

This metaphorical topography offered up by the net or world-wide-web presents the simulation of a vast, undiscovered country in which only our imaginations limit our abilities. Distance disappears into immediacy, and presence becomes a state of simultaneity and transparency. The political boundaries are now assuming a meaning different from what it was earlier because the net has mapped its territory comprehensively, and differently from those mapped by the political geographers. Writing truly becomes tele-graphy, distance writing, in that it "breeches" spatial and temporal constraints on a culture (Lyotard 2018, *Inhuman* 49-51). For Baudrillard (1988), as with Marshall McLuhan (1964), telematics supersedes the history of writing.

One thing is for sure: The major aim of writing was to arrest the typical feature of 'rapid fading' of human language. Discovery of audio recording and videography also contributed to the same goal. This is achieved remarkably well by the Online writing and the New Media. The other advantage is removing alienation in a novel way, because there is no need to represent the absent other, nor give of hope of any body taking note of what you are doing in one corner of the globe. Although expressions like 'global village' are a cliché now, there is a kind of universalization that is achieved now.

The question 'For whom do we write?' has, therefore, a different answer now. Those unfamiliar with virtual communities may not yet appreciate the strength of these interactions between virtual bodies in virtual space. In a 1993 *Village Voice* article, for example, Julian Dibbell describes in some detail an incident of "cyber-rape" at LambdaMOO, detailing not only the emotional trauma of the female victim, but also the repercussions of such an act in the virtual community. The crime brought players together in a heated discussion over the state--literally *the state*--of their virtual community, and how to balance justice with liberty.

Let me end this section with a quote from Mitch Kapor, founder of EFF and Lotus Corporation (as quoted by Holmes, David 1997: 53):

Life in cyberspace. . .at its best is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentered than hierarchical.... In fact, life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would haves wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity, and community.

Conclusion

No matter how efficiently we plan out our space and its environ, it is all rendered worthless without people (cf. de Certeau, 1984). It takes people to make a space – rural or urban, indigenous, or foreign, virtual or real. I remember the oft-quoted saying from Bangla – 'Sabaar upare maanuS satya, taahaar upare naai' ("Man is above all truth, there is none that is higher!') It is people who are possible to place in the empty shells of our time and place. It is they who will 'function' and make all other institution – social, cultural, mechanical, or virtual - to function as his agent. It is the language of the people at large that would anchor their space in time, bring it to life. More importantly, it is they and their movement(s) that would write the text. With millions of individuals each writing her own story online and on YouTube, and giving her own interpretation, a nation is pieced together like a patchwork quilt or a pastiche.

While talking about the pastiche, it reminds me that the seasons are changing once again, and winter is setting in with all her problems and possibilities. Where did I stack my cushion and my quilt? Where have we forgotten our languages?

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