

Rethinking the Third World Novel

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Third World fiction emanates from the Third World experience of exploitation, dehumanization and dislocation, shaped by the oppressive triad of geography, culture and history. As the author treats of the agonies, protestations and aspirations of the wretched of the earth, the novel revolves around two main complementary themes: protest and affirmation. The protest, which occurs in three levels, is directed externally or internally, against colonizers and minority power groups, and neocolonizers and sub-oppressors, respectively. The theme of affirmation comes in two forms: the assertion of a glorious past, culture, or civilization, and the affirmation of human dignity, fraternity and liberty. When these themes thus assault the consciousness of the reading millions, the possibilities for collective social transformation become tremendous.

[It is a right hand, palm held out
and fingers tightly pressed
it is a swollen hand
a wounded hand held out,
offered
[black], brown, yellow, white
to every hand, every wounded
hand in the world.
– Aime Cesaire

Third World fiction is a child of the Third World experience of exploitation, dehumanization and dislocation, shaped by a cruel milieu – the oppressive triad of geography, culture and history. For the rich natural resources of the geographical Third World have lured Europeans into pre-independence colonial rule and abuse, and both Americans and Europeans to post-independence imperialism. For colonial rule has meant simultaneously grave economic exploitation (or plunder of resources and control of economy), drastic sociocultural disturbance (or the “pulverization of traditional societies,” the disruption of well-ordered social life, and the degradation of the native and his mores), and political enslavement (or loss of freedom and self-rule on top of repression and abuse). For the ‘flag independence culminating the long and fierce nationalist struggle has frustrated people’s expectations with their government officials’ incompetence neocolonialism, martial rule, or dictatorship. For the aggregate

of these experiences have rendered the Third World peoples economically underdeveloped politically unstable, socio-culturally degraded, and psychologically derailed. Such background has awakened socially concerned writers, especially fictionists to the recurrent and unabated patterns of injustice that thwart the people's humanity, and has impelled the socially aware and morally responsible to use their pens in helping restore the lost humanity of the oppressed and in establishing a new life and history characterized by freedom, justice and human dignity.

As enlightened and courageous victims, (or sensitive observer) of abuse, the committed fictionist cannot just tolerate the unmitigated suffering and oppression.

He harnesses the potential of the novel to interpret and change reality, then transmutes into fiction his resistance (and that of others with a Third World consciousness) to such exploitation, his and the people's desire for a free and dignified station, despite the attendant risks and consequences. He may then denounce the foreign or neocolonial arrogance and their denigration of natives: by conducting a dialogue between the people and their history: by asserting a preferred laudable past of glorious civilization, culture and traditions; by unmasking the exploiters and their criminal excesses for what they are and for their deceptive propagation of their distorted pictures of Third World realities; by rejecting the West and its commodified culture or the white-aping neocolonizers and their cohorts; and by proclaiming the beauty of the Black, or the Colored as well as the validity of their native values and institutions. Or determined in his cause, he may fight for freedom and equality, and uphold human dignity and universal fraternity, as well as national identity and sovereignty. Such resistance against oppression and domination in any form, and such affirmation of praiseworthy traditions and native culture, of hope in achieving self-assertion and reconstruction – which may be called the Third World struggle and the fictionist's crusade of decolonization – he artistically renders in his committed fiction.

Thus, as his novels treat of the agonies, protestations, and aspirations of the wretched of the earth, as these articulate the writer's mission of decolonization in a crippling milieu, they revolve around two main complementary themes: protest and affirmation.

His protest maybe directed “externally,” at white colonizers and their interventions, as in the case of colonies; or at minority power groups lording it over helpless majorities castrated of their political, economic, or intellectual/artistic powers, as In the case of police states. For instance, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* indicts Western interferences in the tribal life of Africans, for their disastrous dislocation of the natives. La Guma’s *A Walk in the Night* attacks the White minority and their trigger-happy military arm for causing a degrading life of poverty, crime, racial discrimination and violence among the non-White masses through the color-prejudiced policies of repression and deprivation in that police state.

Or the protest may be directed “internally” at sub-oppressors, neocolonizers perpetuating unjust socioeconomic, political and cultural practices. Mario Vargas Llosa’s *Conversation in the Cathedral*, for example, lashes at dictators’ and their cohorts’ unquenchable thirst for power, wealth and glory, regardless of the hellish life it brings to the people.

Or else, the protest could be trained at both external and internal forces, the Hydra-headed monster in the form of multinational corporation in collusion with local leaders and their apparatuses for repression, that continue the economic stranglehold, the political clout, and social controls of colonial powers after nominal independence is gained. Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* parodies the grotesqueness of Latin American reality brought about by its colonial experiences, and aggravated by imperialist ventures, and still exacerbated by abusive dictators as well as apathetic subjects either traumatized into subservience or resigned to their predicament.

Such social protest comes in three levels. The first and most common – that of awareness – seeks to awaken the people’s consciousness to the subtle or rampant socio-political and economic evils, to the damaged cultures and psyches, arising from internal (i.e., socio-political, economic structures and excesses) and external (i.e., foreign or imperialistic) forces. Through realistic narrative exposes or through montage-like, fragmented and collided landscapes and timescapes symbolic of the distorted realities, the novelists explore the oppressed, repressed, and depressed lives of the people, and reveal the modes of domination and exploitation employed cleverly against them. These documentations or symbolic montage fragments can raise the people’s level of awareness to their undeserved wretched plight, to their being victims of injustice. These demythicize the “superior,”

“strong leader,” or “exponent of democracy” stances of the exploiters, expose them for what they are – monsters of oppression and repression – and unveil their divisive tricks, their subtle devices and machinery for control and exploitation. These also demystify the ruler-distorted pictures of class-based schisms. Furthermore, these serve as indirect protests and conscientizing warning to the perpetrators of injustice. Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers!* exemplifies this first level of protest as it graphically narrates the increasingly unbearable squalor and misery of the starved Bengali masses when the foreign government and its local lackeys repeatedly deprive the peasants of their grain produce and render them easy preys to apathetic manipulators, and profit-hungry boards, immoral brothel owners, and sycophantic law enforcers.

The second level of protest, which may be labeled critical or satirical protest, is effectively conveyed through essentially humorous or exaggerated devices. Contemptible practices of colonizers, neocolonizers, culture wardens, economic bosses and propagandists may be grossly exaggerated: abusers, irreverently ridiculed; victims, rendered foolish or pathetic. Laye’s *The Radiance of the King* employs reverse assimilation (that is, a White man in Africa, lost in a culture he does not comprehend, is placed at the mercy of Blacks) to mock the materialism and alleged superiority of the West, and to criticize the physical and psychological torture that assimilation entails. On the other hand, Garcia Marquez puts together history, news, government propaganda, folk story, superstition black humor, exaggeration, and the grotesque in a magical realist but “total” world satirizing the unreal reality of Latin American underdevelopment and uncertain future stemming from the tyranny of geography and history, as well as from the peoples lack of solidarity.

The third level of protest is found in militant, even revolutionary protest expressed through aggressive direct tirades, shock effects or calls to protest action, or even revolution. Bulosan’s *Power of the People* issues an unequivocal call to armed protest as he details the development of the underground resistance into an anti-imperialist force and a genuine struggle for complete sovereignty.

Complementing the protest theme in the Third World novel is the theme of affirmation. It comes in two forms: the assertion of a glorious past, culture, or civilization; and the affirmation of human dignity, fraternity, even liberty; of redemptive ideologies and values; or decolonized minds and

reconstructed lives. The first type, cultural assertion, usually underscores the rejection of the hegemony of Western culture, the myth of White superiority, and the tools for exploitation and domination by a foreign power that has not only denigrated the Third World peoples but has also disturbed their lifeways. As it evokes nostalgia for a sacred past of noble heroes, tribal lawfulness, treasured traditions and rich resources, it resents Western introduction that has wrought havoc in their lives. As it claims a praiseworthy native culture or civilization, it debunks the West-concocted myths of White supremacy and White man's burden. It is not a mere nostalgic journey into the past digging into folklore in order to serve exotic dishes to the West, however. Rather, it is a turning to the past and to the people's own lifeways to discover their heritage, to scour native themes, styles, languages, and devices, and to help shape national consciousness. Laye's *The Radiance of the King*, for illustration maintains the primacy of the native, his culture, his lifestyle in his own land, and demonstrates the inadequacy and folly of Western materialism, rationality, and practices in African soil.

Instead of looking back to the past, the second type of affirmation mainly looks for the future with hope, rallies the people toward emancipation, or staunchly advocates ideologies and values for political, economic and sociocultural reconstruction. Often, this affirmation clinches a work of protest as the work winds up with an optimistic motif, such as a symbolic dawn coming, or chain loosening, or as it heralds a bright future upon the death of a suffocating old order, or with the burial of forefathers symbolic of a barbaric historical experience. Fuentes' *The Death of Artemio Cruz* extols the goals of the Mexican Revolution as a *caudillo*, whose life has been their negation, lies dying. Or affirmation may be an independently treated theme, with a whole work focused on the enunciation of the human and humane, while seeking to dismantle forces and structure of dehumanization. Pramudya Ananta Tur's *The Fugitive* upholds the primacy of love (brotherly, paternal, or conjugal), human rights, and human dignity, notwithstanding adversity and poverty.

Often, the modes of conveying the protest and affirmation are forms of protest and/or affirmation, too. Fragmented narratives, montage dialogues and juxtaposed time frames not only register the harshness of the realities being documented but also score the distorted picture of Third World exploitation and deprivation peddled by authorities, if not the disrupted lives and brutalized sensibilities being denounced. Magical realist worlds both detail total pictures of incredibly destructive encounters with imperialist

excesses and class contradictions, and decry the real world of lies, corruption, power struggle and denigration. The growing preference for the use of the collective voice "we" instead of the individualistic "I" as well as for several protagonists and collective transformations instead of single heroes and their privatized experiences, leap away from the realm of narcissistic egos to the concrete arena of social life, to stories of whole races, of whole continents or of Third World peoples.

Nonlinear time, especially cyclical time, or psychic time conjoining past, present and future at once rejects the Western chronological concept of time (conversely, it affirms a non-Western concept) and projects the perception of recurrent patterns of underdevelopment (that is, cyclical time) or the view of backwardness as time standing still for people. The non-English or "nativized" way of using English (or another colonial language) attempts to break the cultural chains of colonialism. Moreso when the novelists abandon writing in a foreign language, use their indigenous languages and utilize cultural materials and aesthetic categories, then dialogue with their own people especially on matters of national developments. They would be affirming cultural autonomy at the same time, advancing literary decolonization. And when the fictionists invent new structures, multidimensional timescapes, fragmented-montage narratives, 'total novels' with marvelous magical realism, or conceive the novel as language structure in order to create apt paradigms of the Third World or of the Third World struggle, they extol the native writers' innovative artistry that their works embody and undermine Western cultural hegemony.

These two thematic strands of protest and affirmation complement each other, although either may dominate a work. Hence, the state smells, the filth, the dilapidated homes together with the drunkenness, criminality and depression in La Guma's *A Walk in the Night* primarily denounce the brutalizing environment of a white minority-ruled society that discriminates against non-whites and perverts justice and goodness. Yet the work also underscores the battered poor's efforts to cling on to their humanity, to values of cooperation and love, notwithstanding the day to day shame of life in that community. Hence, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* may immortalize the self-sufficiency and wealth of traditions in precolonial Ibo society but the work also undermines Western cultural/racial superiority and indicts the colonizers for their destructive intervention and institutions.

This complementary relation between these essentially antagonistic engagements may be seen as a literary correlative of the dialectical dynamics of Third World struggle – a struggle against as well as a struggle for; a *destruction* entailing *reconstruction*; a resistance against multiforms of oppression, and in the process, forging one's own freedom and self-regulation.

These protest and affirmation of these discursive practices may also be appreciated in terms of their implacable nature: their wedding of the political and the aesthetic. As simultaneously great narrative machines and brilliant articulations of Third World concerns, these masterpieces, including the internationally-acclaimed ones, in effect, dismiss the idea of pure art in a Third World context or the narcissistic concern for structures in the *nouveau roman* and the *nouveau nouveau roman* (or what Brazilian critic Sergio Sant'anna calls the "imperialism of the 'signifying' over the signified"¹) and disparage the inadequacy of formalist novel. Instead, they embody the aesthetic value and the social content; project the role of the Third World novel as a potent weapon for decolonization: and uphold the Third World novelists' commitment to the people's two-pronged struggle: to break the bonds of domination and exploitation as well as to build free societies uplifted from poverty, exploitation, racism and degradation.

Finally, it must be stressed that the Third World novel, its protest and affirmation, is an expression not simply of the author's views but the collective renunciation and enunciation of a (Third World) people. Beyond the title-author page, it is positively charged with the role and function of collective, even revolutionary enunciation 'What each author does individually already constitutes a common action...'² Moreover, when the protest and affirmation assault the consciousness of the reading millions, the possibilities for collective social transformation become tremendous.

The "social origin and historic destiny" imbues the Third World novel its special significance.

These findings yielded by an earlier interpretative analyses of selected Third World novels [in separate work] are offered as observations toward a theory of the Third World novel, the novel viewed from an alternative terrain – from the perspective of the oppressed.

In the final analysis, this theory validates Peter Nazareth's view of the a Third World writer: one who belongs to the Third World; one who accepts an identity with Fanon's wretched of the earth and 'determine[s] to end all exploitation and oppression. ❁

Notes

1 Review 70, p. 179.

2 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature" a San Juan Jr., *Ruptures, Schisms, Interventions*, p. 150.