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Of Writers and their Homelands

Recently, I have published a novel on the life in a Santal village. Its is as authentic as it can be. I have been associated with that village for the last twenty years. Although the novel is in German language and it has been published by a German publisher, there is no German tourist or pilgrim descending on the village and staying on because, say, he is moved by the people's simplicity, or because he falls in love with one of the tribal girls. The novel has no "German perspective", it addresses its readers through the mind and the sensibilities of its Indian figures.

My question: Is that novel part of *Indian* literature, as it was written on India and in India and by a person living in India for many years? Or is it part of *German* literature, as it was written in the German language and by a German-born writer? The answer will be a subjective one, depending on the perception of what "Indian" or "German" literature *should* be. If you consider my novel part of German literature, there are numerous parallel examples to corroborate this view. Plenty of German writers have spent much of their lives in Italy, or England, or France, and have drawn their literary material from these countries. Nobody would doubt that the corpus of their literature is "German".

However, I have also toyed with the thought of claiming my novel as "Indian" literature. Aren't there examples of writers merging their work with their adopted country's literature? Take Vikram Seth's last novel "An Equal Music" which is thoroughly and delightfully "European" in theme and sensibility. Take the Czech-born Milan Kundera who lives in Paris and writes acclaimed novels in French. Two or three years ago, the Sahitya Akademi ran an advertisement in major newspapers asking writers to send in their biodata and list of publications for a new edition of the "Who is Who in Indian Literature". The conditions the Akademi wanted every applicant to meet, fitted me exactly: I *have* published books, though not many, in English, and I *do* live in India for over two decades. So I responded. To this day I have not, for fear of rejection, inquired whether my name was included.

On purpose, I have put "European" or "German" and "Indian" within inverted commas. Because these categories are created for the convenience of professors of literature and theoreticians. Such labels have, indeed, their uses. But after a point they vanish, and what remains is just literature – good or bad, moving or unconvincing,

exciting or drab literature. A professor may object and say: Writers need their roots, a social context, an emotional climate, a fount of experience from which they can draw their inspiration, their material, on which they must rely to unfold their creativity. My answer is: True, indeed! Writers cannot conjure their poems and stories from thin air like a magician his rabbit. Yet, their creativity wells mainly from their fertile minds, their imagination and their subconscious dreams and fears. The question how they project these inner promptings onto a real and peopled landscape, is a secondary consideration.

Writers tend to become fertile exactly when their roots are bruised or thin or torn off. This pain of rootlessness evokes creativity. When at their best, writers transcend the boundaries of national literatures, of languages and social contexts. They then tear down such terms and categories beloved to the academia and revel in their naked humanity.

In India, we recently had a lively public debate contrasting authors of Indian origin who write in English with those writing in regional languages. The arguments are tainted by jealousy and arrogance and a confusion of values. On the one hand we have the market value of literature, on the other its artistic, creative value. These two sets of values overlap occasionally, but rather haphazardly. It is evidently untrue what sensational media hype wants us to believe, namely that the book with the fattest advance is the best book.

In my view, the debate is nonetheless noteworthy because it accords special importance to the *language* in which a literature is written. Nationality, place of domicile, and everything connected with “roots” have but an ephemeral relevance. But not so language. Clearly, it is the common homeland of a writer and his readers, if there ever was one. Language shapes thought and emotional patterns of its literature. Language determines the way in which writers see and feel and describe and communicate reality. Language is, in a way, the beginning of reality! And if writers yearn “to belong” and feel “exiled”, it is mostly because of their separation from their language. Mainly through their language they also “belong” to the people who speak that language and to her culture and her soil.

I consider language as the most essential agent which works towards the crystallisation into a cultural identity. It is part of the landscape of modernity particularly in India, however, that this identity is loosely-knit and shifting. Modern Indians often have two mother-tongues or they accept their second language as the

language shaping their identity. Many write in two languages, and often this is a regional one and English. This situation defines both the wealth and the depravity of modern multilingual and multicultural Indians. And it forbids to formulate hard rules about literature and its purposes. As mentioned, such rules tend to be superimposed by literary historians.

Well then, if it is really the language which shapes me into what I am as a cultural being, then my novel on a Santal village ought after all be considered part of *German* literature. Because I cannot write fiction in any other language but German. The German book market may prefer books by Indians on India because they are more salable; or it may favour my books because they are written by a German for a German readership. Both arguments have their own currency as far as the market is concerned. But these and other arguments pale into insignificance when we discuss the value of a book. Here only the ability to move and excite and console is what matters. This is the author in his naked humanity coming face to face with the pain and joy of the creative process.