

Responsibility in Writing as 'Other'



* Pandurang V Barkale

* S.N,D,T College of Arts for women, MUMBAI-20 (MS)



August, 2012

ABSTRACT

Writing as other by default entails a great responsibility. This article attempts a theoretical study of that responsibility. It refers to various theorists to elaborate upon the notion of representing other culture. Further deliberation makes it clear that when the culture-to be -represented is inferior to the one that represents, it often culminates in a problem.

Margery Fee in her essay "Who Can Write as Other?" enlists the issues arising out of this kind of representation. Fee states in connection with White's depiction of the people of colour and vice versa. She, first, discusses the difficulty in determining the minority group membership. Then she asks how can "distinguish biased and oppressive tracts, exploitative popularizations, stereotyping romanticizations, sympathetic identifications and resistant, transformative visions?" (In Ashcroft et al. ed.1995:242). Fee goes on to say that those who claim to speak authentically, unproblematically as an 'unified subject' on behalf of the group he/she represents, might be playing "textual games" (Ibid:243). The present article examines the risks and issues associated with writing of those writers who write about the culture foreign as well inferior to them.

Colin Thomas Johnson, better known by his nom de plume, Mudrooroo, in his essay titled 'White Forms and Aboriginal Content' believes that the British portrayal of the aboriginals was a distortion of what and how they actually are. He states that it is because of the sympathy that British authors had for the aboriginals they made them a part of their writing. He says that the "distorted aboriginal religious beliefs, legends, stories and even aboriginal characters became a sign of the British colonist who has some sympathy with Australia" (In Ashcroft et al. ed.1995:229). But they were observed through British eyes and culture and were cast in the mould of British forms.

The Aboriginal culture got distorted as a result of being seen by the colonizer's eyes. It is a distortion of the Black individuality. Their individuality is further abstracted by trapping it in full of contradictions. The African Americans too are shown either as 'vile, dirty or as clowns' that can never break the mould they are cast in. They are typecast into playing some unfavourable roles. They are represented in such a way that their inner core would also appear as black as their

skin colours. They are depicted in a comic situation. They are shown to be unintelligent, foolish clowns, or as evils. Some negative stereotypes are always maintained of them. Their poor financial position gives them no ability to exercise their own agency and to contest the representation of negative stereotypes.

Claude McKay, a Jamaican-American writer-poet and a seminal figure in the Harlem Renaissance believes that African American writers articulate their experience with greater intensity. And it is no wonder for him that the famous anti-slavery novel 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' (1852) that is said to have laid the foundation of Civil War, the novel of which 300,000 copies were sold in the first year of publication, was finally made fun of by Blacks. The writer of this novel, Mrs. Stowe is the White abolitionist who is said to have portrayed blacks in a very poor light. McKay states that the writings of the writers like Stowe resemble the pretence of a patron. It provides a superficial support, but it neither provokes thought nor does it inspire. In regard with an authentic representation of Blacks by a Black writer or his White counterpart he says that "the chances for a black writer and a white writer were not equal, even if both were of the same caliber" (McKay 1970:316). McKay concludes that the Black writer's representation of Black people would be more truthful because he has lived experience to his credit.

David .N. Livingstone, in his article titled Representation and Authenticity: A Reading, says that certain representations of the people and places, or races and regions, can be re-examined and repudiated precisely because they are inauthentic depictions or characterizations of the human subjects and its habits. He states further that without this authenticity "history can be only censored and dragooned in to the service of most powerful" and if one insists on authenticity of the representation, history can be not only be exposed but criticized. (15) Livingstone quotes George Steiner who believed that any mature representation

and any attempt to communicate such representation, is inescapably 'moral act'. To him, engaging in representation is not an ethically neutral practice because it is invariably implicated in the deontology of authenticity. Livingstone also states that sometimes the excessive insistence on the authenticity lapses in to what Christopher Lasch calls "culture of narcissism"- 'being-true -to-myself-syndrome'. He says that if we do not adopt the posture of courtesy we remain cut off from the very possibility of experiencing the real presence behind representation. To him, without the real presence there is nothing that to which the representation is answerable. Consequently we may find ourselves rendered impotent to critique those representations that could be dubbed inauthentic, debasing, oppressive or manipulative. (Ibid: 18).

Charles Taylor, in his book: 'Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition' describes his views on the ill-effects of the misrepresentation. According to him the degraded and debased representations always follow a far-reaching ill-influence. He says that the "projecting of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that it is internalized" (Taylor 1989:25). He continues to say that without the notion of authenticity these representa-

tions remain just images, no more no less distorting. He believes that the misrecognition or misrepresentation "can inflict, harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone (or group) in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being". (Ibid: 25)

George Lipsitz, a cultural and racial theorist, has outlined the concept of 'Cultural appropriation'. He defines his seminal term 'strategic anti-essentialism' as a calculated use of cultural form, outside of one's own to define herself or himself. Unlike what Spivak implies in her 'strategic essentialism' he argues that when the majority culture attempts to strategically anti-essentialize themselves by appropriating the minority culture, they must take good care to recognize the specific socio-historical circumstances and significance of these cultural forms so as not to perpetuate the already existing majority vs. minority, unequal power relations. The study of minority writing always confronts the problem of representation and it gives impetus to the debate between essentialism and social construction and implications for the issues of appropriation of voice and agency.

Thus the article studies the responsibility the writers are supposed to be aware of while they theorize about the culture they do not belong to.

REFERENCE

1. Ashcroft, Bill, et al. ed (1995): The Post-Colonial Reader. New York, Routledge .
2. Mackay, Claude (1937): A Long Way From Home: An Autobiography. Lee Furmon Inc. New York
3. Livingstone, David (1998): Reproduction, Representation and Authenticity: A Reading. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/623154>
Accessed: 01/03/2012 02:48
4. Taylor, Charles (1989): 'Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition', Princeton University Press, Princeton.