

SAFARA

REVUE INTERNATIONALE DE
LANGUES, LITTÉRATURES ET CULTURES



N° 4 Février 2005

Section d'Anglais, UFR de Lettres & Sciences Humaines,
Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, B P 234, Sénégal

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Safara, English Department, Gaston Berger
University, Saint-Louis, Sénégal, n° 4 , February 2005

UNDER THE PALAVER TREE



1. Literature, New Media and Globalisation

by Sunandan Roy CHOWDHURY*

This is the text of a paper presented at an international gathering of writers on 8th September, 2001 in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

In the beginning there was the word, and in case of any end whatsoever, there will be the word. Since the advent of the printing press, literature has come to be associated with the printed book. Printed book is a technologically engineered product. All technologies have a life span. Printing has been around for five hundred years. It may be there for another five hundred or more. But, as a technology to take ideas to millions, it is being outwitted by the television and the internet. It is often argued that the internet is an interactive medium and hence the growth in its popularity.

But, I guess, it is less interactive than, for example, a group of friends discussing public affairs in a café or for that matter, a round table like this. The days when literature thrived before the printed book, it's face was more like this gathering. In India, in the Arab world, in China, in Europe, in Africa there was a culture of 'katha' – in Sanskrit katha means story as it is told.

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The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Biblical tales, the Arabian Nights and a plethora of myths and cultures around the world thrived through the spoken word. The printed book silenced the spoken word. Internet is propelling us to break that silence. With speech and sound software, Gunter Grass can sit down and start reading in German in an European capital and Kenzaburo Oe can hear it in Japanese, sitting in his Tokyo home. I think, we, the idea community, can start flooding the worldwide web with poetry and novels and readings by authors and intercultural dialogues and hundreds and thousands of books put up on the net. In printed books there has been the trash ones and those that outlive their writers. In cinema, there has been the Bollywood and Hollywood and there has been the Tarkovskys, the Kurosawas and the Satyajit Rays. The same thing can happen with the internet and more so with the convergence of the television and the net. Wouldn't it be great that this round table be watched in ten different centres of the world!

But to achieve this, one has to think and act creatively. And along with intelligent use of technology, we have to broaden our vision of the products that we want to sell and buy. Multinational companies are targetting vast markets in Asia. And they are 'localising' their products. Literatures from Asia and Europe are not marketing themselves. Translations are the way to change this phenomenon. A Tolstoy inspired a Gandhi. And one Gandhi changed the lives of a people who are a billion now. Intense translation of words, literatures and cultures will create a churning which will challenge and in all likelihood overthrow the McDonaldisation and MTVisation of the world. But, in achieving this, there has to be a change in attitude among us. Europe, and here I talk of Europe because it has been the principal power point for the last five centuries, has been preoccupied by the high culture and the low. This has led to near to zero appreciation of 'peoples without history' and I possibly belong to one of those peoples. In Asia too, the variegated understanding of the west is limited to a handful. Translations, I think, can be a major cultural offensive which the Unesco should take up as an agenda.

And, a similar effort in children's and young people's literature should be the agenda of the Unicef. Here, let's see how literature can wield power on minds. Satyajit Ray, the Bengali filmmaker is known in the west for his cinema. But for generations of Bengali children, he was the most popular writer, whose detective stories and adventure detective fiction was and still is a household name among the Bengali middle class. One of

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his characters was a Professor Shonku, an eccentric scientist who lived in a small town in India but always got involved with one or the other mystery in some part of the world. Shonku was good friends with a German scientist and some others elsewhere in the world. These tales, as much as they gripped the imagination of the young, they shaped the world of possibilities in the minds of Bengali children. In the transformation of post-colonial societies, 'the imagined possible' can wield great power.

Coming to comparative powers, there are three idea modes that shape minds, namely, religion, politics and literature. Religion succeeds in dividing peoples, politics unites as well as divide, and literature mostly builds bridges. In conflict zones like west Asia when a Hebrew book like 'Samir and Jonathan' celebrates the friendship between an Arab and an Israeli boy, it can definitely impact young minds. If literature has to be 'the queen of the arts', it has to pay attention to the future queens, kings and king-makers.

Literature has always been inspiration for common people and great minds. Gandhi's 'Hind Swaraj' created independent India, Theodore Herzl's words laid the foundations of the Israeli state, Slovenia has lived as a nation even without a state till very recently, thanks to literature. The Bible, the Koran, the Capital have made and still make so much difference to daily lives of millions. So 'myths' and 'truths' and 'literatures' are here to stay, to outlive us and generations to come. But to make that happen better, we have to unlock the printed word and the sounds of those words in Sanskrit, in Arabic, in Russian, in Italian, in Swahili will flood the world and wash out the 'tidal wave of mindless infotainment'.

- This is the text of a paper presented at an international gathering of writers on
- 8th September, 2001 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. It has later been published in *Mainstream*, an Indian weekly from Delhi.