

PERSONALITIES THAT SPELL ENCHANTMENT

Aravind Menon*

The Bird Woman and Other Creative Rebels by Siddhartha, 2002, Bangalore: Dronequill Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 777, M, 13th Main, 1st Cross, HAL Second Stage, Bangalore 560 008. pp. 176, Price Rs 195/-

There is an old adage in writing: Don't tell, but show. What does this actually mean? It means don't tell us about anger or any other emotion; show us what brought about the particular feeling. The author's role is not to tell the reader what to feel, but show them the situation and the necessary feeling will automatically be evoked. That is, instead of talking about feelings, the writer captures his feeling in words that will awaken the same feelings in the reader. The writer takes the reader's hand and guides him through the valley of sorrow and joy without ever having to mention those words.

This commonsensical view gels with Sanskrit poetics, which is also the theoretical basis of our native criticism. It extols the reader as *Sahrdaya*, the competent and sensitive admirer of artistic beauty. His imagination should equal that of the writer. The only difference between the two is that while the reader is receptive,

* Aravind Menon calls himself a nomad, without any roots, because, according to him, he is not a seeker after just eternal truths but the truths in the present and now. Currently, he is involved with a voluntary organization taking up causes like communal harmony, water resource management, women's empowerment, rehabilitating the locally ghettoized people. Address: Pipal Tree, 139/9 Domulur Layout, Bangalore 560 071. Ph: 535 1756, 535 1716. email: aravind_govind@rediffmail.com

the writer is active. The basis of *Sahridayatva* is *Rasajnanta*, the knowledge of and sensitivity to *rasas* [emotions] while *Pratibha* or creative genius is a unique and inexplicable gift of nature, which Kalidasa termed as the ability to create ever-new objects. To create new objects one must have the ability to recognize potential novelty. Openness to experience, a fluid attention that constantly processes events in the environment, is a great advantage for recognizing such potential novelty.

Siddhartha, the author of the book under discussion, *The Bird Woman and other Creative Rebels*, does not tell, he shows. As the blurb says, "...Siddhartha's path has often crossed those of people who have lived life on their own terms." In his own words, "The people written about in this collection have all been to Heaven without being dead." (A telling oxymoron) "They are men and women who have been on the razor's edge and lived passionate lives with little remorse or regret. Not only have they made significant contributions culturally and politically, they have also experienced the wondrous vitality of day-to-day life, re-enchanting the world around them. Several of them are outrageously happy people." And Siddhartha's portrayal of them makes the readers feel that they themselves have been acquainted with the living *dramatis personae*. If the reader has the *Sahridayatva*, it can match the *pratibha* of Siddhartha to meet the people in this book vicariously and come to understand why they have been termed rebels.

For an author who is only two books old, it is no less than an achievement. (Incidentally, his first book appeared in French.) But then, he has been a prolific writer, regularly contributing to various newspapers and magazines.

A brief biographical digression: Though, in a way, he is a late bloomer, in spite of his attempts at writing stories in his teens, which he abandoned, when he serendipitously discovered that he had the making of a leader. He won an important student election while in college in Chennai. Others saw in him a leader with a social conscience. He thought that he found his forte. He went to Paris to study Social Anthropology and later worked as the International Coordinator of a respected educational institute. For nearly twenty-five years he globetrotted giving lectures on social and cultural themes and leading workshops.

They were according to him, "glorious years". As a surfeit of anything cloy the appetite, so does a surfeit of glorious years. He began to doubt whether he was as committed to the transformation of society as many others were. The self-doubt later turned him into a mild depressive and he even sought psychiatric help. Around this time he went to attend a meeting at Rwanda that had to do with the horrific genocide of close to a million of Tutsi and Hutu tribes. In his

depressed state, he nearly decided not to accept the invitation. Fortunately for him and to his numerous readers, he changed his mind with the idea of recording the events in written form as a way of extricating himself from an apparently jaded life-style and his depression.

This strategy worked. He wrote a piece on his Rwandan experience and it was carried as the main article in the Sunday edition of the newspaper, *The Deccan Herald*. Since then, as the cliché goes, there was no looking back. He began to average two long pieces a month, contributing to, apart from *the Deccan Herald*, *The Hindu*, *Gentleman and Humanscape*. This, despite his packed schedule heading a voluntary organization as an activist. In fact the essays in the book under review are the fusion of literature and activism.

Invariably, the pressures of the market invite writers to be loud, to follow prescriptions and formulae, to satisfy expectations, to avoid experimentation in form and content, to do away with subtleties and go on repeating what is successful in the market. By no stretch of imagination, one could say that essay is a genre that has many takers. The golden era of Addison and Steele is long over. Even the latter day practitioners like Orwell, Koestler, *et al* cannot be having many readers, unless they are dyed-in-the-wool literature buffs. The only exception may be people like Tom Wolfe and Gay Talese who followed a new form of writing *a la* Truman Capote who called his novel in 'Cold Blood' 'fact as fiction and fiction as fact.' Of course, the implication is not that what is written is fictionalized fact; it is more in the nature of using the fictional techniques for presenting facts. This genre is also called 'new journalism.' However, when people like Sir Vidiya have already started singing requiems to novel itself, by and large the most entertaining and durable written form in the age of visual precedence, whither essay?

Yet, as the persons he has written about, he himself must be a rebel, going against the grain of popularism. That is, the market forces do not seem to concern him. Apparently he enjoyed doing what he wanted to do and he is evidently vindicated, going by the sale of his books and the appreciation he has been garnering. Incidentally, Siddhartha's essays are in the new journalism mode. But in my interview with him, he confessed that he had not even heard of new journalism, let alone read its practitioners. He calls his essays personal. Ergo, it is his natural aptitude to gauge the pulse of the reader that has given the verve to his writing. His eye for physical details gives an intimacy to people and places.

The excerpts from two of his essays will bear witness to what has been said. The following is from his essay 'Doing Nothing with Fukuoka'.

"It was hot and muggy on a July morning as Akiko and I took the train to meet Masanobu Fukuoka, the natural farmer, who was in Tokyo for a few days. Akiko speaks fluent English and was going to help as interpreter. The train was almost as packed as a Mumbai suburban, but nobody was jostling. I looked at the seated commuters to see if some were sleeping. From previous visits I knew that a favourite diversion was to sleep to and from work. Sure enough, the situation has not changed. Half of them had their eyes shut. The three in front of me were young women in their twenties. I asked Akiko if people slept on trains because they did not sleep enough at night.

"That's partly true," she said, "but some of them sleep because they have nothing else to do."

"It was a curious answer, the bit about them having nothing else to do. Akiko herself was only twenty-six years old and I wondered if her words were merely capricious or if she was making an acute observation. I urged her to explain further. She replied swiftly, her words rolling out in a rush, "There are people who don't know what else to do the train," she said, " They may not care to read and it's not very exciting to look at faces. In Tokyo, people are exhausted dealing with each other, even if they don't know it. They avoid looking at faces. Some close their eyes, even if they are not sleeping...:"

"A short walk brought us to the little apartment where Fukuoka was staying... We removed our shoes and entered the small living room. Fukuoka was sitting cross-legged on the tatami floor-mat, wearing the traditional Japanese samue, a white cotton shirt with blue baggy trousers. He resembled an old mountain goat that had lived forever, his beard and hair wispy and white, as if they had been freshly bleached and dried. He had aged physically since I met him in Bangalore in 1988, but his mind was still sharp.

"Almost the first sentence Fukuoka uttered on seeing us was, "Human beings should simply rest on the earth, instead they are busy cultivating it!" In those few words he had summed up all that he stood for, what his life's journey is about...*"

"But I was not to be put off. I faxed Fukuoka a letter saying I was not interested in a polemical discussion on agriculture, but was keen on learning his insights on the meaning of human existence. I mentioned that when I met him years ago, in Bangalore, I had unfairly confronted him, as I found his ideas mystifying and bereft of political insight. But his words had

disturbed me sufficiently to buy a copy of his book, One Straw Revolution, and read it from cover to cover. It was probably the beginning of my de-grooming, my first steps on an uncharted pathway that would render me skeptical of the brave new technological world, with its driving aphorism of innovation for innovation's sake. Fukoka had relented on reading my fax and agreed to meet me."

The last line of the excerpt might give a clue to the author himself or his persuasive powers.

The purpose of this article is not an exegetic study of the text; but trying to have an overview of the writing style the author has adopted. Does it grip the reader? Maybe the author himself was so inured to his world travels, being in different climes, meeting different people, that he could have remained oblivious of what was happening around him. He himself could have slept off. Yet, he did not succumb to it. He wanted to be awake to the realities around him, by observing and recording the finer details of his experience, for the simple reason that creativity surges from openness to new experience which could be found in the humdrum.

Another excerpt will show you how the author vivifies the trauma of a man beleaguered by his situational tragedy. It is about Asghar Ali Engineer, the noted secular Muslim scholar who has been the target of physical attack, many times from his own Dawoodi Bohra community. For his unorthodox humanitarian views he was almost murdered twice. At the time of the author meeting him as a friend of long-standing, Asghar was just recovering from the fifth grievous attack on him. The author writes, "Why was Asghar Ali Engineer singled out for this kind of treatment? I must admit that I did not know very much about the reform movement going on among Dawoodi Bohras till this attack on him. I have always seen him as a campaigner for communal harmony and did not see his role as a reformer within his own community as so crucial. I also wondered if Asghar's zeal had occasionally got the better of his judgement to merit so violent a reaction." ...

"I asked Asghar if the recent attack had demoralized him, coming as it did only a few months after his wife's death. He said, "No, no! I have gone through far more difficult times." His biggest ordeal was in 1972 when he was excommunicated from his community after he published a critical article in a newspaper. He could not bear to see the suffering his mother underwent at that time. She was a simple person, whose husband had been a priest. And now her son was not anymore a part of the community she loved so well. And if she kept in touch with him she would face the

same fate. Asghar almost went mad with anxiety for his mother and the thought did cross his mind several times whether he should not buckle down and give up the struggle. The price to be paid for continuing his reforming crusade was too high. Not only for him but for his mother and all those he loved deeply. But in the end he stood firm.”...

“Another heart-rending time was when his older brother died...(His brother’s) body was kept overnight in the Bohra cemetery for burial in the morning. Asghar went and sat beside his dead brother and cried all through the night. The next morning a cousin approached him and said the religious authorities would not allow the burial to proceed as long as he was present in the cemetery...He stood at the gate and wept while the burial service went on. When it was over, two of his uncles went up and embraced him ... The religious authorities noticed this and the uncles were asked to pay a fine. They each paid Rs 25,000 to avoid the prospect of being excommunicated.”

The Bird Woman and Other Creative Rebels is strewn with such lapidary vignettes that tug at the heartstrings of the reader. In the same essay the author talks about his attending a meeting which Asghar addressed and their ride back home. Asghar’s daughter and a journalist and a photographer were with them. His daughter was to be dropped off at a place where her husband was waiting. When they reached the pre-determined designation, the journalist wanted a photograph of Asghar with his daughter. But the husband vetoed it. He did not want his wife to be dragged into any trouble.

The author ends this essay with, “ The reaction of Seema’s husband was understandable enough. I saw a wave of pained emotion cross Asghar’s face. All his adult life his family had to pay for his convictions, even if most of them had done so without demurring. I knew Asghar was not unaware that one day he might have to pay with his life, although this was not of overwhelming concern to him. What was a nagging source of grief was the tumult his actions caused in the lives of those he loved dearly.”

Though for the discursive analysis of the book only two personalities are selected, *The Birdwoman and other Creative Rebels* contains insightful portraits of another fourteen. Julio Labayen from the Philippines who was on the hit list of Ferdinand Marcos, the avant-garde dancer Chandralekha, the theologian-philosopher Raimondo Panikkar are some among them. It also has Mary the rag-picker with a limp. By Siddarth’s deft pen portrait, she intrigues the readers as much as she intrigued him with her calm mien in the face of pain and grim poverty. And of course, there is the birdwoman of the title. She is Nok, an uneducated woman of

Supanburi in Bangkok, who dedicated her life for the preservation of birds of all kind that her efforts resulted in a splendid bird sanctuary that could be the delight of any ornithologist. Be they renowned or obscure, each personality in this book is so finely and lovingly etched that he or she makes a palpable presence and the reader wishes for more. Perhaps Siddhartha will oblige us with another volume soon where we will meet with a host of delectable personalities other than those captured in this slim volume of 176 pages.

Truly, the writer takes the reader's hand and guides him through the valley of sorrow and joy without ever having to mention those words and his *pratibha* and our *sahrdyatwa* segue into perfect harmony.

* *Fukuoka, the oracle of the 'One Straw Revolution' the method of agriculture known as natural farming was offended by a gaffe Siddhartha made. He faxed Akiko from Bangalore asking her whether he could meet Fukuoka to discuss with him organic farming. Because of the terminological incongruence, Fukuoka refused to meet Siddhartha; Fukuoka's antipathy towards organic farmers is that they accepted modern scientific methods though they shunned chemical agriculture.)*