

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt / Egyptology

ABSENCE OF SOCIAL PRAXIS IN ZULFIKAR GHOSE'S INTELLECTUAL AND CREATIVE VOICE

Asma Aftab¹, Muhammad Asif², Muhammad Saeed³

^{1,2}Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government College University, Faisalabad

³Department of English, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus

Email: [1asmaaftabkhan@gmail.com](mailto:asmaaftabkhan@gmail.com), [2drmuhammadasif@gcuf.edu.pk](mailto:drmuhammadasif@gcuf.edu.pk),

[3msaeed.akhtar@riphahfsd.edu.pk](mailto:msaeed.akhtar@riphahfsd.edu.pk)

Asma Aftab, Muhammad Asif, Muhammad Saeed. Absence Of Social Praxis in Zulfikar Ghose's Intellectual and Creative Voice-- Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 18(18), 151-159. ISSN 1567-214x

Keywords: Praxis, Elitism, Artistic Autonomy, Organic Intellectual, Reductive Literary Outlook, Politics Of Representation

ABSTRACT

The present article has attempted to discuss the aesthetic views of a Pakistani-born-American novelist, essayist and poet Zulfikar Ghose by arguing that his outlook has been bereft of what many humanist thinkers have termed social praxis. It has been primarily derived from the idea of the praxis of Gramsci's notion of organic intellectual that aims at social and cultural transformation via his intellectual vocation. In other words, by seeking to link the dialectics of theory and practice, the organic intellectual, in Gramsci's view, creates ground for a practical philosophy that could shape and transform society on a more just and egalitarian footing. Naturally, such intellectual vocation is always mindful of social and ethical responsibility, implying that the actual task of an intellectual is to unmask those political and ideological structures which oppress and hegemonize people. However, contrary to this notion of a conscious and cognizant intellectual, Ghose's non-fictional writings present him as an isolated, even elite intellectual who seems to stay complicit in his cozy and comfortable intellectual/artistic domain, immune and insular from the world outside. In other words, his views about artistic autonomy necessitate a reductive view of art and literature with its indifference or distance from social injustice or political oppression as the inescapable human condition. The article concludes the need to create an intellectual position that can catalyze change and transformation by involving the artistic and creative enterprise in a productive dialectics with the politics of representation and culture.

Aesthetic And Literary Worldview of Ghose

The present article has attempted to discuss the aesthetic views of Ghose as a creative writer by arguing that his outlook has been bereft of what many socialist thinkers (within the humanist tradition of the west and the rest) have termed as social praxis. The dictionary of critical inquiry defines praxis as a process by which a theory or idea is enacted, embodied, or realized, suggesting that “social inquiry is a distinctive praxis; a form of reflective action that itself transforms the theory that guides it” (Schwandt, 1997:19). In the argument that follows, we have primarily derived the idea of praxis from Gramsci’s notion of organic intellectuals who aim at social and cultural transformation via their intellectual vocation. In other words, by seeking to link the dialectics of theory and practice, the organic intellectuals, in Gramsci’s view, create ground for a practical philosophy that could shape and transform society on a more just and egalitarian footing. Naturally, such intellectual vocation is always mindful of social and ethical responsibility, implying that the actual task of an intellectual is not to stay aloof from the world of real politics but to be part of it by contesting against and unmasking those political and ideological structures which oppress, dominate and hegemonize people (Torres, 2005). Such conscious intellectual, according to Gramsci, neither evades nor avoids participating and precipitating in change and transformation by simultaneously remembering their crucial role in increasing the collective consciousness of the people and gearing their energies towards a realizable political goal.

Moreover, with an acute consciousness of their voice and subjectivity, such intellectuals do not stay complicit in the cozy and comfortable ivory towers of their intellect. They prefer to speak from what Aijaz Ahmad has called the “structures of many solidarities (Ahmad, 1993:145)” by simultaneously acknowledging that “the struggle to be clear, or to be partisan or detached or committed” is integral to their intellectual vocation and position (Said, 2002(b):469). For this reason, they constantly remain in a “symbolic relationship with their time” [and] “in dark times [are] very often looked to by members of [their] nationality to represent, speak out for, and testify to [their] sufferings” (Said, 1996:43). In this way, Said associates enormous power with intellectuals in asserting a people's enduring presence and memory through their voice and representation (Dahab, 2003). Such intellectual position becomes doubly crucial in times of collective crisis (for instance nationalist struggle against colonial/foreign rule) as Said does not see the possibility of being an ‘amiable non-entity’ for an intellectual claiming any distance from or non-involvement in the compelling politics of representing his people and their cause to the world (Said, 1979). However, in saying this, Said does not ignore or undermine the universalist appeal of a genuine intellectual who, despite being rooted in specific historical and cultural conditions of his people and their trials and tribulation, can connect them in solidarity with others on account of their shared sufferings and struggle against oppression. In this way, such intellectual vocation remains mindful and cognizant of its local, communal and national specificities while simultaneously embodying the potential of being a universal praxis of emancipation and hope for all wretched of the earth.

Focus And Delimitation

The article has primarily focused on a close reading of a Pakistani-American writer Zulfikar Ghose's philosophical and aesthetic views that he has expressed over more than four decades (1965-2011), indicating the absence of social consciousness and political sensibility in his outlook. As a creative writer, his views crystalize an obvious distance, even indifference from the political, cultural and social concerns of the times he has been writing in, starting from the late 50's and 60's till present day in the backdrop of major political, social and cultural upheaval vis-à-vis his subjective, artistic and intellectual outlook.

In order to trace out the evolution of Ghose's intellectual voice and views, we have made a deliberate selection of his earliest writings – his memoir, *The Confessions of a Native-Alien* that he wrote in 1965, followed by many works of fiction and poetry, till his collection of essays and lectures *In the Ring of Pure Light* that he got published in 2011. In between these two works, Ghose has been expressing his views in his journalistic writings (appearing in national and international dailies) and in his interview/conversation with different people. What remains consistent in these myriad expressions (in his speech and writing) is his insistence on the so-called autonomy of literature and his denial to accept or acknowledge his role in raising the social or political consciousness of his people in order to create a more just and equitable society. Even the passages where he refers to his sense of anxiety and unease from the political, social and economic inequalities of his native culture (in both India and Pakistan), he remains largely ambivalent, even apathetic to see his role in creating a social praxis that could redeem his people in their grim present and even grimmer past.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Rejecting The Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Literature

One important theme of Ghose's writings is his obvious inclination to consider the question of art over its socio-political significance or historical context. Time and again, he even rejects the notion of social responsibility that an intellectual should be entitled to in the representation of life and its problems when he refers to his experience of writing in August 2010 – at the time of a highly devastating flood in Pakistan with one-fifth of the country 'under water' (Ghose, 2011: 63). He unmasks his peculiar mindset as a creative writer and says, "Were I to write the greatest poem ever written about human sufferings, it would alleviate no one's misery as much as would one small bottle of drinkable water" (2011:63). That a poem, no matter how passionately written in the backdrop of human sufferings, can probably be compared with a material thing like a bottle of drinking water sufficiently illustrates the reductive and lopsided views that Ghose seems to propound regarding art and literature.

In his conversation with Dasenbrock and Jussawalla, he further explicates it by giving a very narrow definition of literature, necessitated out of his myopic clinging to the so-called aesthetic autonomy and 'luminescence'. When he says "the subject matter of literature is very limited. It's birth, copulation and death, as Eliot wrote. Add to that a few incidental details. – a bit of violence here and

a bit of sex there”. Adding more to this reductive view of art, he expresses his absolute indifference from the transformational potential of ideas and says “I despise ideas. Ideas have never helped mankind. Only things help. Things like penicillin and flushing toilets” (Dasenbrock and Jussawalla). This is further explicated in one of his lectures, where he rejects the notion that art can solve human problems by pronouncing, “it’s none of the artist’s business to solve narrowly specialized issues. Not a single issue is solved in Anna Karenina and Eugene Onegin (2011:115). Complicit and content with his choice of weighing things in terms of their materiality, Ghose seems to undercut intellectual and literary enterprise’s valuable contribution and responsibility for creating a better world of social and political praxis.

Aesthetic Principle – An End in Itself

Side by side with his reductive view of literature, Ghose seems to propagate, rather unilaterally, the notion of aesthetic principle as an end itself by referring to the humanist tradition in west where literature is produced in a “moment of ecstasy experienced by the mind when an expression, an image or a rhythm brings to it a sudden surge of pleasure” (Ghose, 2011:3). By showing his complicity with the notion of pure aesthetics, he insists on the intensity of a moment’s experience and its “exquisite sensation” by viewing art as nothing more than a self-indulgent exercise, a kind of literary and aesthetic extravaganza. In this way, he seems not to acknowledge the liberating and transformation potential of literature (elsewhere in the world), which is socially conscious, politically resistive and ethically profound in its appeal. In his blind reverence for the aesthetic principle as “the highest of all teaching” (Ghose, 2011:3), he clings to the sheer spuriousness of a literary or creative work that serves no social or ethical cause but to satiate the hubris of a lone intellectual.

Isolated Or Elitist Artistic Process

Ghose accrues a highly privileged position to a solitary intellectual who is immune and insular from the external and largely extra-literary influences, necessitating an intellectual elitism with its distance and apathy from the world around him. In his strong conviction about the solitary and subjective dimension of literature, Ghose tends to confine and narrow its appeal and range “between a dozen persons of superior intelligence” who would be involved in a “spiritual collaboration...an aesthetic treats available to none but the most discerning” (2011: 67). As an instance, he seems to misread one of Yeats poems Politics deliberately and lays bare his intellectual dilemma indirectly by citing:

“How can I, that girl standing there, / my attention fix/ on Roman or Russian/
or on Spanish politics? / But that I were young again/ and held her in my arms!
(Ghose, 2011:72).

By way of comparison, the above view of Ghose about the so-called transcendental beauty of the girl can be contrasted with the opposite sensibility of a Pakistani poet Faiz whose gaze at the charming face of his beloved reminds him of the more serious, even sickening sights of hunger and deprivation, thus

endows his poetic voice with more depth and profoundness that it lacked before.¹

On the other hand, it is very pertinent to refer to Said, who debunks this myth of artistic purity as fancied by Ghose in the above lines by criticizing a “specialized intellectuals” who speak with one another “in a language oblivious to everything, but a well-guarded, constantly shrinking fiefdom forbidden to the uninitiated” (Said, 2002(e): 28). Contrary to this, Said resists and rejects the isolated stature of intellectual or humanist thinkers by widening their appeal and relevance for a larger audience and their myriad political and social concerns.

Problematic Dimension Of Intellectual Freedom

Ghose advocates an almost anarchic definition of artistic freedom by considering literary imagination to be unfettered of all restrictions. He even goes as far as to call artists and writers a pack of “unruly anarchic species” who are not bound by any moral and social responsibility and are at liberty to use everything as a mere locale for their literary rendezvous (Ghose, 2015: 3). In his absolute defense of artistic and intellectual freedom, he favors “the expression of doubt and heresy [as] a pre-requisite of intellectual advance...” (2011: 17) by arguing that no matter, how “distasteful or obnoxious a heresy might at first appear...we must never question the right of the individual to express it” (2011:8). The vacuity of this intellectual stance with its characteristic despair and an almost unbound freedom of self-expression becomes evident when Ghose admits how in his work *A New History of Torments*, he ends the novel by destroying the world he creates.

Here he seems to be strongly influenced by modern aesthetics, especially the Harvard Aesthetes for whom the “cultivation and expression of one’s sensibility are the only justifiable aims for a poet” that he must seek and preserve even at the cost of a whole human culture and its health and stability (qtd. in Williams, 1972: 86). This view more problematic because it advocates the notion of freedom without responsibility and representation without its entailing politics since it is singularly based on an individual’s right of self-actualization without any consideration for some collective cause. Likewise, sanctioning absolute intellectual freedom is itself vacuous, as in Maclintock’s view, it is only in the presence of certain limitations that one can legitimize the notion of individual freedom (qtd. in Lazarus, 1999:77). It is not surprising to see how such a self-centered intellectual view smacks of narcissism and is instrumental in producing a brand of intellectuals who are complicit and complacent with their self-aggrandizement.

Aesthetic And Social Dimension of Literature

We want to argue that the literary view of Ghose, with its disproportionate emphasis on aesthetic dimension, is likely to imprison the intellectuals/artists within their limited disciplines, where they remain isolated and largely immune from the socio-cultural dynamics of their literary enterprise. The superfluous and redundant debates about the intricacy of form and language occupy most of their creative energies and in turn, leave them incapable to “reflect on the social

traces of their work” (Said, 2002(a):171). The most damaging effect of such literary outlook is that it tends to confine literature into a narrow and individualistic realm of the author without letting it become a broader medium and expression of human tales and travails. Hence, the stylistic and formal features of art are unduly emphasized and the complex socio-cultural dynamics of literary productions are ignored beneath the clamor and din of the aesthetic question.

On the other hand, to subscribe to limitless academic freedom or intellectual autonomy is prone to make intellectuals efface and escape from the compelling “difficulties of human life and more specifically from the political intercourse of a given society and culture” and eventually produce an air of collective inertia (Said, 2002(c):400). On a related note, if, for the Algerian writer Frantz Fanon, national consciousness is synonymous with social consciousness, it follows that a philosophical view that negates the social dimensions of art is likely to raise the social consciousness of a people and is incapable of collective transformation.

Myth Of the Autonomous Nature of Literature

Likewise, the given historicity of literature and literary productions makes the idea of pure literature moot and unthinkable to the extent that for the British cultural critic, Terry Eagleton, pure literature untainted by any politics is “an academic myth” (Eagleton, 1996: 170). The premise about the purity of art and literature is based on a “certain fashionable, new-fangled ways of thinking” which regards literature as “a specially privileged object, and ‘aesthetic’ as separate from social determinants” by making them “hermetically sealed from history” into what Eagleton has called a “sterile critical formalism” (179-89). Edward Said also criticizes this intellectual outlook when he calls life within the academy as “deathly boring” and “quite impotently genteel” with intellectuals who are complacent with either some “blinker specialization or for gentlemanly aestheticism” (Said, 2002(c):400-02).

Seen from this angle, one can identify this “gentlemanly aestheticism” in a range of Ghose’s writings where he seems to assert the privilege of a lone artist with his quest for the suitable literary form which is independent of and distant from the compelling power politics of the outer world. In his essay *Sublime Nonsense*, he expresses his unwavering belief in the primacy of style over content and form over the meaning and discusses in detail the poetics of Rabelais and Beckett by asserting that: “for the writer, it is the pattern, the structure, the inner weave that matters. It is not ideas, but a design that interests the writer” (Ghose, 2011:11). In one of his interviews, he further accentuates this by declaring that the main preoccupation is form as he is “looking at language, not life” (Kanaganayakam, 1986:182). Thus, for him, novel is more a search for form than it is a comment on some socio-political content, which can be better accomplished by a journalist than a novelist. Likewise, the primary task of a creative writer is to work on the imagistic perfection of his art – something that he names as ‘luminescence’ as the “finest works are those that contain the least matter” (Ghose, 2011:111), and are not “dependent on nothing external... [but] the internal strength of [their] style” (Ghose, 2011:110).

When we deconstruct this artistic outlook of Ghose, we find that it is intellectually naïve to say that an artist's search for appropriate literary form and concomitant selection of signs and symbols is free of the politics of representation. Thus, a great many humanist thinkers have argued that this search for aesthetic form, despite being purportedly un-self-conscious and natural, embodies the cultural and ideological orientation of those involved in it (Belsey, 2000; Eagleton, 2001).

The recent theoretical debates in cultural and critical studies have highlighted how the discursive and formal features of a literary work are determined mainly by the subtle ideological and cultural symbols of a given historical epoch. Eagleton most succinctly demonstrates this in his discussion of the ideological versus rhetorical debate within the realm of language and literature, implying that all acts of language (writing or speech) are ideological and are "never innocent of authority" (Eagleton, 2001:82). He further contests against the theoretical premise of Stanley Fish that all "language is rhetorical" by calling it the, in fact, the product of Capitalist modernity, showcasing Fish's inability to "reflect on his social determinants" (2001:83). In referring to Eagleton's critique of Fish, we want to argue that Ghose's so-called autonomous and ideology-free aesthetics is symptomatic of the general intellectual indifference and isolation of the late 50's and 60's literary landscape of England and America. Needless to say, that it is the same time and atmosphere that influenced Ghose while he was graduating from Keel in the year 1955 – something that he narrates in detail in his memoir *The Confession of a Native-Alien*.

However, Ghose fails to acknowledge that even the most innovative and original ideas are likely to become stale if they are not conscious of the creative interplay, even tension within language, ideology, and power which constitute them. The contemporary theories about the importance of context and a more recent re-discovery of the historicity of literature are the telling evidence of the inadequacy and omission of this humanist view with its myopic insistence on form and style only. Such aesthetic theory with its belief in the autonomy of art tends to de-historicize the complex human experience in a given cultural context and reduces its broader appeal and scope in a simplistic and reductive formation of form and style (Matterson, 2006).

A similar view is accentuated by Said, who argues that to say that "we are against theory, or beyond literature" is to "be blind and trivial" as interpretation is or can never be free from the "moral, political, cultural, or psychological commitments" of a given culture and time (Said, 2002(f):383). By the same logic, the compelling yet creative tension between the inner subjectivity of authors with the larger socio-political realities outside gives a lived dimension to their perspective and representation by making it invaluable in terms of its human and universal appeal.

Absence Of Social Praxis

There is an interesting paradox involved in Ghose's insistence on the importance of literary form and his simultaneous negation of the socio-cultural

dimensions of artistic/literary productions. It runs counter to his own passionate call that he gives in the very beginning of his selected essays *In the Ring* where he calls him a “preacher” who, borrowing T.S. Eliot’s expression for Ezra Pound, “presents the appearance of a man trying to convey to a very deaf person the fact that the house is on fire” (2011:10). One wonders how this urgent cry to a deaf person can be raised without considering the human and social dimensions of a reading or interpretive community and their culture. With its singular emphasis on the formal or aesthetic nature of literature, such a view is likely to downplay the social depth and determinants of a work of art. Moreover, it constitutes an intellectual milieu that, despite being prolific in its production, is hardly productive and transformational in its impact. It once again reinforces our previous assumption about the absence of social praxis in the vast corpus of Ghose’s writings, which, despite their wider dissemination, could not produce palpable social consciousness with the promise of transforming the community and culture at large.

Trivialization Of Literature and Culture

Ghose’s aesthetic outlook with its professed distance from the ideological or political currents of his time is symptomatic of the intellectual attitude that, in Said’s words, prefers “silence, indifference and pleasure of ignorance and non-involvement” in the face of formidable collective crisis (Said, 1979:21). It underscores his evasion and avoidance of responsibility by ignoring that as an intellectual, his voice can bring about a palpable change and transformation in the community. By “constrict[ing] and limit[ing] the critical awareness of the scholar” (Said, 2002(d):501), this intellectual view fails to perform the crucial task of turning and “connecting...more politically vigilant forms of interpretation to an ongoing political and social praxis”, with the result that “even the best-intentioned and the cleverest interpretive activity is bound to sink back into the murmur of mere prose” (Said, 2002(e):147).

The article concludes that the narrow and truncated aesthetic view with its insistence on the stylistic and formal aspects of literature undercuts the force and vitality of literary production by limiting their wider appeal and by isolating them from the complex cultural context, resulting in a “trivialization” that for Spivak is tantamount to a “tragedy...a kind of cultural death (2009:86). Suppose literature is outside and isolated from the social determinants of a given culture and history. In that case, it calls for the need to liberate it from such confines by broadening its appeal and scope beyond a limited canvas of intellectuals in the academy to a larger constituency outside it (Eagleton, 1996).

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, A. (2014). "A Response." *Public Culture* 6.1(1993): 143-191.
<http://public.culture.dukejournals.org/content/6/1/143>.
- Belsey, C. (2002). *Critical Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Dahab, E. F. (2003). "On Edward Said, Scholar and Public Intellectual." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 5.4: 2-8. Web.19 Feb. 2016.
 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1197&context=clcweb>>.

- Eagleton, T. (1996). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Eagleton, T. (2001). "Ideology, Discourse and the Problems of 'Post-Marxism.'" *Postmodern Debates: Readers in Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Simon Malpas, New York: Palgrave, 79-92.
- Ghose, Z. (1965). *Confessions of a Native-Alien*. London: Routledge.
- Ghose, Z. (2011). *In the Ring of Pure Light: Lectures on Language and Literature*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Ghose, Z. (2015). "Nationalism and the Individual Artist." *Dawn [Lahore]*: 3-4.
- Lazarus, N. (1999). *Nationalism and Cultural Practice in the Postcolonial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Matterson, S. (2006). "The New Criticism." *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. New York: Oxford University Press. 166-176.
- Said, Edward. (1979). *The Question of Palestine*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Schwandt, T. A. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry: A dictionary of terms*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Schwandt, T. (1997). *A. Qualitative Inquiry: A Dictionary of Terms*. California: Sage Publications.
- Spivak, G. C. (2009). "Nationalism and Imagination." *Lectora 15*: 75-98. Web.4 Oct. 2014.
- Torres, N. M. (2014) "Frantz Fanon and C.L.R. James on Intellectualism and Enlightenment Rationality." *Caribbean Studies 33.2* (2005): 149-194. Web.10. <<http://readingfanon.blogspot.com/2011/12/frantz-fanon-and-clr-james-on.html>>.
- Williams, D. (1972). *Trousered Apes*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Yeats, W B. (1956) *The Collected Poems of W.b. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan.
-