



VED MEHTA'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF HIS WRITINGS

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Abstract

Mr. Ved Prakash Mehta-The great Indian English Novelist. 'He is scholarly and journalistic and, above all, a man who thinks things out.' He says, "I am an amalgam of five cultures—Indian, British, American, Blind and the New Yorker."

Ved Mehta's incessant quest for the identity of a lonely man, his marked progression from the tortured realization of loneliness to a calm acceptance of it, from the impotent striving of the anonymous man to the creative activities of the literary artist are perceptible in the plethora of autobiographical works which he has produced since the day he had the realization of the wandering of a secluded, sightless man in a world which could scarcely share the sentiments of an agonized soul.

Intense agonies, pains and sorrows suffered by a sightless man, in the passage of life, flows in his fiction with such lucidity that create the impression of a major artist struggling to establish his identity in a sighted world.

Mehta himself admits "I was inspired by the vision of those great masters like – Homer and Milton – who, devoid of normal vision persisted in setting up their authorities in the realm of literature. They did not depend on retinal impressions to catch the rhythm of life but on the vision of their mind to emerge out from self-imposed immaturity for illumining the sense of enlightenment.

Ved Mehta had never hidden his identity. He had always written in a purely subjective way. His autobiographies are full of the adjectives 'I' and 'me'. This is what makes his novels quite different and interesting among the readers.

Keywords: Ved Mehta, Quest of Identity, Loneliness, Sense of Isolation, Blind Indian Novelist,

Mr. Ved Prakash Mehta---The great Indian English Novelist 'He is scholarly and journalistic and, above all, a man who thinks things out.' **He says, "I have a strong sense of smell. I could never live in an Indian slum" and that "I use alchemy to transform my ears into my eyes. I don't belong to any single tradition. I am an amalgam of five cultures—Indian, British, American, Blind and the New Yorker."**

Ved Mehta, in his conscientious efforts to rediscover Indian culture, past and present, through the self- perception of a sightless man, has hit upon

the singular theme--- the quest for identity of a lonely man; and his marked progression from the tortured realization of loneliness to a calm acceptance of it; from the impotent striving of the anonymous man to the creative activities of the literary artist. Such realization naturally sprouted a strong passion in him for a companion who could be his shadow till the last breath of his life, and this is essentially the blank pages, akin to the abstract shadows sharing the reflections, contemplations,

sorrows and sufferings of a dismissed soul in seclusion and solitude.

Mehta's writing flows from loneliness. The experience of loneliness finds expression in bewildering variety of feelings and responses in his work. Ved Mehta breaks the curse of loneliness by transcribing his sublime thoughts and ideas into literature. For him there is a singular God that can disperse the darkness of solitariness and that is dignity, the dignity of literature.

In fact, Ved Mehta alone is not obsessed with loneliness. "Flow insular and pathetically solitary are all the people we know", said Emerson. Loneliness is inherent in the human condition. It is a paradox that in our very loneliness we recognize our kinship to others and lament our alienation from them, which makes it a poignant and universal theme in world literature.

"He who exults in loneliness is either a wild beast or God," wrote Bacon. Nothing in contemporary literature surpasses the loneliness of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner who, estranged from man and God, has vented the pain of it:

"Alone alone, all all alone
Alone on a wide, wide sea
And never a saint to pity on
My soul in agony"

In a way the modern writer's concern with solitariness is not tangential but total. The bonds that tie man with man, and with the larger physical and metaphysical scheme of thing, have given way. It is, as if man were writing in a void. This is isolation, from within not without. Modern man, as George Lukaes, the Hungarian writer and critic points out, is "by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationship with other human beings." According to Lukaes loneliness in traditional writings can be ascribed to certain factors in man or his predicament whereas in modern writing, it is a part of a universal experience, it is in the very air he breathes.

Thomas Wolfe, the greatest American novelist, speaks of loneliness 'as a kind of hideous weather of the soul' and of 'the triumphant loneliness' of the creative artist. Often the same

word, the same metaphor is employed to express both the mutation of loneliness. It is, therefore, necessary to understand the other loneliness which is wholly free from the anguish of loneliness.

Mehta's remarkable strides of achievements in finding a desired personality are not of a fairy world, though the reality in this case has proved more enchanting than such a world. His success has been so astounding, that it is no more a fashion to look at him as blind. He has established that the lack of a sense is not a handicap if one is yearning to grow. At the most, we may say, like one of his classmates that he is not blind but keeps a secret for certain reason. Though, some critics have dismissed Mehta as a 'high class journalist', yet it is likely that his work will survive as a testament to the human spirit as well as a penetrating account of contemporary Indian life. I have endeavoured to concentrate on the dexterity and deftness of Mehta as a literary artist.

Sightlessness, invariably, makes a passage for social alienation. Self is the nucleus from which all the writings of Ved Mehta originate. Intense agonies, pains and sorrows suffered by a sightless man in the passage of life _ sometimes crippling his reason, and sometimes precluding the flight of imagination _ all flows in his fiction with such succinctness, terseness and lucidity that create the impression of a major artist struggling to establish his identity in a world crowded with strangers having no human emotion for one whose 'light is spent'.

Loneliness is a complex and usually unpleasant feeling in which a person feels a strong sense of emptiness and solitude. The causes of loneliness are varied, but it can be affected by social, mental, emotional, and spiritual factors. It is a natural phenomenon, since humans are social creatures by nature. Loneliness has also been described as social pain — a psychological mechanism meant to alert an individual of isolation and motivate him to seek social connections.

Mehta's obsession with loneliness is, thus, too deep to be defined in proper words. It seems to be in particular state of mind that touches upon a wide variety of feelings. In my study I came across many symptoms and expressions of his loneliness,

through the illustrations dwelt upon it on the fictional pages, in order to offer a succinct inkling to his loneliness. It is variously experienced and commonly transcribed as separation, misunderstanding, lack of communication and interaction, unworthiness, failures and failings. The list can be stretched indefinitely to include many other nuances of the experience.

Indeed, Ved Mehta's blindness led him to such loneliness which resulted in out bursting his inner artistic talent. Isolation is a defence mechanism in psychoanalytic theory, first proposed by Sigmund Freud. While related to repression the concept distinguishes itself in several ways. It is characterized as a mental process involving the creation of a gap between an unpleasant or threatening cognition, and other thoughts and feelings. By minimizing associative connections with other thoughts, the threatening cognition is remembered less often and is less likely to affect self-esteem or the self-concept.

The white corpus of Ved Mehta's works instantly create the impressions how the agonising sense of isolation affected his mind, and sometimes made it too torturous an experience to share even with close companion, with the later phases of his life, but to bring it in his 'Memoirs' in order to mitigate the sufferings of the mind and exonerate himself from the black shadows of the past.

"The whole conviction of my life now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a curious phenomenon peculiar to me, and a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence," declares Ved Mehta in one of his interviews to John Corry. Yet, in no way, he permits himself to remain confined within the asphyxiating precinct of solitariness rather, like other sightless writers, transmuted his loneliness into gifts of a creative artist.

The road that Mehta selected was obviously a long and arduous one for a sightless man. "I recall how daunting my first steps along that road were: what they led me to was a chaos of randomly assembled materials that had to be subjected first to the elusive formulation of ideas and then to the untameable nature of language itself. I was

constantly tempted to put off writing...I found, I had first to decide what exactly I wanted to say, even if in the course of writing I should find myself saying something totally different. Nevertheless, having that idea, though it might be only the germ of one, enabled me to overcome the terror of the blank page", confesses Mehta, and gradually gains the confidence to move on the wearisome path, undeterred by the dark shadow of blindness.

It's worth quoting here that the Greeks took blindness as a punishment from Gods, for which the afflicted individual was often granted compensation in the form of artistic genius. Punishment it was or not, debatable it is, but the compensation granted is, indeed, grand and sublime. From Homer, the Greek poet to Jacques Lusseyran, the blind French, the catalogue is long. We have concrete examples of the tireless efforts of the blind writers who have made remarkable contributions to the world of literature.

Fate, which cursed Mehta with blindness, gave him the enormous gift of a way with language. His memory is based on the feel of faces, the smell of people, and the sound of the headmaster's shoes in a school where all the other feet were bare. This truth telling gives his works a remote, "Kafka-like quality and makes you wonder where the blind child gets the courage to endure a life which must have so much unexpected terror in it."

A meticulous study of Ved's writings does unravel how much effectively he has recreated the images of his own life which is graver in tone, yet lit throughout by a deeper glow. His development as a novelist is not truncated by his blindness and the progressions of his novels surely vindicate his ever-evolving dexterity as a writer. Navigating his way from self-obsessed chronicler of his own adolescence to sophisticated assessor of the instinct of multitude, Ved has presented the vast panorama of life that leaves an abiding impression on his mind.

Ved's writing has unmistakably the quality of a painter's canvas upon which is set not only the figure, but the shapes and texture of the world. Bitter and hard as he conceives his life to be, yet himself is never hard, nor, save in a rare impulse of exasperation, is he bitter. The burning flame of his

charity blazes all the higher for the infinite and unrelieved blackness of the universe, in which it is the solitary gleam of light.

Mehta's fictional canvas, crowded by the members of his family and desperate episodes, leaves an impression of the humming life itself. He chronicles the story of his family, but puts it in a larger design of human history through the suggestions of specific myths. He endows his characters with mythical overtones, which win for him a pride and dignity. Ved's fiction, then, with its grandeur scope and crowded canvas, speaks of all the known values dearer to his generation, and seeks to build up the tradition and the myths of India, and at the same time anticipates the existential crisis in our culture. In his fiction it is the very conscience of the age that stirs and it is the century itself that speaks, for Ved, indeed, deserves to be honoured as one of the greatest writers of Indian English fiction.

Conclusion

I have dwelt upon the fact that sightlessness didn't bring incoherence in the novels of Mehta. Whether it is instinct or art, the parts of his novels cohere just as the various parts of life cohere, and the formative flow of existence imparts his fiction a structural unity which is never artificial or arbitrary. His works, in fact, demonstrate a technical virtuosity with which he is seldom credited. They do manifest through their characters, events and episodes, the essential unity, and hence, the basic autobiographical tendency in its entirety.

Lastly, I would like to allude to the statement of John Milton---

"When he suffered from complete blindness he took his affliction to the misfortunes of those bards whom God has compensated by superior endowments and those superior endowments are well perceptible in Ved Mehta".

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