

## Literary Fiction, Shakespeare and Me

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### Abstract

*This article strives to arrive at an understanding of what “Literary Fiction” means at present and how it is different from Commercial or Genre Fiction. I write this article as a professor of English as well as a novelist. The article goes beyond mere theory and scholarship, into the realms of the creative process of a novel. It studies not only the nature of literary fiction, but how that nature is largely being determined today by the publishing industry of the West. The paper shows how William Shakespeare has spoken through literary fiction from the eighteenth century to the present. As a novelist, I can see how it is difficult for literary fiction writers not to come under his sway. The influence is visible in the works of a very large number of novelists writing in the English language in England, America, and the Commonwealth countries.*

**Keywords: Literary Fiction, Shakespeare, The English Novel, Postmodern Fiction, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie.**

This article dwells on the nature of literary fiction, particularly the literary novel. But it is also on how the publishing industry has played its role in deciding what the nature of literary fiction is to be in our times. It maintains that the publishing industry and all other factors that shape literary fiction play a smaller role than a single individual, the man of all time, William Shakespeare, in setting down what literary fiction is to be now and for some time in the future. This article ends with an example of how Shakespeare influences an author like me. It also questions the ability of the critic, who has not written fiction, to theorize on and critique the novel, as well as the novelist-critic can.

I have increasingly felt that the best critic of the novel is the novelist with a sound reading of the theory of fiction. This idea has been growing on me because when I read critiques and appraisals of the novels that I teach at the university, I feel that a sense of inadequacy must arise in the scholarship that is unrelated to any direct involvement in the creative process. Too much theory can take away the basic flavour of a novel. Just as awareness of theories can help in literary appreciation, too much dependence on them can be detrimental for that purpose. Disregard of the creative experience is something like chemistry would be without any experimentation. Theories of fiction have been impressive and helpful for academic and scholarly purposes but for actually stepping into a novel with detachment there is a little extra something which only a novelist can offer to the reader of fiction. I have written on the nature of literary fiction with some such belief in my mind. As a novelist and short-story writer, I have felt the need to go beyond the merely theoretical; into the vistas of felt experience. I have often wondered whether literary fiction can be clearly defined. For deep literary writing emanates from sources not so easy to access by rational thought. It emerges rather surreptitiously from the most unexpected quarters. In my writing, I have seen how the subconscious interferes with the conscious mind as I write a novel or another work of fiction. It is as though a connection between the subconscious and the conscious minds gets established and the former virtually guides the latter. It is something like a child holding an older person's finger when taken for a walk. The subconscious is laden with experience, knowledge, and wisdom and the conscious mind is like the child, needing to be taken to that school where experience and knowledge abound.

Perhaps the voice in a literary novel can be best understood as a connecting channel through which the subconscious passes into the consciousness of a novelist. It helps the novelist to pour out what is lying deep within. All the ideas, images, experiences, thoughts, and sentiments which have affected a writer keep shelving themselves in the unconscious and can remain there for years or decades before they finally leak out of a pen. Literary theories have spoken of impersonality and the death of the author, but they have yet to show what exactly that means or how that happens in precise terms. Writing from the depths of one's being is something like meditation which takes one into the inner layers of the subconscious where words, ideas, and images have remained seated in a dormant manner. The death of the author could mean the switching off of the single channel of the conscious mind and the switching on of the multi-channeled subconscious connection. A writer in creation is too absorbed to notice anything happening around them. I can use words that are not in my conscious vocabulary, only to find later that I have not misused them. How does this happen? Words can remain forgotten but their meanings can survive, there, with me, lying in the cold storage of my mind, until taken out when

that becomes urgent. While we keep changing in the way we think, or the way we are, there is something in our beings that is retaining everything that has ever been thought, felt, or experienced by us. When literary fiction is created it is created with the “whole being” of an author; something that constitutes their past as well as present; their conscious and their unconscious minds. We are dead in a way because our current position may not have been our position twenty years ago but the writing process can transport our minds back to that erstwhile position. We can write things that we no longer believe.

My contentions in this article are not only what my reading on the nature of fiction, chiefly literary fiction, guides me to believe. I write on the nature of literary fiction very largely based on what I have felt along my journey as an Indian writer not settled in the West. It is necessary to come to some decision about what literary fiction is at a time when commercial fiction is fast becoming the more popular option and literary fiction is gradually losing out on its readership. The number of writers making it big on literary fiction is dwindling in proportion to the number of new novelists writing genre or mainstream fiction. There are some highly skilled writers of the literary novel that the media is pumping up to the greatest heights because nothing succeeds like success and the media ensures that that particular novel will get back much more than what the publisher has invested into it. The publishing industry provides guidelines and gives a clear route that a novelist should take to climb to the peak of success. These guidelines and the route to be taken – of a literary agent, publisher, platform, book marketing, and publicity – did not affect literary fiction a century ago as it does now. Today, literary fiction is being reduced to a thing; a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market. And the industry caters to the market of America and Europe that most of the other regions are supposed to support in their own smaller markets. It is therefore evident that the nature, source, and calling of literary fiction have changed and are changing in our times. This article is an attempt to map what literary fiction is at present and how it has snaked itself into its current form.

Economics was always a factor affecting literary pursuits directly or not. Even a writer like Shakespeare had his factor to consider. He suffered earlier in his life because he could not market himself as well as the institutionalized University Wits could. He could not become the Shakespeare he is today until the early nineteenth century and later. For that, some real critical analysis and journalistic marketing would have been necessary. Marketing and genuine reviewing have always gone hand in hand in erecting a literary author’s reputation. But when it is marketing for marketing’s sake, things do not augur that well for literary fiction. With the coming of the modern age, the role of the marketplace has multiplied several times and is continuing to multiply in the twenty-first century obnoxiously. The six-figure deal is dangled before every novelist and haunts their consciousness even as the genesis of a novel catches on. Help is provided to authors to target such a deal via “How To” books and agencies using the Internet and other media. Such targeted reviewing has had both its positive and negative roles to play in promoting both authors and their publishers; unfortunately, today’s publishing industry is well-armed with institutionalized reviewing where the chosen few novelists, the ones singled out by the leading publishing houses, are focused on. Reviews help immensely in the marketplace to determine literary worth, and sometimes aptly. But if all was fair there would be no resentment in the erstwhile colonies and even in erstwhile colonizers’ domains in some cases. These well worked out reviews have been seen to promote not only the author, but more so the publisher,

and the commercial magazine, which sets out to make bestsellers of authors. Even magazines and paper-pullouts described as premier, literary and intellectual magazines in the English language continue to promote those that have once been earmarked as bestselling material. This is where reviews in academic journals and some highly motivated literary supplements (with a backing of tradition) are more reliable than some of the most branded sources that make or mar reputations in the upkeep of commerce. An innocent review, unconnected with marketing is altogether a different matter because reviews connect readers with literary authors and their works. Whether a review opposes, interrupts, questions, or even demolishes a novel, it is part of an interactive process between authors, critics, and readers which is all for the good. It is the direct intervention of the marketplace that poses the problem.

Virginia Woolf questioning the growing trade in reviews in her 1939 essay, "Reviewing", and seeming disturbed by "those few words devoted to 'Why I like or dislike this book'" suggests that even at that time literary fiction and poetry were beginning to get plagued by a commercial menace (ix). Beth R. Daugherty shows how Leonard Woolf reacted to Virginia Stephen's objections to trade-related reviewing (27-28). Daugherty further points out that "the roots to modern reviewing lay in the early eighteenth century essayists who had combined criticism with publicity in their attempt to 'guide the public taste.'" (27) What troubled Virginia Woolf naturally troubles the writer of literary fiction even more now, particularly if they are neither stationed in London nor New York, the places that endow respectability to writers of literary fiction through their propelling and prestigious magazines and media tools. For a writer living in regions such as South Asia or Africa, it is necessary to get the stamp of approval from the promoting West if they are to flourish under the tag of "literary." Since the number of writers, who manage such approval, is infinitesimal, they have little option but to drift towards "mainstream" fiction. Their work can suffer appalling generic hybridity and their desire to write literary fiction can end up funnily reduced to a voice crying out to an audience that does not pay heed. But once this unfortunate breed of authors can follow the route and guidelines worked out by the marketplace, they enter the domain of recognition and sometimes fame. It can be a feeling of being intellectually re-colonized that such an author goes through in the quest to be considered a writer of literary fiction. Such success usually follows after an author has migrated to America or England and subjected the self to a taming process, the kind of discipline that allows the author to acquire multicultural hybridity in which the self and others appear to become one at least in snatches.

Not surprisingly writers of literary fiction are being pulled in directions in which the market rather than the self needs to be satisfied. When Cesáreo Bandera related literary fiction with the sacred and the religious he linked it with the self, rather adhesively. In a book entitled *The Sacred Game: The Role of the Sacred Genesis of Modern Literary Fiction* (1994), Bandera writes that it is in the West that there occurs the phenomenon of the "non-religious man" in the most complete sense (15). He pits the "sacred" against the "profane" and suggests that these two traits are not real oppositions.

Bandera then talks of a "sacred allergy" faced by the West, and after discussing Durkheim, Girard and others come to conclude that there is a victimizing process at work whenever the sacred and the profane are put asunder. He believes it would seem that there is a connection between the human and the divine which modern man has been trying to throw off in

vain. But he says that fiction has tried to liberate itself from posing as a bearer of truth (30). Bandera refers to it as a “liberation” that is found in Cervantes (30). Interestingly, Matthew Arnold could consider literature as a substitute for religion and John Middleton Murry could make a significant remark that before Shakespeare, spiritual authority for the Western man lay in the Church after him it lay in the Individual. There have been these frequent linkages between the mind of man and religion in literary and philosophical theorizing; the mind of man as reflected chiefly in literature and literary fiction.

My reading and teaching of Shakespeare and my writing of fiction tell me that Shakespeare has been a canonical influence on literary fiction, particularly fiction written in the English language in England and the Commonwealth countries. The literary has been a substitute for the religious as discussed by Bandera or perhaps something even higher than that. Shakespeare has played a substantial role in the formation of the literary fiction writer’s “Self.” I spell “Self” with a capital S because this self is not an individual self but the sum of all or most English language literary fiction writers’ selves. The rest of this paper discusses the transfer of what I consider to be Shakespeare’s intertextual blending into the English literary novel, first in the eighteenth century and then later in the novel’s most contemporary form. I find a sentence in George Luis Borges particularly apt for literary fiction: “A book which does not include its opposite or ‘counter book’ is considered incomplete.” This statement is very true in the case of a book or a text of literary fiction, particularly the literary novel. For, this category of fiction does contain its counter quality as well as what it projects, both tied up in binary opposition. To mention a random example of this I would like to cite the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” Though the novel begins with this statement, the novel proceeds to demonstrate that it is more the single woman who is on the lookout for a good and wealthy husband or son-in-law. Literary fiction should be able to see, as William Shakespeare does, fair in foul, good in bad, and everything in nothing. This oppositional way of perceiving things may not always be as explicit as it sometimes is in Dickens’s – “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” But it is there more implicitly present, if it is not present in explicit terms, in literary fiction. Where the experience is tragic, in the real sense, as it is in the Greek tragedians, Shakespeare, or the Germans who delved into the tragic after the advent of Marx, this tragic experience will be understood and internalized in opposition to a comic vision as perceived down the ages from ancient classical times. A true master of literary perception has an inner realization that nothing is entirely tragic or comic but that thinking makes it so; nothing is to be seen in extreme or absolute terms – all should exist at the level of suggestion or should appear true only tentatively. Life is too complex and unpredictable to describe with any sense of finality. Thus living on boundaries is what the author of literary fiction accomplishes. The human experience is always fraught with the biggest surprises that can convert tears into laughter, or vice versa. The writer of contemporary fiction must always be conscious of this as some of the masters like those of postmodernist fiction are. We have learned to realize that giving too much importance to serious or what can be considered “high classicism” cannot live on for long; it must be, if it is to remain alive, blended with its very

opposite, the romantic. It is unnatural for the human mind to see things steadily and see them whole for any length of time. For what is “whole” and what is “steadily” is anyone’s guess. Life requires that the literary imagination place irony at a very central viewing point of perception. “There is nothing serious in mortality” and “everything is nothing” are lessons that come down from Shakespeare to postmodernist fiction. The battleground of a postmodernist hero can well be a bed as is the case in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*.

It follows from the above that literary fiction, in its contemporary form is a rather oblique form of expression. It is not merely a story or a narrative. It invites its category of what Wittgenstein and Lyotard call “language games.” It must accommodate within its vision the understanding that there is no absolute, no eternal, no final, or no concrete meaning. Anything that is stated must be stated with an intuitive awareness of the limitedness of our perception. An author’s view may be tragic or comic but they must never trust the tragic or the comic entirely. Nothing ultimately remains where it stood beyond a point of time; there is never a dead end and the literary mind must have this vitally necessary openness of perception. Fixities must go and a more eclectic way of seeing remains if one is to write literary fiction.

The great classics from ancient times down must remain “great” only in the context of their respective time-frames. There are few or none, like Shakespeare, that live on to accommodate the contemporaneity of “all-time” in their vision. This happens to those authors who have learned to live on boundaries instead of absolutes; those that never swear by anything of a permanent nature and have learned to live in the moment. When you say something concrete as in philosophy you leave the realm of literary fiction. Opinionatedness and literary fiction are not friends. The best writer of literary fiction would rather choose to remain silent than express an opinion that directly or confrontationally bulldozes other opinions. One is reminded of the value of this kind of silence in the words of Arsenius the Great: “I have often regretted the things I have said, but I have never regretted my silence.” This again points to the fact that nothing is permanent and to profess an interest in any kind of philosophies that swear by eternal truths is to go against the literary temperament as it has come to appear in its new avatar.

It may appear bizarre to link almost half of the fiction written in English to a particular individual that existed before prose fiction came into existence. But William Shakespeare can be considered, I say this with a consciousness of what my critics could say to such a claim, that single individual whose texts form the intertexts of most writers of literary fiction. This is not only at the base of the forms that literary fiction has employed but also at the level of the consciousness itself of authors who write in or who know the English language. Shakespeare was constantly assimilating the visions of the ancient masters with his stable genius. Thus he was blending much that was considered the best that had been known and thought in the ancient classical world with his more than a romantic approach to things. Apart from his intuitive abilities to see things better, he had the advantage of living during the Renaissance, that unique age when the human mind could even go back to the ancient past to advance towards the future. Shakespeare’s mind could survey what was great as well as what was not that valuable in Ovid, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Sophocles, Plautus, Terrence, and others apart from what was great and avoidable in his contemporaries and predecessors in England like Chaucer, Spenser, Marlowe, and Kyd. His mind seems to have churned in the ideas and visions of myriad kinds of genius, creating depths that have remained unrivalled in human history. In the eighteenth century when

the novel acquired its “four wheels” – Richardson, Fielding, Laurence, and Smollett – to start moving ahead as a literary form, Dr. Samuel Johnson could speak of Shakespeare’s work as “the map of life.”

Since the early nineteenth century, when the novel had begun to acquire a mature shape, everything literary seems to have been affected by Shakespeare’s way of seeing things. Shakespeare’s rise due to admirers such as Hazlitt, Coleridge, Lamb, Keats, and others in the first half of the nineteenth century, each a critic who could recognize Shakespeare’s genius as others before they could not, probably forced the novelist in and after the nineteenth century not to ignore Shakespeare. Coleridge, the influential critic, and theorist had stressed the idea that the opposite of poetry was not prose but science. Hence the writer of prose fiction could easily have found a wealth of resources for literary fiction in Shakespeare. There are few like him who, as Stephen Greenblatt points out, can “turn politics into poetry(11).” I know how I have never been able to escape the impact of Shakespeare and his inheritor, Dickens, subconsciously, whenever I have sat down to write fiction.

Shakespeare could strangely anticipate the postmodern not only as he could keep his perception of tears frighteningly close to laughter, as he does in *King Lear* but also because of his inclination for parody, in addition to his fascination for irony. Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out this aspect of Shakespeare, citing *Love’s Labour’s Lost* as an illustration where the ridiculous school teacher, Holofernes, “whose manner is the parody of a classroom style that most audience members must have found immediately recognizable (24).”

The desire to make an idol out of Shakespeare has existed from his own time to the present. Bardolatry is a word given only to Shakespeare. I would like to draw attention to the view of John Middleton Murry who, in his eleven or more year polemic with T. S. Eliot, pointed out the vital centrality of Shakespeare in the creation of an English, and wider, mind and worldview. Murry could say that before Shakespeare’s authority for the Englishman lay in the Church whereas after Shakespeare it lay in himself; in his inner resources. What Shakespeare did was to create a resource bank of creativity in his Self and his successors found it convenient to rely on Shakespeare’s manner of handling creativity perhaps without quite knowing it. We also have Harold Bloom’s theory of Shakespeare and “the invention of the human” as well as Bloom’s contention that Shakespeare is at the centre of the Western literary canon. Stephen Greenblatt points out how a young man from a small provincial town moves to London in the late 1580s and, in a remarkably short time, becomes the greatest playwright not of his age alone but of all time. How is an achievement of this magnitude to be explained? Stephen Greenblatt brings us down to earth to see, hear, and feel how an acutely sensitive and talented boy, surrounded by the rich tapestry of Elizabethan life, could have become the world’s greatest playwright.

When literary fiction takes on the added task of going beyond its basic role, which is self-expression, then it acquires a related function. Just as Shakespeare sometimes wrote what is now called his History Plays (plays based on British history), and when he did that he was still producing literary texts of high quality, the literary novelist can stray into another domain. Literary novelists may want to keep their gaze on social behaviour, psychological patterns in individuals, particular historical figures, etc. but they continue to write literary fiction because that is what comes naturally to them. Or, sometimes the literary novelist may want to take little

from a basic source and focus more on psychological patterns in human behaviour as Shakespeare did in *Othello*. When the urge to reveal an individual as a victim of the desire for social recognition and importance gets the better of a literary novelist, they write something on the patterns of *King Lear*. Finally, Shakespeare's plays amply reveal the desire to remain politically strong and significant as in *Macbeth* and so many of his plays. This is a recurrent theme in literary fiction. The literary novel must have a theme that comes from a sociological, historical, psychological, or political perception of the universe in which an individual lives. These have rarely been better visualized than in Shakespeare's plays. Hence he has remained the model for most such writing. Odd as it may sound to name Arundhati Roy soon after Shakespeare, there is something in her first novel *The God of Small Things* that ties the two together. The connection between the two is largely an intense love for the niceties of the language. Even her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, is unparalleled in the way in which it alters its narrative mode after her debut novel had established itself as a marvel of linguistic achievement. It uses an entirely different kind of language to tell a different kind of story. But the real connection between the two authors goes beyond language. It points to an intimate integration with the universe in which they live. Such connectedness is rare and only the literary fiction of Roy or the poetry of Shakespeare can handle it without letting it jar.

Mainstream fiction or commercial fiction is more popular than literary fiction because it says things clearly; things that have much more obvious meaning or finality. Of course, the dichotomy between the two has been often opposed as it is by Jodi Picoult. She finds even in Shakespeare a "commercial hack" and believes that when you're talking about good writing there simply are no divisions between the literary and commercial (250). But Picoult could be saying this as she calls herself an author of literary as well as commercial fiction. There seems to be a personal angle to her description of Shakespeare as a commercial hack. Commercial or popular fiction does say things more clearly than does literary fiction and therein abides an essential difference between the two. Most of us are used to clarity of expression and real content in whatever we express. Therefore a story told without ambiguity, with an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end is much more popular. But such a story will hardly be the framework of literary fiction today. E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* projects a false impression in the way it seems to view the relevance of the story. When Forster says that "What happens next?" is very significant in a novel's scheme, and when he recounts the story-telling strategy of Scheherazade, he is also conscious that a story has power over a less refined or even savage mind. The story is vital, in comparative terms, for the less advanced reader. In contemporary terminology, a story is more important for a "writerly" text than a "readerly" text. Roland Barthes's theory that the readerly text is hardly readerly because it does not locate in a reader a site for the production of meaning makes it quite clear that a readerly text, or literary text, is not for everyone. Literary fiction too is not for everyone's consumption. There are aspects of the novel that lie beyond the dimensions of its simple meaning; the literary novel is significant in that sense. It puts us in touch rather clearly with the novelist's consciousness. The commercial novel keeps the reader glued to the story or the hook whereas the literary novel takes them to other domains that may spring from the story but which may never limit themselves to it. The mind of the novelist needs to be tamed, controlled, and calm so that can incorporate a welter of



unruly experience churned and tuned in to what needs to give it that classy, life-like touch. The writer of literary fiction is often hypnotized by life.

In the case of commercial fiction, the plot is often so significant that when a novelist has worked hard on that the novel is half-written. Planning, and plotting, even if it seems contrived is everything for a commercial novel. In the case of literary fiction, the author needs to work elsewhere, in other domains apart from the plot. He or she needs to do one or more of the following: (a) take the reader into the minds of their characters, (b) dwell at length on highlighting the features or feel of a place, (c) reveal how the present, or a particular time, is different to others.

The first of the above, taking the reader into the mind of characters, is the primary task of the literary fiction writer. In doing this, an author can make the reader see everything from the point of view of certain characters. Of course, this can also happen in other categories of fiction. The vital difference between literary and other fiction is a matter of depth; it is the extent to which the reader is kept experiencing the trauma, passion, or the excitement of a character in a particular experience. Or, it may just be a memory, a meeting, reaction, regret, and so on. Literary fiction generally moves slower in terms of plot because it needs to fathom deeper into human experience.

Today the diaspora novel is a type of novel that so many literary novelists are writing. It has gone much beyond the movement of the Jews out of Israel that initiated the concept of the Diaspora. Today so many award-winning novelists from Asia, Africa, and other continents are writing diaspora fiction, describing the condition of settlers from these regions in the US and UK. Shakespeare's creation of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* stands out as an iconic representation of the treatment meted out to migrants just as it shows how their insecurity on foreign soil makes them hardened and revengeful. Even Othello represents the typical outsider in a white country. Similarly, the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant* becomes a symbol of what the Black male meant to the white writer of fiction. Thus novels such as Kamala Markandya's *The Nowhere Man* (1793) followed by several other Indian diaspora novels as well as novels like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and the many Black novels in this genre can be seen in line with Shakespeare's handling of the outsider.

Literary authors try to externalize deeply felt experiences emanating from the soul, the consciousness, the self, the imagination, and so on. This is not like the reality of the exterior world but it is still some kind of reality. The Fortuneteller in *Antony and Cleopatra* says: "In nature's infinite book of secrecy a little I can read." It is this habit of the mind to externalize the hidden or secret that makes Shakespeare so different. For him society is nothing by itself; it is what the individual makes of it that matters. The way individuals perceive things is a personal matter. Cognitive theories may never explain this. The child, the lover, the idiot, the businessman, the poet, the scientist, the philosopher, may each delve into different modes of perception and each may get no more than a partial view of things. The novelist does often attempt to reflect the social aspect of life but he does it idiosyncratically. It is always he or she looking at society via their inner perception of things. When the Second Witch in *Macbeth* says, "By the pricking of my thumbs/ Something wicked this way comes," she is being intuitive like some people are. Shakespeare had realized that "reality" was a vague term that meant different things to different people. For someone, the physically visible world could be real but for others,

it could have inner dimensions and be available in the imagination. Hence Shakespeare presented different versions of reality in different plays and situations and included the magical in his range of reality. Interestingly, “By the Pricking of My Thumbs” became the title of an Agatha Christie novel. Other novels and plays like *Cakes and Ale*, *Brave New World*, and *Brief Candle* have titles from Shakespeare.

Salman Rushdie, Ben Okri, and others have adopted Shakespeare’s approach to treating reality differently. This similarity of the two with Shakespeare is rather deep and decided. They have been contributing to what is loosely described as “magical realism” in fiction. Rushdie’s and Okri’s magical realism is somewhat different from the Latin American magical realism of the mid-twentieth century. They have their roots in Shakespeare. Commonwealth authors have Shakespeare more naturally in their subconscious when thinking in and through the English language. There is a recurrent attempt to get language to correspond to counter, unrealistic or romantic modes to express interiority. *Macbeth* is a good example of how there are more than rational connections between human actions and their effects on nature. Lady Macbeth’s worries in doing evil deeds, for instance, are not just contained within herself; they affect nature:

The raven himself is hoarse

That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan (*Macbeth* 1. v)

This same link between the deeds, thoughts, and inklings of people are conveyed through other plays of Shakespeare:

And this our life, exempt from public haunt,

Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,

Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (*As you Like It* 2. i)

Clearly, for Shakespeare, there is a connection between the human and the non-human; the non-human can be seen as a signalling system that corresponds to the inner faculties. These inner faculties connect to the human mind through symbols, metaphors, images, or sometimes merely some rhythmic manifestations. Shakespeare’s symbols, metaphors, images, et cetera convey what he felt internally.

The novels by Rushdie or Okri, externalize what is internally perceived. Okri says in *A Way of Being Free* (2015): “It is for me an axiom that words create a mysterious reality (xi).” He is constantly engaged in conveying his perceived mystery through words. These words are symbolic expressions that relate to mystical experience. This truth is not the literal or factual truth. It is a truth that is fetched from within and expressed through words, the only medium through which that interiority can get an outward expression.

Rushdie has frequently returned to the contention that stories don’t have to be true or that they are not true. “By including elements of the fantastic or pure make belief, you can get at the truth in a different way.” He goes on to say in an interview that: “Stories are not true. They have another door into truth.” His kind of realism, according to him, is as important as any realism in fact but it uses techniques that are not grounded in reality. To expect truth in fiction is to expect what it does not contain. Fiction as we know it is the opposite of fact. Rushdie tells us squarely that fiction should be recognized as “human truth,” the truth we recognize as human beings, human beings with all their weaknesses and limitations. Shakespeare also recurrently showed us what it was to be human. All his tragic heroes have flaws and are yet so likable. They have realizations in their fictional worlds as we do in our so-called real world. *Macbeth*, for instance,

feels that there is nothing serious in mortality, “all is but toys,” and Hamlet can say that, “there is a divinity that shapes our ends”. These realizations are the inner voices of his characters but are indeed his inner realizations for he returned to such statements recurrently.

With Shakespeare literary writing became much more psychological because he tended to turn inwards – into the nature of a fear that a criminal can encounter, as in *Macbeth*, or into the problem of having wedded outside the race, nationality as in *Othello*, or presenting the plight of a young man who has to attend his mother’s wedding as in *Hamlet*. He seems to have experienced the misery of seldom feeling entirely normal or satisfied. He often took us into the phenomenon of feeling fake or awkward, a state in which one would avoid social interaction and delve into the self. The novel also has to depend on this inward journey. What the novelist sees outside would be real only to the brain and senses, but there’s much that is mysterious; much that is difficult to map or know. Shakespeare frequently took the reader into this interiority as the novel would later do, in a medium more suited to such inward travel. His love for the magical and dreams is connected with the inwardness of his approach. Much before Okri, characters in Shakespeare, such as Hamlet, can talk of death as a sleep that will bring forth astonishing dreams.

It is not surprising that Freud found some relationship between Dreams, dreamwork, and narrative. Freud admired *Hamlet* because, among other things, he found Shakespeare’s taking dreams seriously as something positive and meaningful. Richard Walsh claims that dreaming is itself a kind of narration. Narratives have been compared to dreams even before Shakespeare, but Shakespeare put them together more concretely. We cannot forget the perennially popular comedy, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in which the story unfolds virtually like a dream, with all the nonsensical elements of a dream. Shakespeare understood that dreams and other extra-rational experiences were inward journeys that pointed to outward realities.

Once you take the mysterious inward journey, you never know where you’ll end. *Macbeth* is the best example of such a journey. He has stepped into the unknown and become a lonely traveller. He is plagued with fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. At a time when his mind does not help he needs the assistance of the magical (the witches). The novelist now and again has to do something similar by taking us into the uncertainties and fears of people. Fiction reveals that in a world that is full of social possibilities, there are a great number of moments when people are alone, mentally and they are gripped with emotions that are not made public to others; even to those they consider their very own. The novel is a psychological document also because it takes us into moments when a man is all by himself trying to understand the world inwardly. These can be the magical moments of a novel because they reveal inward realities not available to outward perception. This going inward can also tantamount to going beyond the reach of language. With language, we are generally trying to map the factual or real world and the search for reality is a great goal of the philosopher and the scientist. But language can seem insufficient for the purpose. I have often felt like an author that my language is insufficient for the experience I have felt. The literary mind looks for ways in which language might best express something. In an interview at the Jaipur Literary Festival (on January 28, 2019) Ben Okri stated that reality is his chief concern. He said that reality was also the foundation of literary language. Its quest was the greatest task one could embark on. He also lamented that we are losing language. Words such as freedom, race, literature, truth, etc. are diminishing. The one who best wields language is the imaginative writer. It seems that by “imaginative writer” Okri meant the one who could go

inwards to a greater extent. He said that there were differences between the language of precision, the language of realism, and the language of poetry. The last one, he insisted, needed to be kept alive. The literary author, of whom the poet uses language best (not precisely or realistically but poetically), is the one who matters because the merit is not in the story but the telling; how language is used.

I happened to write a story, “Vatsala” soon after reading Shakespeare’s “The Rape of Lucrece.” The structure of this poem seeped into my mind in a way that I could not help rewriting this story in a different context. I tried my best to consciously make some parts different from Shakespeare’s poem so that it might not seem a copy. But try as I may, the basics of the story/characterization axis remained very similar. The difference between the two texts came about in the plot which I tried hard to manipulate. In this story, I painted Vatsala in the image of Lucrece who could neither be blamed nor be exonerated for her part in the crime. Shakespeare did not always take clear-cut stands on matters of human failing. The story is intertextual. Valerie Ganzer has shown a similar impact of Shakespeare on Dickens.

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