

What Are the Challenges to Artists as Champions of Human Rights?
Does Culture Trump Human Rights?
How I Became the Victim of Culture:
How One Artist Has Faced the Problems of
Culture's Trumping of Human Rights

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"The Artist and Human Rights:
What are the challenges to the artist as champion of human rights?"

I am neither an anthropologist . . . nor even a sociologist. An
ordinary
writer: that's what I am and no more.
Therefore, an analysis of the philosophical or theoretical structure
of
any particular culture is simply beyond me. All that I'll try to get
across to you here today is what I experience as a social being and
feel
as a writer.
My own language is Bengali. It has two synonyms for culture. One
is
Sanskriti. The other one is Krishti. Even those here today who are
aware
of Sanskrit as one of the world's ancient languages may not know
that
the word Sanskriti was originally suggestive of the great
language's
pure form, of refinement, of its being well wrought or
constructed.
Sanskrit or Sanskriti derives from Sanskar, which means refining or
purification. There's another word stemming from the same
source:
Sanskarak, which means one who purifies, the sanctifier, or the
reformer. Therefore, in Sanskrit, culture or Sanskriti is an act of
purification. It's a mental or an intellectual process. Culture is
nothing but the process of purification and refining oneself
through
experience, erudition, and intellect.
The other Bengali word for culture, Krishti, comes from Karshan,
which
means the act of "tilling" or "cultivating the crops." Therefore,
Krishti is associated with cultivation: cultivation of the mind. The
word takes me back to an 18th-century Bengali song that says,
"Oh! My
mind, had you known the art of cultivation, my life wouldn't have
remained barren and could have yielded gold." In other words, it's
only

through the cultivation of the body, mind, heart, and psyche that
it's
possible for us to attain a high level of refinement. This means
that
culture is not just something that is just inherited. It has to be
earned through arduous endeavour.

Each society has its own culture. When I say "society" I mean
inhabitants of a geographically specified area, whether that area
is

culturally homogeneous or multi-layered. For an easier discussion
of the

subject, let us not lose ourselves in the bewildering expanse of
western, eastern, Greco-Roman cultures or in the intriguing
diversities

of 19th-century European culture. Let us, instead, focus narrowly
on a

more specific cultural arena for the purpose of this discussion.
Inasmuch as I come from Bangladesh, a small territory belonging
to the

Indian subcontinent, it will be easier for me to discuss briefly my
own

ideas about the culture of my society or country.

Social scientists and scholars believe that men and women of
every

society everywhere are deeply influenced by the configuration of
land,

by nature, climate, and environment. These elements have
inevitably

influenced civilization. But no society inherits culture just from
nature. Any culture in a given society slowly evolves through
man's

endeavour to transcend the immediate surroundings and the
dictates of

biology. Culture is, of course, influenced by history, geography,
and

ancient lores. But culture is never the quintessence of these.

Culture

includes religion, language, law, philosophy, science, art, and
literature. Culture may indeed be defined as the product from the
combined ingredients of all these. It follows that the dress, the
livelihood, the eating habits, the lifestyle, the moral codes, even
the

etiquette, may be taken as equally important cultural signs of any
society. T. S. Eliot's definition of culture went so far as to include
the Derby Day, the Cup Final, cheese, and boiled cabbage as being

integral parts of the British cultural heritage.
To me, culture is like a lotus with a hundred petals. Fragrant to the
core, this lotus of great beauty spreads a hundred petals of a
hundred
different colours. Yet they all harmoniously combine to produce a
flower
uniquely graceful in its balanced totality. Nurtured by soil, water,
and
sunlight, this flower draws its bloom from far and near, from
whatever
is beautiful, propitious, and auxiliary to our journey towards
perfection.

This act of imbibing and accumulating is very important in the
context
of any culture. Nowhere in the world are people who belong to a
particular society equally or ideally absorbed with its culture.

Some
people are almost completely lacking in culture. Yet, others attain
a
greater level of culture or refinement. This is because of their
wider
experience and their special care in cultivating their interests.

They
may derive this from reading, from being in touch with people of
different cultures, and from intellectual pursuit. I already have
said

that culture is not attained merely by dreaming. To the contrary,
it is
the result of an arduous cultivation—cultivation of the finer
qualities

of the mind and body, of life finally. The English word culture and
the

Bengali krishti—don't these two words come very close, even in
sound?

It is the writers, the artists, and the creative people who are our
most

important co-travellers towards the goal of a fuller realisation of
human possibilities. Their role in transforming society and culture
is

as important as that of the social reformer. The artists and the
writers

may not all of them consciously perform the task of reforming
society,

but they quite often unconsciously become the standard-bearers
of

change. The so-called watchmen of social unity, integration, and stability naturally then cry out in protest and try to mobilize public opinion against such writers and artists. The cultural guardsmen invariably raise popular issues like "national culture," "religious heritage," "indigenous culture," and one's "own culture" in their resistance against the new wave of change. This is so because it's on the so-called "national" or "indigenous" culture that they have built the citadel of their vested interests. Therefore, they resist any change by denouncing it as an intrusion of a foreign or even a corrupted culture. This citadel of the vested interests, so carefully raised and maintained on the propagation of the so-called national culture, contains within it the state, the government, the cultural department, and the controllers and directors of culture: an organised conglomeration of great social forces. Therefore, a battle becomes inevitable.

Matthew Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy*, wrote the following: The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it, to make it efficient outside the clique, the cultivated, and the learned, yet still remaining the best knowledge and thought of the time, and a true source therefore of sweetness and light.

Today, no one perhaps cares that much for such words. I, too, cannot accept his over-dependence on religion. Moreover, Arnold, in fear of anarchy, has in reality pleaded for stability and not for change. Nevertheless, I quote him because he believes that culture evolves from a process of intellectual and mental cultivation. It's not a gift. It has to be earned. And cultivating one's own mind is not enough. It's the

duty of the cultured to try for the refinement of the entire society.

Therefore, it's beyond the realisation of many cultured people that such men and women who are really cultivated may feel imperilled. Especially because being nurtured in a democratic, liberal, and rationalistic environment is not an overly daring act. Nor is it impossible to argue with a civilised opponent in an atmosphere of rationalism. But in societies where the ruling class use the "indigenous culture" as the main source of their strength, can there be any doubt that they would try to protect their stronghold by embracing the age-old issues of religion, language, dress, eating habit, or any such cultural signs? Out of this selfish motive, inspired solely by vested interests, the ruling class often tries to keep all the power in their control and become avid promoters of religion. They are up in arms against women's liberation, freedom of expression, freedom of opinion, and human rights. In fact, they are against the right of individual choice. Hence, the different methods of social and administrative control. Culture is then no longer the essential ingredient for human development. It is, then, an obstacle to all kinds of social advancement.

Yet, the most important requisite for human development is the freedom to analyse the present social and cultural constituents, then to accept or reject them. We must demand even the freedom to be rebellious and non-conformist. Does every child accept with glee every dish cooked by his or her mother? Some children reject a particular food, such as spinach. They want to enjoy the freedom, even in their youth, of refusing to eat spinach or to do something that adults say is good for them. They raise questions. They want rationality and empirical proof.

They want to embrace dress, food, and ideas of their own choice. Similarly, artists and writers want the freedom of self-expression.

But,
as I have already demonstrated, the powerful state and its
government
leaders sometimes want to curb this freedom in the name of
"national
culture."

Let me give several examples. Islam forbids any pictorial
representation
of the human shape. This is a religious dictate. Therefore, if one
wants
to be an artist he or she is confined only to drawing geometrical
patterns, calligraphy, the depiction of flowers and fruits, and the
general designs of embellishment. However, artists of many
countries do
not abide by this prohibition, not even in my Bangladesh. But
there are
places where artists are forced to abide by this interdict. Such an
authoritative prohibition is made in the name of religion.
In most countries the woman's borkha or parda is taken as a
cultural
display, an ornament, as it were. The woman has no right to shed
this
ornament which has been forced on her. In the name of religion,
many
other prohibitions are decreed. At every step there is something
to
hinder freedom. In many countries even the freedom of
expression is
denied to people. In countries where the Muslims dominate, the
watchmen
of culture are especially cautious about women's freedom of
speech. If I
had had that freedom—the freedom of speech—I would not have
had to leave
my own country and drift like this from one country to another,
from
Germany to France to Sweden. I am dangerous as a human being
not because
I am a terrorist with lethal arms but because I am a writer armed
with a
mere pen, and I write against that coterie of the ruling class that
is

guided by its vested interests. I am considered to be a dangerous
enemy
who can inflict harm on them.
So, as you sit there and listen to me, are you frightened? Do my
ideas
scare you as they scare those who have chased me out of my
homeland? If
I reach quickly into my purse right now, will you run out of the
room in
terror before you realize I am just looking for a pen in order to jot
down an idea? Will you come forward with a rope and hang me
because of
what I am saying, which is what will happen if I return tomorrow
to the
public square in Dacca, the capital city of Bangladesh?
In the final analysis, I think the real enemies of culture are those
who
are afraid of genuine culture and refinement, who insist upon
speaking
of "communal culture" or "national culture," who oppose with all
their
strength the freedom of artists and writers, who are guided by
narrow-mindedness, and who basically equate self or group
interest with
culture. Naturally, people who are in pursuit of culture find them
as
social, or national culture may not always be rulers of a particular
society. Even then they have the capacity to stall advancement of
real
culture, resorting to various ways of showing opposition. In that
sense,
conflict between culture and human rights, and rights of the free
expression of a creative writer, will remain so long as society at
large
remains tolerant of it.
To me, it is a social obligation for any creative artist to contribute
his or her efforts to achieve this goal of free expression, even at
the
cost of life.
Martyrdom on behalf of real culture is not too great a price to
pay!
major adversaries who stand in their way.
As in every society there are people who are opposed to new
ideals,
values, and norms, who don't believe in rationality and scientific

outlook. An individual or a group of people who believes in all
these
are invariably in conflict with them.....