

# **Rare Narratives Rare Discourse Innovative Conscience-Keeping Through Creative Productions**

**Divyajyoti Singh**

Associate Professor  
JC Bose University of  
Science, and, Technology,  
Faridabad, Haryana, India

**Mamta Bansal**

Associate Professor  
JC Bose University of  
Science, and, Technology,  
Faridabad, Haryana, India

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## **Abstract**

This paper furnishes explores creative productions aimed at social reforms. It takes into account the efforts of songwriters, soldiers, critics, filmmakers and playwrights who made the world see and hear the plight of people on the fringes. The marginalized so represented may have been social misfits or whole communities 'displaced' from their original homes. The stress lies on imaginative methods of registering protests, emphasizing equality and showing resistance to demeaning existence. In warfare: militaristic,

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cultural or ideological, there is intolerance, but steadily a world has been built which is more protective towards human rights. There have been human rights representations in most innovative forms: poetry, songs, movies, plays, placards, posters- film and literature have been the steady aides of activists. They have appealed for tolerance to 'difference' and intolerance to oppression and fanaticism using both imagination as in 'agitprop' drama or heart-touching stories and action as in protest marches, candlelight vigils or even distinguished sports performances. The present discussion includes representative movies by Charlie Chaplin and others; a play by Bertolt Brecht; poetry by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon and songs by Bob Marley that touch upon subjects like segregation, possession, hatred, apartheid, war, and capitalism. Due to creative efforts of many steadily the definition of culture has become more inclusive. This study may be of significant interest because it discusses major works –popular or canonized- that have contributed towards sensitizing the audience/reader/spectator towards alternative points of view and have appealed for consideration of human rights in imaginative ways.

**Culture: changing understanding**

Steadily the definition of culture has become more inclusive. In fact, the definition of 'culture' itself has been revised. It no longer denotes 'refinement' but value-systems that have currency in a limited social and historical context. Also, the line between 'high' and 'low' culture has been erased in cultural reception. Cultural historians like Michel Foucault have charted the development of a world- more humane to criminals and mentally disturbed people in books like *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish* however, there is also a recognition that monologue of

authority persists as in *Birth of a Clinic* and *History of Sexuality* by the same author; the society seems to be more embracing towards 'otherness'- in terms of culture, gender or sexuality. In "The Rise of Cultural Studies" Robert Stam asserts: ' Key to cultural studies is the idea that culture is the site of conflict and negotiation within social formations dominated by power and traversed by tensions having to do with class, gender, race, and sexuality'(Stam, 228). Robert Stam critically assesses the endeavour of cultural studies and comments, 'At its best, cultural studies locates moments of subcultural subversion and resistance; at its worst, it celebrates *fandom* and consumerism as exercises in untrammelled freedom' (Stam, 228). The phenomena began in an uncanny ally of culture: science. ' Einstein's theory of relativity captured the imagination of a public whose common experience told them that observers differently placed got a different view of things. The ideas of relativity and uncertainty led people to deny absolute values in any sphere of society' (Tindall and Shi.1187). Now 'culture' meant 'the whole system of ideas, folkways, and institutions within which any group lived. Even the most primitive groups had culture and all things being relative, one culture should not impose its value judgments on another' (Tindall and Shi.1187).

### **An Overview**

In the era of imperialism, Asians and Africans were displaced as 'slaves' and entrenched as 'bonded labour' to serve in British colonies in the New World. There were segregations prompted trans-history by wars, conquests and invasions (as Tibetan refugees fleeing Chinese suzerainty). Astonishing episodes like the partition of India happened leading to mass movements across newly carved out borders. Hate propaganda targeting other races, religions and cultures

took shape of 'ghettos' and Nazi concentration camps in Germany. The tug-of-war for power after the Second Great War lead to modern spurt of prosecutions as in Cold War period when economic and ideological insecurities prompted American governments to maraud 'communists' in Capitalist America.

Pretexts for exploitation and killing of humans by humans are many: usually the 'other' (the term evoked by Edward Said in *Orientalism*) is perceived as low, barbaric, dangerous, abnormal or mean or any one of them. Many- a -times oppression gets State or religious sanctions: wars precipitate in this way, but there are other forms of sanctioned inhumanity as prosecutions in the reigns of the Catholic Queen Mary and her protestant sister Queen of England Elizabeth I directed to the other sect in turn.

Shias and Sunnis have fought though belonging to same religion and there is an apprehension and suggestion that the revolt in Bahrain is due to the fact that the monarch is ruling the majority of a different sect. One grave charge levelled against Saddam Hussain, the erstwhile 'dictator' of Iraq was that he targeted the majority Muslim community there, giving the Americans enough reason to step in and take action. Christians and Jews though they share the roots have an uneasy relationship throughout history for was not Christ a Jew when born?

The 'actual' and the 'subterranean' motives of aggression vary. In fact, Adolf Hitler used pseudo-eugenics to prompt Germany to enter World War II and fulfill his ambition to be world supremo and wars for economic gains have been fought as Gulf war with American intrusion.

**The Last Decade: Critique of the State-sanctioned subjugation**

Though states have long taken recourse to criminal tactics and *modus operandi*, they are rarely given a terrorist tag. It is apparent that the penal system of most states is based on procedures and methods adopted from the criminals. This similarity was emphasized greatly by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish*.

The law-dispensing authorities claim that tortures and third degree of state prisons and repressive measures serve ends that justify the means that is, fostering a healthy fear of Law. The spectacles of pain and torture are exemplary and act as deterrents to crime. The state sends out signals saying that the state could target the criminal just as the criminal victimizes others. While in some countries 'an eye for an eye' principle still prevails, in others this is considered a barbaric code.

The Indian constitution is perhaps the finest and most humane and merciful of constitutions (such that many a times, it appears to be an ineffective deterrent to criminals). Human rights groups preach mercy and forgiveness towards criminals and the state is criticized for corporeal punishments. While some states give harsh punishments that mimic criminal methods only in the 'rarest of rare cases', others dole out corporeal punishments as a policy matter- to curb crime as the cruel punishment is considered a great deterrent. The harsh impositions of state are considered necessary to maintain law and order- as the state penalizes those that are culpable but does not touch the innocent.

There are times, however, when the state is hijacked by crime and we witness a phenomenon where not people's actions but their identity or their opinions allow them to be dubbed as criminals- a fundamentalist, ruthless, totalitarian, oppressive regime employing methods borrowed from criminals

materializes.

These methods are: infringing upon the privacy of subjects/ individuals(Watergate scandals), misrepresentations and misinterpretation and misquoting individuals to make them culpable(contempt of court proceedings against recipient of Booker's Prize Arundhati Roy), judgment without trial, punishments after fake trials( The Salem Witch trials), communal riots employing state machinery or relying on state's apparent indifference( NarendraModi's Gujarat), massacres and genocides abetted and aided by the state(Nazi Germany). The state does not give logical reasons but furnishes excuses for its extremities.

It banks upon the primal fears, and racial/communal hatred to create myths/stories fostering stereotypes in which the prospective victim appears as the aggressor and perpetrator to create hate waves that precipitate as violence or mobbing of the hated group. History has witnessed states (not just individuals) deriving sadistic pleasure out of terrorizing their subjects. Most recent is the crisis in Middle East and North Africa with civil war conditions emerging in many countries following the revolt of people of Egypt against their dictator Hosni Mubarak. The wave has spread engulfing Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. The governments as well as the revolting people are suspicious of the Western powers in the fiasco. While the people claim that they are fighting for restoration of human rights, democracy and better standard of living, the powers-that-are claim that this is due to resurgence of religious fundamentalism. It was also observed that Muammar Gaddafi was using the weapons supplied to his forces by the U. S. The Middle East, today, has not found an Islamic utopia or a humanistic democracy but has turned into an extensive burial ground of human hope. Europeans and

Syrians both find themselves on the receiving ends of a refugee crisis.

There has been emergence of Right-wing politics in the 'Post-truth' contemporary era directed by paid and controlled media- Trump, Modi, Putin, Xiang Zemin and the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il only a shade darker. The nightmarish reality finds many articulations and graphic representations in media but though the individuals may be moved, the governments so much in control of civil rights and liberties seem to demonstrate an uncanny helplessness and little control over the juggernaut of attacks once the ball starts rolling.

However, the artistic productions aim to impress the 'one swallow' hoping it would 'make a summer'. Just as one rotten apple can spoil a whole basket!

### **Literary and Cinematic Representations of Issue**

Films and literature can be used in conjunction to *study* and effectively critique culture. The dynamism of culture is emphatically revealed through these media. Literature and movies have a capacity to reveal limitations of subjective perceptions; therefore together they create a system that is enriched by plurality highlighting respect for differences by bringing in marginalized communities and cultures into focus. For instance, a host of anti-Nazi movies were produced during the period of World War II.

### **Movies on racial hatred and war**

*The Trial* (1935), perhaps, offered Orson Welles, a filmmaker, the greatest opportunity to explore the limits of the 'cinema of consciousness' (Bordwell, 274). The stories "The Judgment" and "In the Penal Colony" and the novel *Trial*, record the terrible encounter of the individual subject with the authorities. The challenging task for the filmmaker was to

express the simultaneous subjectivity and objectivity of the protagonist: to help the audiences visualize the terrible face of the system through the consciousness of the individual subject and at the same time, to reveal the objectification of the protagonist by the authority's indictment or persecution of him. One may be reminded of Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon* about which Foucault talks extensively in *Discipline and Punish* as a concept than as an architectural type. The 'panopticon', here, is so gigantic that it engulfs all existing space turning offices, monuments, and theatres into surveillance apparatuses. Foucault inquires: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prison?" (228). The prison is so huge, that the naïve prisoner is only vaguely aware of his cage. The authorities, however, discourage even the illusion of freedom. This is done by impinging upon the subject's movement at strategic times and forcefully reminding the subject of an all-pervasive gaze.

Charles Chaplin played Adenoid Hynkel inspired by Adolf Hitler in his movie *The Great Dictator* (1940). He also played a persecuted Jewish barber in the film who exchanges positions with the dictator in the end to vouch for peace and brotherhood. This was hailed as a courageous movie. Similarly, Italian filmmaker Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (1997) and Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* (2002) based on the life and biography of a Jewish musician send across a message of courage, beauty and optimism in face of Nazi atrocities. *Sound of Music* (1959) a world renowned musical set in Austrian locale is based on the memoir of Maria von Trapp, *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, the audience winces at the imminent threat of war to this idyllic life. *Anne Frank's diaries* offer a renowned intertext for these



media productions.

Films have also taken inspiring stories to create sensitivity in the audience. A recent and native example exists in *Chak De India* where the players of Indian hockey team are taught to forget their regional roots and commit themselves to national team. The tribal girls from Jharkhand are undermined by those from Punjab and Haryana, considered more progressive states. In fact, in sports there is one exceptional real life example to show how a player through his performance can gain pride for the whole of his community. In 1947 The American baseball's *Brooklyn Dodgers* put Jackie Robinson on their roll, the first black player to feature in the National League (Tindall and Shi. 1401). Many read it as a gigantic step in way of Negro emancipation. The racist crowds teased but heedless to the abuses Robinson got his team to win the match. He paved the way for many other sportsmen relegated due to their race to be recruited for sports. 'Jackie Robinson vividly demonstrated that racism, not inferiority, impeded African –American advancement in the postwar era and that segregation need not be a permanent condition of American life'(Tindall and Shi.1402). Robinson opened the way for more black players to enter national teams in America, such that they now dominate the American sports scene.

### **Short Stories and Novels against segregation**

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a Czech Jew writing in German. He wrote his stories and novels in the period around the First World War and his writing reflects an acute apprehension of his position as a person belonging to a minority community and a persecuted race in the menacing socio-political situation prevalent in those times. Nazism was directed both against the Czechs and Jews so, Kafka must

have been doubly disadvantaged. They put up their notices saying: *Jews, Czechs and Dogs not admitted*. Such attitudes must have evoked a fear of the fast emerging totalitarian state and an apprehension of oneself as a threatened individual. Franz Kafka's oeuvre offers a literary reflection of such predatory states and his apprehension of the political situation prevalent in his contemporary times is acute because of his minority status and because the authorities' gaze is most often directed towards a minority subject.

In his oeuvre, Franz Kafka often takes up the theme of judgment as exercised by the authorities over their subjects. The authorial institutions are the family, the office, the court, or the pervasive prison of *The Trial*. The authorial figures are, correspondingly, the father as in the "The Judgment" and investigating magistrates, parsons, or lawyers as in "In the Penal colony" and *The Trial*. The 'Penal Colony' is run according to law that is 'monologic' and asserts truth to be singular and indisputable.

According to the norms in the penal colony: 'Guilt is never to be doubted. Other courts cannot follow that principle; for they consist of several opinions and have higher courts to scrutinize them' (97). The colony, then, is an organization "closed" to dialogue or debate. The punitive apparatus that looks like a gigantic turbine to pierce and mark human bodies is demonstrated by one of the officer-judges.

The intricacies of the turbine's design are more delicate than the laws of the penal colony that allow the same gruesome death to all sorts of criminals. The punishment begins as the convict is branded in his own blood and the needles pencil out the crime in words over the criminal's body. These words, although, they have no sonic power have visual and somatic impact. The strange inhuman way to punish

emphasizes silence and subjection as the twin posts of a dictatorial regime.

An “explorer” and outsider admitted into the colony heralds the end of this punitive era. But the end is complex: the officer- in charge, who finds this part-archaic, part-sophisticated method of dispensing justice (of which he is a firm advocate) under criticism, goes on to inflict self-punishment following the same punitive law that is being discarded due to the outsider’s intervention. This self-punishment is janus-faced asserting not just the guilt of the judge-officer or the old system but also attempting to make a last ditch-effort validating the obsolete law by submitting willingly to it. The officer rejects the succor of the more humanitarian laws introduced by the outsiders and chooses the mercilessness of the earlier *dictate*. As the officer goes to commit the semi- legal suicide substituting himself for a released convict, he shows the unforgiving nature of dictatorial tyranny. The barbaric show, which allows public witnesses, is a reminder of cultural atavism that sometimes accompanies civilization’s advancement.

*The Trial* distills what is so unexpected and sudden in “The Judgment” and so archaic and exaggerated in “In the Penal Colony” into a grim but subtler apprehension of tyranny. The novel is an evolution from the “Penal Colony” and “The Judgment” since it admits a more devastating critique of the state machinery and law-dispensing authorities. While the penal colony is put forth as an isolated case of a community where barbaric practice in law is still extant, *The Trial* is a more explicit recognition that the oppressive legal machinery exists even outside such a specimen colony.

In India, there is the peculiar scourge of caste which though emerging in Hinduism casts its spell over nearly every

other religion practiced in the subcontinent. The stigma of 'untouchability' and being an outcaste does not leave a person born in certain fringe castes even when they convert to Islam, Sikhism or Christianity. The remarkable hypocrisy that allowed uppercaste men to, customarily, enjoy sexual relationships with the women from declared lower castes as 'keep'(s) and concubine has been noticed by all conscious and unwitting contributors to writing on the Dalit issue. In fact, UR Ananthmurthy's *Samskara* focusing on a Brahmin community from an earlier age and time evokes episodes of similar nature is narrated in *The Outcaste* another quasi-fictional account, the autobiography of Sharankumar Limbale.

It thus, seems to be a unimpeachable assertion that exploitation economic, sexual and social was sanctified in the name of a religion that was based on hierarchy rather than unity and oneness of its followers. The overarching paradox was that the position and relevance of the higher castes depended on the retention of these outcastes 'in/' 'of' the Hindu fold.

Caste persists and adversely affects the lives and character of all who live in the Indian environment. It has sustained from ancient to colonial to post-colonial times in the nation.

A remarkable document possessing authority and idealism that has withstood caste is the constitution of India; it is unique in its almost superhuman endeavour to be 'inclusive'. The Indian constitution is derived not just from legal theories of modern nations and the French and American revolutions, but from customs of diverse indigenous people. Looking at it from a post-colonial perspective, the Indian constitution is guided by the best thoughts in Occident and Orient world.

It is indirectly influenced by the ancient Hindu philosophical and ritual treatises, epics and myths that is, by *Vedas*, *Vedanta* to *Puranas*, and epics like *Mahabharata*, sometimes by viewing the Hindu tradition critically and decoding its caste biases propagated by *Manusmriti*. In fact, the Chairman of the drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution was Dr BR Ambedkar an outcaste belonging to the 'Mahar' community whose scathing critique of caste, actually meant to be a speech, was left undelivered but found articulation in form of an iconic text *The Annihilation of Caste*.

The Greeks like Plato who spoke of the 'Philosopher King' in his *Republic*, Transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau; various religions and dissenting sects like Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity, *Bhakti* movement amalgamate to create a strong ethical inspiration for our constitution; English theorists as disparate as Hobbes who emphasized the evil and anti-social nature of man in his well known text *Leviathan* and Locke who held his faith in goodness of man both contribute in some way to its making.

### **Plays against war**

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) wrote many plays that treated the theme of war and were meant to intellectually stimulate the audience. He introduced 'epic theatre' in collaboration with a renowned Berlin theatre figure Erwin Piscator. Piscator was adept at *agitprop* drama that uses agitation and propaganda and 'epic theatre' with its political purpose and episodic structure incorporates the features of *agitprop*. Brecht. Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children* was written in 1939 but was copyrighted first in USA in 1940 and was published in English translated by HR Hays before being published in German. It perhaps offered the most

vicious satire to war ideology. The opening episode is a humorous dialogue on war emerging from a conversation between recruitment officer and a sergeant. They consider it a merit of war that it makes counting of men, rationing and stratification imperative.

War is synonymous with organization while peace breeds ennui and conceit. Mother Courage, herself, surviving on war by selling edibles from her wagon understands that mercenary motives lie behind every war. The vague parentage and varied descent of all three of her children are an indication that she certainly does not believe in provincialism of any kind. She is not sure whether their father is Swiss, French or any other.

In scene 7 as Mother Courage pulls the wagon on the highway, she declares her stance boldly and says:

I won't let you spoil my war for me. Destroys the weak, does it? Well, what does peace do for 'em, huh? War feeds its people better. She sings: War is a business proposition:/Not with cream-cheese but steel and lead(55).

She makes no bones about it and chastises the recruiting officer for trying to enlist her children in the army to serve as cannon-fodder.

Mother Courage: This one's just a baby. You'll lead him like a lamb to the slaughter. I know you, you'll get five guilders for him(8).

It may be of remark that the play was written during the Nazi hysteria and appeared just before the commencement of World War II. However, it bore the subtitle of *A Chronicle of the Thirty Years War*. This was a war in Europe(1618-48) that had an overt religious but covert political purpose and the dissociation from the Germany of twentieth century only helped show how men continue to find

newer excuses to make war on each other.

### **Poems by War poets of WWI**

A notable poem from the first-hand experience of a soldier in the first world war is 'Suicide in the Trenches' by the war poet Siegfried Sassoon (8 September 1886 – 1 September 1967) published in *Counter-attack and Other Poems*(1918)that talks of the psychological breakdown suffered during war:

I knew a simple soldier boy.....  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,  
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain.  
And no one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go.

Wilfred Owen(18 March 1893 – 4 November 1918) was a British soldier who died fighting. Owen's poem 'Dulce et decorum est'(1917) that parodies the war-praising lines from Horace is perhaps the most evocative of realities of war which are different from the idealization of those who do not fight at trenches. He describes the death throes of a soldier who falls victim to a gas attack exposing the horrors of modern warfare with its inhuman reliance on chemical weapons.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,---  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est Pro patria mori.*

It is 'sweet and proper to die for one's country' was a patriotic motto that inspired new recruits but the two world wars taught that the reality of war was bizarre and horrific. These soldiers wrote poems to shake the complacent governments and civilians to the plight of soldiers who died, were maimed or taken prisoners in war.

Anthems/Songs for Peace, Equality and Humanity

While the war poets brought to notice the plight and horror of war, there were those who went to the root and vehemently voted for nipping the evil in the very bud: destroying to construct. One is reminded of RoberNesta 'Bob' Marley (February 6, 1945- May 11, 1981), the Jamaican singer of group called 'Wailers' who inspired the *Rastafari* movement. In his song *War* (written by Norman Whitfield and Barret Strong) Marley declares:

Until the philosophy which hold one race superior  
 And another  
 Inferior  
 Is finally  
 And permanently  
 Discredited  
 And abandoned-  
 Everywhere is war-



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Me say war.

Furthermore he asserts:

That until that day  
 The dream of lasting peace,  
 World citizenship  
 Rule of international morality  
 Will remain but a fleeting illusion to be pursued,  
 But never attained-  
 Now everywhere is war-war.

This is a constant concern with him. For instance, there are the lyrics of his song 'Get Up, Stand Up' in which he dismisses dogma of all kinds:

We sick an' tired of-a your ism-skism game -  
 Dyin' 'n' goin' to heaven in-a Jesus' name, lord.  
 We know when we understand:  
 Almighty god is a living man.

There is this effort to recast morality and ethics in terms of this temporal world rather than as preachers say for the love of heaven or fear of hell.

There is Bruce Cockburn's song "Call it Democracy" wherein he exposes the democratic pretensions of capitalism:

padded with power here they come  
 international loan sharks backed by the guns  
 of market hungry military profiteers  
 Slavery gets a modern avatara in the twenty-first century:  
 by turning countries into labour camps  
 modern slavers in drag as champions of freedom  
 sinister cynical instrument  
 who makes the gun into a sacrament –

Phil Collins "Another Day in Paradise" evokes the pain and plight of refugees and homeless people. But he does

more the luckier people also seem to be helpless and do not offer them shelter or solace: they walk off without looking back, pretending not to hear the cry for help. Collins asks us if the 'paradise' we take so casually as ours enduring enough since our neighbour's is not.

John Lennon (October 9, 1940- December 8, 1980) one of the founder members of *The Beatles* tells how this can be achieved in 'Imagine':

Imagine there's no countries

It isn't hard to do

Nothing to kill or die for

And no religion too

In fact, patriotism is one excuse to kill the others. Terrorists too are misguided patriots; over the years many have proclaimed commitment to greater causes to justify their killing of innocents.

Imagine no possessions

I wonder if you can

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people

Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I am not the only one.

Surely there were and are many more such dreamers and they are required.

However, criticism and protest cannot be useful or strong without inspiration and commitment, and it is best articulated in the world famous song by sung by John Baez with words and music by Zilphia Hart, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan and Pete Seeger: "We shall Overcome" the best note on which to end- there is hope and promise for human

rights till human spirit holds.

These rare narratives uphold humanity and the rare secular discourse resisting the mainstream narratives supportive of the powerful discourse of hatred and schisms. They persist in their task of being the conscience-keepers of this society riddled by differing faiths, beliefs and birth in formal religions.

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