

Nobel Prize: Hardly Noble Politics

The Nobel prize is not only an attention-grabbing honour, but also a power structure

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Theme: [History](#)

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It is really a great achievement of the Nobel award committee that it has created an environment in which criticism of the Nobel prizes is always rubbished and in which controversies are taken just as part and parcel of the scenario of the Nobel awards announcements. The committee has successfully infused the global psyche with a total indifference to, and an utter contempt for any valid and reasonable criticism from really serious and progressive-thinking writers and intellectuals. This can be termed as a feat on the part of the Nobel committee.

Now its announcement of literary award for French novelist Patrick Modiano has come like a bolt out of the blue. Its suddenness stems from the fact that all along the global media have been abuzz with speculations of a Nobel literary prize for Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. Also touted as Nobel award probables were American writer Philip Roth, French writer of Czech origin Milan Kundera, Ukrainian writer Svetlana Alexiyovich and Syrian poet Adonis.

However, it was Murakami whose name has been raising a lot of expectations. His works have been celebrated as both literary and commercial; yet they have been taking on more western colors than native Japanese. He too has declared himself as “an outcast of the Japanese literary world”.

Global media have idolized him, not without reasons. They are carried away by the way Murakami presented a fusion of literary and commercial features; a sort of modern outlook. Another reason for the rapture with which he is being read is that he conforms to the new dictum that only those writings projecting Western or European thoughts can be described as world literature. It is this tacit dictum that has been sunk into the psyche of global writers. Publishers’ international market politics too can be fitted into this scenario.

Now we can have a keen look at the writers who have stirred the media’s speculations about the Nobel honor.

Milan Kundera’s writings emerged on the scene when discussion of modern writing was globally threadbare. His important novel, “Immortality” hogged the global limelight; the literary world started paying a riveted attention to his writings. His short stories have a game-like appeal, revealing varied dimensions of writing. They describe the human mind’s weird thought processes interestingly and aesthetically and also the absurdity of human life as part of the rules of life game and its multi-dimensional crises. His book, “The Art of the Novel” discusses the aesthetics of writing, exploring various dimensions and possibilities of the art of novel.

Syrian poet Adonis is a very important personality in that he has given an expression to

Arab life and brought Sufi thinking to bear on his poetry. This poet, who has been living in exile on account of his controversial political stances, has been regularly nominated for the Nobel prize since 1988.

Similarly, the writing of Svetlana Alexiyovich are regarded by critics as a literary documentation of the emotional tailspin of the Soviet and post-Soviet individual in the backdrop of the historic events such as Soviet-Afghan war, the Soviet Union's downfall, the Chernobyl disaster etc. Russian literature that stagnated during 1950-60 is now resurrecting itself and traversing a revival trajectory. Russian literary critic Elena Dimov says: "Modern Russian writers are diverse and incredibly talented, and they did the almost impossible: they restored the Russian public's trust in the written word after decades of government-ruled literature." ([Contemporary Russian Literature](#))

The Nobel Committee's aversion to leftist thinkers and sympathisers has been reflected in its operations since the days of Soviet Russia.

From 1901 to 1912, the Nobel Award Committee had given prizes with a slant in its selection of awardees, though it justified its decisions, saying that it was conforming to the principles propounded in the will of its founder Alfred Nobel. That was why great writers such as Tolstoy, Ibsen, Emile Zola, Mark Twain etc. were bypassed. The committee had recommended awards to the writers of countries and their allies, which said they preferred to be neutral in the First World War. Moreover, there was a history of bias which was manifest in the fact that great Russian writers Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov never managed to get onto the Nobel list, all because of a bitter animosity prevailing at that time between Sweden and Russia.

At that time, it was a fad in the arts world to criticize Soviet Russia. During the period of Stalinist repression and suppression of artists, anti-Soviet thinkers and anti-establishment writers were going on in a full swing. Andrei Sinyavsky, an important writer, was up in arms against Soviet atrocities. Under the pseudonym of "Abram Tertz," he wrote a book, "On Socialist Realism" (1959), criticizing the then-much-touted Soviet principle of socialist realism. From underground, he continued to criticize the Soviet establishment through novels of metaphor, allegories and fantasy writings. In his novel, "The Makepeace Experiment" (1963), he presents a satiric portrait of Lenin set in a heroic image, branding the Russian thought system Marxian utopianism.

This kind of anti-establishment post-modernism turned into magical realism in the Latin American countries where anti-dictatorial agitations were going on. The Nobel-winning novel, "The Tin Drum", written by Gunther Grass, which projected the hero Oskar Matzerath as shrinking into a dwarf to protest Nazism belongs to the magical realist genre.

As a descendant of Andrei Sinyavsky, Boris Pasternak castigated his own country of 'Iron Curtain' and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958. But he was not allowed by the Soviet government to receive the award. Hence, a dejected and depressed Pasternak poured out his emotions in his poem, "Nobel Prize." The line from his poem "I am done, like a beast in a cage" captured the blues of his vexed mind.

In a similar way, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who, in his novel, 'Cancer Ward', saw Soviet Russia as a metaphor for the cancer ward and whose another novel "The Gulag Archipelago" shed light on the seamy side of the Russian society, was honoured with the Nobel prize in 1970.

Poet Joseph Brodsky, who was sent to the concentration camp during the Stalin regime for criticising the government, was also given the Nobel prize in 1987.

Consequently, the Nobel Committee was bombarded with charges that it honoured only the anti-Leftist writers and in order to counter the criticism, it went out of its way to honour Left-leaning writers such as Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre, Marquez. However, it should be pointed out here that these writers' creative world was purely literary. Camus' writings focused on the absurdity of human life. Sartre put forward existential thoughts involving the modern man's life. (It is a different controversy that he refused to accept the Nobel honour). It should be kept in mind that Marquez's writings exude magical realism.

Thus, the Nobel prize is beset with endless controversies, political motives and pressures and vested interests.

However, I am not projecting these writers.

In the global media politics, Third World writers' names continued to be suppressed. (Sometimes, as if in reservation system, they get recognition). No media project and talk about writings in the Third World, nor about the post-colonial political aesthetics. The micro political operations behind the scenes dish out awards in the name of art and aesthetics for what is generally touted as standard and serious writings. Alternative cultures or alternative writings are not recognized properly. Only those writers conforming to the western parameters are considered to be worthy of consideration for awards.

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In this regard, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o must be mentioned. He was not much taken note of by any media except The Guardian.

He says, "If a language is to be brought under colonial domination, the best way is to impose upon it the power of the colonists' language and make a literary impact upon it. The colonists could trumpet about the supremacy and lofty features of their own language and make it a symbol of social status, thereby creating an inferiority complex among the speakers of the native language and castrating it".

He has been writing adamantly in his mother tongue Gikuyu about the post-colonial politics. His books have been translated into several languages. His critics explain how his novel, "Petals of Blood", published in 1977, portrays the residual western culture, capitalism and political changes which have become warp and woof of the Kenyan life after the end of the British reign in Kenya. His different viewpoints about alternative politics, alternative writings and alternative culture are considered as paramount against the backdrop of the present post-colonial milieu. He must have been chosen for the Nobel prize.

I will plumb for Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who has been fighting tooth and nail the micro-politics and power centre enshrined in the European literature and who has been proclaiming the power and depth of his own cultural foundation and literary strength of his language.



Well! What are the reasons cited by the Nobel Committee for selection of French writer Patrick Modiano for the honour?

Modiano's writings have captured in vivid details the sorrows of Jews, the atrocities perpetrated by Nazis and loss of social identity. He has reconstructed powerfully in his writings the events that led to the invasion of France by Germany during the World War II. The grief-stricken life and turbulent human emotions under the foreign occupation have been successfully and aesthetically metamorphosed into a mosaic of creativity. That is what the Nobel Committee says, justifying the honour for the French writer.

What is the art that the committee speaks about? And what is the writing aesthetics that it puts forward?

It is not known still how long the Nobel prize committee members will continue to harp on writings dealing with the World War II. Nowadays battles are waged in several parts of the world, whose inhuman and cruel face is no less macabre and morbid than the Holocaust. In the chess game of the international politics, the ordinary human life is broken to pieces. Human life has become absurd in the post-modernist milieu, as man seems to be metamorphosing into the Kafkaesque beetle, caught as he is in the vortex of racial, post-colonial and religious politics.

The western thinkers, who pigeonhole the wars waged between big forces as I, II and III World Wars, seem to be blissfully unaware of the inhuman and dastardly attacks on small racial communities and blatant genocides happening in the Third World. To them, such attacks do not come under the label of war. In the name of fighting terror, how the dominant racial communities are preaching and practicing racial chauvinism and perpetrating atrocities on the lesser communities..... all these go unnoticed. The loss of social identity that Modiano speaks about in his writings is actually occurring in the Third World battles nowadays.

In the concrete world, hi-tech weapons and chemical arms keep on attacking human bodies. At the same time, in the abstract world, a variety of political power-oriented thoughts are tearing apart the fabric of human life. The absurdity of the 'battle politics' unfolds before us as the essence of human life, as if it were anonymous. The illusion of this anonymity is an art.

This is the art that the Third World creative artists are conjuring up.

Do the Nobel authorities take into account the writings that pierced the flesh and blood of wars happening in the Third World countries such as Africa, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Latin America etc.? Do they take into consideration the racial and post-colonial outlooks, values and realities?

In this context, our Tamil poet Piramil's poem comes back to mind. "A feather that falls apart from the wing moves on, writing on the inexhaustible pages of wind the life of a bird". A feather that peels off a bird's wings is not just a feather; it is a history; an art. This thought is the crux of the Third World countries' art of life.

Are the Nobel committee members naïve enough not to understand all these things? Are they not steeped in the imperialistic power, dominant values and micropolitics?

Yet, why did they choose Modiano, a Jewish author, for the award? Let us dig out the micropolitics behind it.

The Israelites' Zionist domination is eliminating Muslims in the Gaza Strip in Palestine. Jews today are a far cry from the Jews suppressed during the World War II. The old scenes have changed. Now unfolds a new scene that shows them at their most valiant, at their most dominant and at their most powerful.

Yet it is the Zionists' hidden agenda that the ground reality should not be viewed from a critical perspective. They want the old Jewish tales of woe to be told again and again; how they lost their identity must be dusted off and narrated seamlessly. Art must be created to delineate the force of dharma with which they rose from the dead like the phoenix. The present-day reality must be relegated to the background and a post-modernist reality projected before the world.

How wonderful this post-modernist politics!

This is the 'Art-Truth-Politics' that British playwright Harold Pinter spoke about in his Nobel prize acceptance speech in 2005.

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