

The Power of Spirit in Shaping Fictional Characters

**An end-of-course Monograph by
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1. INTRODUCTION

I have attempted to study my attitude to Truth and Society in relation to my identity as an Indian woman writer writing in English and in relation to the characters of my first novel *A Partial Woman* (KALI for Women, New Delhi, 1998); and to trace the growth of a truer attitude to my work on a second, as-yet-incomplete novel, following my understanding of the power of attitude based on the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.¹

1. The Mother, *The Sunlit Path: Passages from Conversations and Writings of the Mother*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India, 1984.
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Mehra, Ameeta, *Power of Attitude*, The Gnostic Centre, New Delhi, India, 1998.
Dalal, AS, *Looking From Within: A Seeker's Guide to Attitudes for Mastery and Inner Growth*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India, 1995.
Dalal, AS, *Living Within: The Yoga Approach to Psychological Health and Growth*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India, 1987.
Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library, Vol 28, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, India.
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2. MONOGRAPH

My wish to explore the truth about life in an Indian community in a novel demanded a stepping back from a) the mental pictures formed by my imagination (in order to find the best words to express them); and b) the writing self seated before a computer, termed the ‘implied author’ by Geoffrey N Leech and Michael H Short²; so that the real-life author could transit to a positive ‘I am a writer’ identity in a society (I refer specifically to the Punjabi Sikh community) in which self-actualisation by women is rare.

When first I began writing my novel *A Partial Woman* in 1991, I did not believe that whatever happens, happens for the best. I believed that whoever had the means to escape from India and settle abroad, was doing so. I wanted to expose the inhuman treatment of women in Punjabi society. For this reason, I chose a childless woman as my protagonist and placed her in the Punjab of a hundred years ago, when a woman without children had no work, no travel, no car, no property, to make life bearable.

‘The experience of pain was an early blight...’ In this opening line of my novel I was expressing my own unhappiness experienced in childhood, and subscribing as an adult writer to the theory of creative fiction as catharsis.

Ironically, important life decisions, relating to one’s identity and to one’s relationship with significant others, are taken at a very early, inexperienced age: At around the age of thirteen, I felt convinced that I would be a great writer one day and consequently, I would not have much in common with my family. Till the age of forty-four, after a career in teaching, research and journalism, I was unable to reach my goal which had remained unchanged through long, frustrating, ‘unwritten’ years. Imagine then the trepidation and *rush* in which the writing of my first novel was undertaken and pursued over four years of infirm trust in my ability.

By the time Part I of *A Partial Woman* was written, I began to recognise a habitual manner of writing in myself. As I sat before my computer and read the previous day’s writing, a picture of the next scene to be recorded would arise in my mind and, slowly, the words. I did not struggle with words or the pictures. I brushed aside issues relating to my use of English, a foreign language; there would be time

for that, later, I told myself. Since I knew no other language as well as I knew English, that time also never came. I resigned my job in the University, took another as the editor of a design magazine, and then threw that up also within a year.

After that I began writing obsessively, cutting myself off from my parents and family in self-fulfilment of my teenaged prophecy, fearful of never completing my first novel (as I had failed to complete my PhD thesis), of never becoming a published writer. Quite soon I became gravely ill, experiencing in hospital a near-death experience, wishing for deliverance from the misery of life. I see today that I had become a willing victim of the gender and cultural identity I was forging for myself.

When I signed up for *The Power of Attitude* course, I was in a trough following the crest — the publication of my novel by the first and foremost feminist publishers in India. I was not sitting down to my computer as I used to do earlier. Inwardly I felt as though I had never written a word. I felt that my book was not so much neglected as my self: my colleagues, friends and family seemed to be conspiring in the persuasive reality that I was the same person I used to be before I became a writer.

When I sat down to my second, as-yet-untitled novel, I began writing in the same manner as before. Sometimes it felt as though I was tiresomely writing the same novel as before, and sometimes that I was still struggling with my first novel. I wanted so much to write a new me. If I could transform my innermost attitudes to reach the highest attitude possible to my work as a writer, I could write a *new* book.

As I assumed the identity of a writer, I define the change in me as one of a higher consciousness of, and greater responsibility towards, society. But I had not taken the ‘highest attitude possible’ to my work, which is the same as the highest attitude to human life and the universe. How is this possible? And what steps am I taking to attain it?

The ‘highest attitude’ is discoverable at any moment in our lives when we are not lost weaving meanings into the past or the future, when we own the present, when we own the power *that* brings. In those moments, when the body is quiet, the mind silent, and the spirit awake, we experience a clarity and wholeness of being. We understand in a new way or we find meaning in something new,

something hitherto unknown or a problem or mystery as yet unsolved; we sense that there has been a visitation from a higher power and it has illumined us. During meditation I can always identify the highest attitude toward my work as I understand it at that moment, whether I act upon it during writing is a second matter.

Today I feel confident that I can attain, and retain for the duration of my work on the second novel, the highest attitude possible to writing, first because I am now aspiring to do so. Second, I am aware of the distance, between my operative selves and my true self, that I will now endeavour to close. I will now bring wholeness to the existential act of writing. Third, I will step-back, without losing the creative flow, and refer to my chart and compass, banishing self-doubt as my second novel is already well started.

With meditation, prayer, group support, guidance from Ameeta and reading the works of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, I made an important discovery — I had written my first novel with the utmost integrity to the ‘implied author’, had been true to this ‘self’ which had *overtaken* me whenever I sat down before my computer. This ‘self’ had negotiated linkages between myself, the real-life author, and the first-person narrator of my novel, a sixteen-year old girl married to a much older man, whose ailing first wife is still alive, and who refuses to pray for his childless wife although he is a guru to a host of men and women who come to him for help.

For the first time I re-read my first novel and made a startling discovery: In the second half of the novel a third-person narrator had suddenly split from the ‘I’, the first-person narrator in the novel, to emerge as an omniscient narrator. I had been unaware of this split until now. It had occurred at a critical juncture in the story, when the angry, impulsive heroine enters into an affair with a distant, male relative, an unworthy, ‘drinker of Scotch.’

Because I wanted to underline the moral perspective, to introduce the theme of the superior woman-as-mother vs the inferior woman-as-person, I had detached the first-person narrator’s close identification with the ‘implied author’ and created a third ironic, bitterly satiric persona. But I, real-life author, had identified too closely with the first-person narrator and heroine, and ‘implied author’ and where I had felt a pressure to interrupt the ongoing story, to rethink my meaning, to change, to understand the layer upon layer of intent in the act and meaning of writing, I had created a different narratorial point-of-view, a new persona.

While writing *A Partial Woman*, I had succumbed in my own inner attitudes to the stereotypical male perception of the Punjabi woman as weak-minded, who fears loss of control over herself and over others, and who may not reveal the secrets of her feudal society without violence, and had, therefore, kept myself unchanged, *negotiating the biggest life change I had ever wanted only through the 'implied author' who did what it knew best to do - create another voice, another persona.*

In my practise of the different disciplines of spirituality, such as meditation³, prayer, mindfulness, self-healing, I have found that what is called the 'transformation of the self' is actually the co-creation, with a guru, of a *new self*, in a *new space* (only from a space within oneself can one proceed on the path of spirituality), in a time that is always the present moment.⁴

Some seven years ago I found my guru who helped me to attain peace of mind and detachment, put me in touch with my own ignorance about the dynamics of human personality and interaction with others, showed me the way to remove hatred and other negative emotions from my heart, exhorted me to experience the love of God, and enabled me to write. My guru and God have 'co-created' me and continue to do so, and I am not what I was before I met my guru. I experience myself, not as transformed into somebody new, but as new.

People who don't meditate express a difficulty or an inability to get started because they try to begin while 'on the run.' Meditation is a launch pad for spirituality and a launch pad is built on a site. A guru can point out a site to you - I myself found it while learning Reiki. I found it to be a place I had to reach before I could enter the highest awareness; this 'place' lies within oneself. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, the spine erect, eyes closed and the palms of the hands opened upwards, to receive - physical stillness for long periods of time is a must in reaching a 'new space' hitherto unvisited. Unlike when writing, I never see pictures in this place, or of this place, unless it is a guided meditation in which the master may ask me to visualise a place or an object. I only experience *being* in a new place. Like the dawn that is never the same in three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, this 'space' is always new.

In my life I had been unwilling to touch the deepest, inviolate self but willing to create a new self to negotiate inner transformation following religious inspiration, experience of the presence of God or

the teaching of a guru. I had done the same in my novel. A 'point of view'⁵ and not me had written the story and left. I existed as before, intact. This was my unfortunate situation.

The reaction of my family to my new career in writing had convinced me of the danger in my quest for a new status and identity: My husband had never wanted me to leave my job. He had expressed his resentment at the 'Do not Disturb' sign outside my study into which I might disappear at any time of the day. My younger son, studying in England, said 'No' when I wrote to him asking him if he would like to read a chapter of the book I was writing. The fear of disturbing the status quo within the family was uppermost in my older son's mind: 'I don't think you should try to publish what you are writing. Self-expression is the highest aim of human beings, but in your case we are being called upon to pay the price of your satisfaction!' To this day none of them have read my novel.

Both my mother and mother-in-law read my novel but said they did not want to comment on it as they had no 'literary' understanding. It was reviewed in all the major newspapers and magazines as a 'feminist' novel. I did not gain anything for my skill in writing from all the reviews put together, though I felt protected in my personal life having entered the public domain as a published author. I had already written twenty-five thousand words of my second novel - now I did not want to continue the writing in the old way.

Thanks to the work begun in the *Power Of Attitude* course, I have achieved another vital insight - in the co-creation of different selves that occurs when the spiritual is infused in a human being, there is a *hierarchy* to be found amongst the layering, the unfolding selves. There may be moral relativism but there is no spiritual relativism. In the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother I have been most impressed by first, the exhortation to keep my spiritual aspiration constant, and constantly going, thereby recalling me at every moment to the *power* of the present moment. And second, to seize that present, the here-and-now, to ascend to the highest self I am capable of reaching, as Mother says, '...to throw a great light upon it,' to become that self in the presence of God. This is what is meant by 'practising the presence of God.'⁶

In my first novel I had not used the highest consciousness I was capable of from an existential viewpoint when writing. I had compartmentalized my work from my better understanding in order not

to interfere with 'inspiration' but now I write in a disciplined manner. I am not dependent upon, because I no longer believe in, secular 'inspiration.' I am asking myself: What are my aims in continuing to write? The answer is to express the truth, to discover it, to share my joy in it with my readers.

Even the 'implied author' had fallen short of achieving her best and truest expression of meaning. Why had I created a first-person narrator-heroine of limited education and understanding, chosen an angry-funny tone of voice for the narration, and then failed to achieve ironic detachment from my own character?

Now I see that it was because of the *nature* of the identification I made with the heroine of my first novel and which I must avoid in my second novel. The nature of my identification, my shy collusion with negative modes of behaviour that the heroine is 'partial' to, was such that even the 'implied author' became wilful and unthinking. To salvage the self-subverted story-telling, I brought in an omniscient narrator who shortly foreclosed the narration with yet another narrator, another mode of narration - the epistolary.

While writing my first novel I had found it difficult to step back and see where I was going. I could have written two million words instead of one, but I had no 'story' with a beginning, a middle and an end in the conventional sense. I had only this 'life' of the central character and I had congratulated myself on how successfully I had kept autobiographical pages, 'confessional seepages'⁷ out of this life. I found that with my second novel I was doing the same, ploughing on, using god-like omniscience in third-person narration but, forgetting that all characters must be created by the same god-like narrator, and identifying too closely with the female protagonist. The reality of a woman's position in Indian society that I was attempting to portray as Truth was only the truth of my own lowered consciousness. For example, the theme of incest had taken root in my second novel out of my condemnation of violence against women in Indian society, close relatives being the perpetrators of the worst crimes against women, which are committed more often than not inside the victims' homes. However, this theme so surcharged me with emotion and empathy only for the female protagonist that I decided to foreground the male protagonist, but I have achieved only limited success in his characterisation.

Until I reject the negativity, the identification only with a female protagonist, and exercise the highest consciousness my integral self is capable of, at any given moment during writing, I cannot step out of the closed circle⁸ into light. I am doing this by calling upon the power of my imagination and exercising it to the fullest in the service of my craft, my work, *before* I actually begin writing. First I straighten out my aims as a real-life author, then I proceed to take ‘action’ as a third-person, omniscient narrator. The ‘action’ or writing is a *selection* of the people and whole areas of the picture I see in my mind for recording by means of a computer. Characters, especially the female characters, do present themselves, and are often unruly in trying to attract the attention of the narrator, but the narrator will remain in control.

What attitudes have given me the power to reshape the characters of my second novel? Thankfulness for the gift of writing. I no longer have an inflated notion of my talent. At the same time, I avoid debilitating humility: According to Mother we all have a place which we alone occupy in the universal work, and I am a soldier at her post. Truthfulness about this gift, that the very act of writing is not from the victim position. Therefore, not to return to the old wound, to lick it, and lick it again, not to identify with a central, female character. I decided in my second novel to write from a male viewpoint. It was to be the story of a young man, Pali, but at the point at which I stopped, I can see that the story of Surju, a woman driven out of her village for refusing to forsake her son-in-law after her daughter dies, was becoming the major story. Pursuing the development of this gift with all the vigour and intelligence I can muster.

Because the nature of my identification is psychologically bound, not free, bound to the old, unequal relationship between the sexes, bound to its basis in childhood unhappiness. I have experienced the danger of conceding to art as neurosis: To be true to my highest, authentic, autonomous self I aspire to perfection of the life, and of the work, through spirituality.

3. CONCLUSION

I am grateful to the many masters and gurus who have made my integral transformation possible through their teaching of the way of meditation. It all started with my humbly asking for help. Oswald Summerton and Pearl Drego taught me the value of psychological knowledge in cleansing myself of what Eric Berne calls a 'life script' that was holding me back. Reiki Master Puran Dua taught me how to heal myself rather than place my mental and physical health in the hands of doctors and therapists. Sraddhalu Ranade advised me on how to escape the weakness of emotionalism in religion. Abida Praveen displayed her gift from God to me thus strengthening my faith. And Ameeta Mehra taught me courage and meditation, opening doors to the grace of the Mother.

That I should be so fortunate is no longer a wonder to me. Spirituality is boundless and offered to all. I had kept it apart from creativity, thinking I might happily serve two masters, God and Art. But one betrayed me to despair and the other has held me in the palm of his hand these last five weeks. Such has been the power of the right - the truest and highest - attitude to life, to my own being and to the whole universe, that I see all subsumed in God's love for me.

The concepts of linear time and chance occurrences were two thoroughly ingrained blocks in my inner attitude which I am happy to report have been dislodged in favour of an experience of the present (earlier it was always past even in the thinking upon it) and a recognition of the presence of God in every conscious moment.

With renewed confidence I am taking up my writing after a lapse of over a year in which I am glad my fallow imagination did not run to seed, but remained waiting in the wings, to play under the new dispensation. When I became a writer I kept myself open to 'experiences' of all kinds, rejecting none, not even those threatening my life and sanity. The mental constructs of my imagination were sacrosanct, not open to moral, and soon I found, not even open to aesthetic judgements. I reject such foolishness now. Spirituality is the keenest whetstone on which tools of every art and science may be sharpened for the benefit of mankind. It is, and has been since recorded history, the lodestar of Indian civilisation.

ENDNOTES

2. Leech, Geoffrey N, and Short, Michael H, *Style in Fiction: A Linguistic Introduction to English Fictional Prose*, Longman Group Limited, UK, 1981.
3. This most invaluable discipline was taught to me by Ameeta Mehra, Chairperson, The Gnostic Centre, Bijwasan, Gurgaon-122017, Haryana, India, and Puran Dua, Reiki Master, Reiki India Research Centre, 16-17, BA 'Ekopa' Guansagar Nagar, Station Road, Kalwa, Thane-400605, India. The following two books were also extremely helpful in understanding and practising meditation:
 - i) *Meditation: Compiled by Vijay from the writings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother*, Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry, India, 1971.
 - ii) Kapleau, Roshi Philip, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Anchor Books Doubleday, New York, 1980.
4. For a discussion of the present moment as the only time that really exists and that forms the base for touching existence beyond the present see: Summerton, Oswald, *Becoming OK: Transactional Analysis Basic Concepts*, Alfreruby Publishers, Bombay, 1994, p 209.
5. For the best discussion of 'point of view' in fiction see: Booth, Wayne C, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1961.
6. Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. Donald Attwater, Templegate, Springfield, Illinois, 1974, quoted in Summerton, Oswald, *Becoming OK: Transactional Analysis Basic Concepts*, Alfreruby Publishers, Bombay, 1994, p 208.
7. Praised for avoiding, in a review of *A Partial Woman* by Jain, Madhu, "Feminine Woes", *India Today*, March 9, 1998, p 77.
8. Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase in Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness*, Methuen & Co Ltd, London, 1958, p xxix.