RESPONSE BOOKS

And thou shalt not write fiction about sexual harassment

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JUNE 23, 2018 18:00 IST
UPDATED: JUNE 23, 2018 18:44 IST

A type of disquiet, perhaps, is a quality of arresting literature that aims to challenge received meanings of reality

In the article, ‘Junot Díaz and the abusive men in his books’ (Literary Review, May 12, 2018), the writer notes the recurring pattern of sexual violence in Díaz’s male protagonists. It is an accurate but partial observation and I would like to make some clarifications. The essay frames the thesis that such abuse by Díaz’s toxic, masculine characters perhaps emanates from Díaz’s own nature. The suggestion is that a one-to-one correspondence can be drawn between Díaz’s purported sexual misconduct with many female writers of Latin American, Central
American, Hispanic and coloured heritages, and sexual abuse by his fictional characters. That’s a problem.

Firstly, the essay concedes that Díaz is a skilled fiction writer but only after harpooning his oeuvre with the charge of sexual violence. While doing this, the writer says that Díaz seems to “revel in... and celebrate...” the sexual misdemeanours of his male characters. A question one can ask is how the writer is sure of Díaz’s fictional intention. Did Díaz say he created these characters to “celebrate” their abusive natures?

In any case, how are we to discern a fiction writer’s intention from the work of fiction? Where is the evidence to make such a claim? Secondly, the essay gives the impression that Díaz is not able to create female characters who can define themselves outside of the “male gaze”. That is, they are without individual agency. But a reading of Díaz’s first three works of fiction complicates such a view. At least two female characters exhibit exemplary courage of conviction and independence. Their circumstances are circumscribed by men but not defined by them.

**Despite the men**

Beli Cabral, the mother of Oscar in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is one such. She is a major character in the book. The large middle portion of the novel depicts her life journey.

Her husband leaves to find work in the U.S., while she raises the kids in Santo Domingo, working two jobs and battling cancer in later life. She has to battle the patriarchy of Dominican Republican society, lecherous men circling around her like wolves, and the reptilian men of the dictator Rafael Trujillo, one of the most fearsome dictators of the 20th century who ruled the Dominican Republic with an iron fist.

Her story as a woman, mother and human being is one of immense resilience in the face of toxic masculinity and political repression. She doesn’t seek validation from men though her life is an unending negotiation with them.

With Miss Lora from the short story ‘Miss Lora’ in *This Is How You Lose Her*, Díaz explores notions of female sexual and intellectual freedom. In it, Miss Lora, an academic in her 40s, has a relationship with her student (Yunior) and makes no bones about her bohemianism. In a way, she jolts the hierarchies of gender relations, ageism and perhaps patriarchy. So there is another side to Díaz’s fiction besides the toxic masculinity.

At the philosophical level, the essay raises queries that are coming at us in the wake of the #MeToo revelations. Even as the writer admitted to being discomfited by the constant masculine toxicity in Díaz’s stories, one impression this writer got from reading the piece was
a doubt about whether we should have toxic male characters who abuse women in literature at all.

**Unpacking social codes**

If so, freedom of expression becomes a moot point. A type of disquiet, perhaps, is a quality of arresting literature that aims to challenge received meanings of reality. So, the toxic male sexual abuser, the summation of the heteronormative, the hyper-masculine, the patriarchal, is an important code and sign of the social world’s order: He may embody clear issues of sexual repression and frustration that exist in his society. The writer may then use such a character to unpack the codes of the social world such a person emerges from. The character itself then becomes the vehicle of interpretation and examination of that society. Is this enterprise legitimate?

Is creating a toxic character like this tantamount to justifying such behaviour? Assuming this is so is to say that writers have to censor themselves from creating such characters. It also implies that such people don’t exist. The first point implies curbs on creative freedom. The other one aims to deny a social fact. The #MeToo movement underscores the existence of sexual abuse on a global scale. There cannot be a subject more political, charged and worthy of creative analysis in all its forms than this.

The male sexual abuser is part of the vortex of society. It is up to the creative artist’s skill and imagination that s/he creates a character, shining a light on personality deviance, provenance, diagnosis and prognosis. In Indian cinema, award-winning films such as Ketan Mehta’s *Mirch Masala* and Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s *Vidheyan* have sexual abusers as major characters. Both films explore their monstrosity and the structures of power and hierarchy that prop them. The stories succeed as art because the artist uses the phenomenon of sexual abuse to investigate larger social issues that go into his making. They end up as rich, confrontational, unsettling stories that hold up a mirror to Indian society. They are high art. As are some of Díaz’s stories.

Humanising the sexual abuser is as important a function of art and literature as humanising the victim.

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