

History, Quest and Contemporary Reality: A Critique of Aung San Suu Kyi's Writings

***Ranjit Kaur**

Abstract

Aung San Suu Kyi has inspired several creative writers, thinkers and political leaders of the world over. She has become the symbol of a new form of resistance where courage, determination, and resistance are accompanied by cheerful hope. Amitav Ghosh, a well-known novelist presents her in his epical novel *The Glass Palace* as the turning point in human history of resisting injustice, authoritarian dictatorship, and colonial oppression. Amitav Ghosh's perception of Aung San Suu Kyi's moral stature is an insight that a creative writer gains into human behaviour. She is an important person in today's world for she lives the moral values she has discussed in her writings collected in a volume titled *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings*.

The present paper focuses on how her writings are about Burma's historical and political conditions, her awareness of the past and its bearings on the present are very important. This awareness can be noticed as she delves into the history of political systems, goes back to Buddhist ideas about rules and good civil society. She exemplifies the relationship between the past and the present that T. S. Eliot discusses in his essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent'. This paper highlights another aspect of her writing is to deconstruct the stereotyped image of the people and culture of Burma in the post-colonial context.

Keywords: Colonial Oppression, Resistance, Stereotyped Image, Authoritarian Dictatorship

Aung San Suu Kyi has become the unquestioned leader of her people for she has guided their movement through her ideas, character and self-sacrifice. In the public speeches, she delivered at the different gatherings during 1988-89 and many of the essays she has written from 1988 onwards tackle the major political issues that face the country. Of the public speeches she has delivered the one she gave at the Mass Rally held at Shwedagon Pagoda, on 26 August 1988 is an outstanding piece of clear and balanced thinking in the midst of turmoil and fear. Aung San Suu Kyi has expressed her countrymen's search for democratic government through principles of political thought, Buddhist values and humanitarian liberal ideals. Her role in the country's struggle is truly great for she has put into practice the values, which she ardently pleads for in her speeches and essays. Her essays state these values with faith and a conviction that is impressive. She has provided her People with the ideology for the movement that began as a resistance to authoritarianism.

It is useful to study Aung San Suu Kyi's prison writings, as a political thought in the latter part of the twentieth century. It is a struggle that is still being fought for democratic political structure, for restoration of human rights after decolonisation. This struggle shows how the concepts of nation, state, civil society, and people's participation in state management are being redefined, reconstructed once the colonial conflicts are put behind. Political instability remains within the newly freed nations, calling for renewed notions of resistance and construction of nation. To redefine her people's views she relates the traditional Buddhist ideas to the modern context, maintaining a calmness of mind.

History, Quest and Contemporary Reality: A Critique of Aung San Suu Kyi's Writings

Ranjit Kaur

It can be said that Aung San Suu Kyi is not a political philosopher. She has not formed any new theoretical position, for she has responded to the conditions within her country, compelled to participate in the struggle; she speaks as a learned reflective person, well acquainted with her cultural and religious heritage. Aung San Suu Kyi has inspired several creative writers, thinkers and political leaders the world over. She has become the symbol of a new form of resistance where courage, determination and resistance are accompanied by cheerful hope. Amitav Ghosh, a well-known modern Indian novelist presents her in his epic novel *The Glass Palace* (2001) as the turning point in human history of resisting injustice, authoritarian dictatorship and colonial oppression.

In one scene of the novel, she is shown at one of her occasional public appearances in front of her house, where thousands of Burmese common men and women stand outside to 'see' their leader. At first she stands there quietly, then, Ghosh depicts that she begins to laugh in a mild and peaceful manner conveying through her action her self-control, peace of mind and a gentle defiance of the power of military. Amitav Ghosh's perception of Aung San Suu Kyi's moral stature is an insight that a creative writer gains into human behaviour. She is an important person in today's world for she lives the moral values she has discussed in her writings.

Aung San Suu Kyi began writing about Burma's history, literature and issues related to the nationalist struggle soon after completing her studies. She conducted research on the events in her father Aung San's life and went to Japan for this purpose. When put under house-arrest she wrote a number of essays mainly to explain the goals of the movement that was being held. She has tried to discuss the methods fit for resistance movement at this point in history, for no country can claim to be outside history. Governed by the Britishers, Burmese society and its culture were influenced to some extent by the ideas from west. Aung San Suu Kyi examines the influences from various sources, the traditional Burmese ideas and values and then locates her ideas in between.

Her writings are collected in a volume titled *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings* edited, with an introduction, by Michael Aris, her husband. This volume includes the essays written before and after her house arrest, along with her some of her major speeches, letters and interviews. The western media has tried to keep her visibility on the world stage, through interviews and reports on her.

In Aung San Suu Kyi's writings about Burma's historical and political conditions, her awareness of the past and its bearings on the present are very important. This awareness can be noticed as she delves into the history of political systems, goes back to Buddhist ideas about good ruler and good civil society. She exemplifies the relationship between the past and the present that T. S. Eliot discusses in his essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent'. Eliot emphasizes the need for a sense of history, of the tradition for anyone wanting to become a poet/writer. The sense of the past is important, for as Eliot says, the past shapes the present and the present includes in itself the whole past. Eliot says that 'the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence'.

Eliot's main concern in the essay is aesthetic, but relating it to other forms of writing is very useful. To be aware of the 'contemporaneity' of her work is essential for a writer, for being, conscious of her immediate surroundings, in time and place, makes the writer relate to the world around more correctly. In Aung San Suu Kyi's writing, the consciousness of the actual conditions of Burma's political scenario is matched with her serious efforts to look beyond the immediate present, to gain a larger and wider perspective. Another important aspect of her writing is to deconstruct the stereotyped image of the people and culture of Burma in the post-colonial context. Edward Said has argued in *Orientalism* (1978) and *Cultural and Imperialism* (1993) how the western countries constructed stereotypes of the natives and colonized societies to suit their political agenda.

History, Quest and Contemporary Reality: A Critique of Aung San Suu Kyi's Writings

Ranjit Kaur

'In Quest of Democracy' it is about the movement. It was first written as part of a project where she wanted to write theoretical essays about the political turmoil in Burma. She could not complete this and the two other essays at that time, but completed writing them within her house arrest after 20 July 1989. Aung San Suu Kyi dismantles the orientalist image of the Burmese, which is a colonial legacy that is being supported by the new rulers. She moves on to an analysis of Burmese traditional Buddhist ideas about good government, to show to the critics that the modern democratic idea and principles are not foreign or unknown to the Burmese society. Is the social system still feudal, discriminatory, or does the society stand ready for new forms and systems? In this essay Aung San Suu Kyi presents the ideological level of a search- 'quest' for a better form of government as the basis of the agitation of the masses. Another major achievement of Aung San Suu Kyi in expressing her people's wishes is in raising the issue of human rights along with that of democracy. It was very important to speak about the two paramount problems that the country was facing and Aung San Suu Kyi had the foresight to do so. Her concern for the sufferings of the common men and women is expressed through her voicing these concerns.

Aung San Suu Kyi then moves on to another important idea. When the movement for democracy is going on, she advises her people to maintain the Buddhist dignity, peace and non-violent manner. To gain their rights the movement must go on, but in a peaceful, non-violent manner, which requires great 'courage, resolution and sacrifice'. She declares that one must be mindful of a historical reality that 'democracy, liberty, justice and other social and political rights, is not 'given'; it is earned through courage, resolution and sacrifice'. Aung San Suu Kyi braces her country forward towards unending struggle until the goal has been attained. In this essay, the ideas about democratic beliefs embedded within the Buddhist culture are given a special emphasis. This is a significant idea, because it demonstrates that the demand for democracy emerges from within the native national religious culture. It shows that the demand is deeply rooted in the ancient philosophy, political ideology, not a borrowed idea alien to the people.

Suu Kyi's emphasis on the political principles based on moral and spiritual philosophy has its own important reasons. Here one again comes across her deep thinking about the future of her country. She defines the nature of the struggle-its goals and basic values; but she is afraid that once the revolution has succeeded new risks face the nation. She warns against the 'Animal Farm Syndrome' where the new order after its first flush of enthusiastic reforms takes on the murky colours of the very stem it has replaced'.

Suu refers to Vaclav Havel's term 'post-totalitarian state' in her essay 'Towards a True Refuge' where she has focused mainly on the constant processes of dislocation people are facing in Burma, as in several other parts of the world. Such 'refugees' need care, help and support, and they need new homes. She writes about the newly formed ethnic enmities in Europe, Asia and other parts of the world as large 183 human groups are shifted. In such situation, material security alone is insufficient to protect and help the refugees.

Aung San Suu Kyi thus asks not only for the removal of military government but also for a revolution based on sound moral and spiritual values-of truth, justice and self-expression. In essays like 'Freedom from Fear', 'Empowerment for a culture of Peace and Development', 'The Role of the Citizen in the Struggle For Democracy' and 'Towards a True Refuge', Aung San Suu Kyi takes up several very important issues. These issues include the formation of nation, state and its relationship with the people, the search for a culture that would bring about greater peace. These essays reflect Aung San Suu Kyi 's readiness to look for new definitions of the components of a civil society-like culture

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Ranjit Kaur

development, minority and the nation's true goals. At the very outset, she makes a profound statement 'It is no power that corrupts but fear'. When human beings live in the state of fear all the time their mental and moral degradation become unavoidable. This very fundamental psychological truth is used by her to emphasize the moral decline that could take place among the Burmese masses if such state of terror that is imposed on them continues. She draws attention to the need to change the political conditions so that freedom of thought can prevail for all.

In such situations, one of the ways out seems to be to return to the culture of the society for the embedded values. People can use the cultural norms to resist the State for their unprincipled and unbridled power. The discourse of cultural values derived from Buddhist teaching in Aung San Suu Kyi's writing takes the direction of resisting the military power. She finds her own country in the conflictual status that Ashis Nandy briefly describes in his essay 'The State: the fate of a Concept' where he deliberates upon the 'growing interest in the nature of the State'. Suu Kyi has several moral and philosophical ideas for the existing government and the future ones to come.

Suu Kyi keeps using Buddhist philosophical and political ideas; Aung San Suu Kyi has related the ancient Buddhist philosophy and principles to the modern political crisis in her discussions about the qualities of a good ruler, good governance and on a society based on egalitarian structure. Finally, she asks for a collective sense of discipline in public and personal conduct. Her ideas have been profoundly influenced and shaped by the Gandhian philosophy and his non-violent civil disobedience and non-co-operation movement. Suu Kyi is among the latest of the freedom fighters who have acknowledged the impact of Gandhi's ideas, life and work. Through her writings, she continues to guide the people as well as explain to the world what the Burmese are struggling for.

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