

**Democracy, Resistance, and the Practice of Literature: Introduction**

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An introduction is always an introduction to many different introductions. A work is also an introduction to a certain field that encourages or invites further introductions or interventions. Writing an introduction for a journal that presents a particular topic or a work on a biannual basis, our most desired task remains presenting a variety of approach, unfolding a gamut of thoughts, and keeping the questions of closure open. We launched *Sanglap*, the journal with a similar intention: to cater to the plurality of thoughts that both excites and orients the academic circles. Keeping that in mind and also that works are never complete in themselves, we have decided to write introductions to particular topics in halves, so that the work could perform in totality an act of perceptive non-synchrony. We do believe that there are experts in particular fields who produce and shape the areas, and mark them with authorial signatures or styles, but the statements organizing such fields are never conclusive; they appear in a broader spectrum, cumulative parts of a larger, never ending whole. To put it another way, thoughts always work with a shade of difference that allows the dialogic in society to take place. As a journal that seeks to represent the link between the necessary and the perceptive, the dialogic is the source that it claims could tap the non-synchrony or the non-simultaneity of thoughts in its most naked and potent form. Moreover, the dialogic also allows a certain multiplicity of voices to exist, which in a recalcitrant manner of being dismantles all possibilities of authoritative diktats in language as well as society. For us, this “dialogic” could be the everyday productions of the “literary” which inhere in them the ceaseless reproductions of the “democratic.” We believe the dialogic, the literary, and the democratic are linked not only on the plane of language but also in material productions of daily life. It is such a belief that we now proceed to enquire in our current topic that deals with resistance, democracy and literary practice, while retaining the question of perceptive plurality in academic intervention intact. In the paragraphs that follow, we would like

to set the issue on motion, engage the concept of literary democracy, and present the possibility of literary resistance in practice.

Recent world politics has witnessed the rise of a certain style of authoritarianism. It can be roughly characterized with a cult of masculine leadership, a popular rhetoric of foreign investment and development, and a phobia of the illegal immigrant made into an ethical obligation. These contradictory forms of politics – the paean to multinational corporations, free trade, and the ‘bloc’-ing of power and the simultaneous mobilization of hyper-nationalism in the form of censoring books and throttling subversive aesthetic practices – characterize the conception and practice of what may be called “authoritarian democracy.” Considering the democratically elected basis of this authoritarianism, it becomes all the more important to ask if democracy paves the way for it. In that case, where do we locate democracy today? Is it right to say that the real democratic space unfolds itself in people’s movements and not in the electoral process? If this is the case, a radical conception of democracy would have to account for a shift of emphasis from the locus of governance to that of resistance and co-option. Historically speaking, democracy may not always be the means but it has been one of the ends for the various acts of resistance such as the working class, anti-colonial, nationalist, feminist, LGBT, or constitutional multiculturalism. In our sour and hungry times, when state aggression is overpowering the geographical marking (Russia’s in Ukraine or Israel’s in Palestine), or strangling the voice of internal resistance (North Eastern regions in India), not to mention religious fundamentalism, we need to rethink the old questions of democracy and resistance. With the ISIS, Boko Haram or the Taliban practice, we have seen how resistance itself can produce a dangerous authoritarianism which further complicates the relations between democracy, authoritarianism, and resistance. How do we historicize and ethically theorize resistance in relation to both democracy and an authoritarianism which borders on fascism?

We would like to respond to these questions through their links with literature. It is not because this is what we consider to be the only way of engaging with the topic but this is where our training lies. As will be clear with the articles in the issue, the engagement has been vastly differing and interdisciplinary. So to come back, the questions that we seek to enquire are: is literature only a representational archive of resistance as practice or does the literary have a democratic practice endemic to itself? Does the generic flexibility of literature permit a complete

freedom of expression? What does the dead and reborn literary author have to say about the unstable fulcrum of democracy and authoritarianism? “Sāhitya,” the Sanskrit word for “literature” is replete with suggestions of the collective and that of togetherness and this brings us back to the fundamental question: what is the nature of the “community” literature and other aesthetic practices can open up? Is this community premised on a principle of equality? The slogans, banners and popular rhetoric in protest marches have always borrowed from literary and philosophical traditions. The literary has often been constitutive to acts of resistance so much so that we can perhaps say that the spectacle of democratic resistance offers an aesthetic experience in itself.

It is to such end that we write this introduction or present the topic to you. In due consideration with our fields of expertise, we would like to delve into the question of literary democracy and aesthetic resistance. Our methods of engagement are different, and so are our ideologies. But both of us aim for a world where words and thoughts could be put together critically, acknowledging their difference. Both of us believe in the act of perceptive democracy as much as in the value of dialogue in society. This part of the essay by Arka Chattopadhyay engages with the concept of literary democracy through a close reading of a range of continental philosophers and ends with the question of literary strategy as faith. The second part by Sourit Bhattacharya aims to comprehend the literary strategy in the field of political sloganeering and seeks to project the existence of aesthetic resistance in material social life.

### Is Democracy ever to come?

Contemporary Italian political thinker Antonio Negri isolates the word *multitudo* from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza’s unfinished political treatise *Tractatus Politicus* (1675-76). In *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)contemporary Variations* (2004), Negri dwells on this word to gesture towards a Spinozian (re)-definition of democracy as the rule of multitude. In Negri’s explorations of Spinoza’s definition of democracy as an *integra multitudo* or “the multitude as a whole” (Negri 102), what becomes increasingly important is the danger of the ‘all’ or an ‘absolute’ in this power of the multitude on which democracy hinges. In our world, is it this absolutist under-taste of democracy that we are experiencing in the name of democratically

elected governments, which seem less on the side of democratic ideals and more on the side of dictatorship? Isn't the irony written right into the Marxian concept of the communist world as a "dictatorship of the proletariat"? As the idea of the proletariat turns into the impossible community of politics with each passing day, isn't it the "dictatorship" which is supplanting the "proletariat" in the communist axiom?

In today's world where both the working class and their politics are scattered and subjected to the transnational flow of labour in global capitalism, how we formulate a revolutionary politics on the basis of this emigrant mass has become a tricky question. Thinkers like Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty are engaged in an enquiry concerning the political potential of this trans-national community of migrant labourers brought together under the term "precariat" which has a provocative phonetic semblance with "proletariat".<sup>1</sup> To come back to Negri's Spinoza, his conclusion which bridges a gap of four centuries and contemporizes Spinozian democracy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is notable for its shift of emphasis from government to what we can call a spontaneous politics of mass protest. Following Spinoza, he eventually defines democracy as "non-government" (111). Negri's book closes on a note of insistence that democracy in the power of multitude as a whole "is not a form of government but rather a social activity of transformation" (111). This definition allows us to ask a vital question. Mustn't we re-conceptualize democracy away from the statist logic of governments, deep into the heart of a politics without party where the agency of the multitude is at work? We need to make a distinction between the revolutionary risks of absolutism ingrained in this "dictatorship of the proletariat" or the absolute power of the demos and the reactionary absolutism which disguises itself in the form of parliamentary democracy. This distinction is crucial in countering the way radical politics is increasingly discredited on the basis of an imminent threat of absolutism. Do we side with an actual absolutism of the One or a potential absolutism of the multitude?

French philosopher Alain Badiou radicalizes the point about the distance between democracy and government by completely uncoupling the one from the other when he formulates the imperative: 'Let "democracy" imply something else than a form of the state.'<sup>2</sup> (Badiou 1998) For Badiou, the ultimate locus of democracy is not the state but rather an event which occurs against the dominant order of the state and measures the so-called immeasurable power of the state. The liminal democratic event not only happens at the limits but also captures

the limit of state power in a fixed and concrete measure of justice. Badiou's theorizing of art and literature as an analogous order of events is instructive for the project of spotting in literature an inherent practice of democracy. We will come back to this point in the next section of this introduction. The third important philosophical proper name in this series of thoughts on democracy is Jacques Derrida, the philosopher *of* and the margins of the dominant discourse whose deconstructive definition of democracy as an unrealized and perhaps unrealizable figure of perpetual futurity is significant. Derrida who famously used the expression "democracy-to-come" (*la démocratie à venir*) in *Specters of Marx* (1993) and *The Politics of Friendship* (1994) shows a similar proclivity towards thinking democracy not as a figure of the actual but rather a figure of the potential, which is always expressed in the promise of an arrival. One can argue that for Derrida, the true democracy will always have to maintain itself as a seed of future change and not an actualization of that change because the actualization is fraught with the risk of totalizing the democratic discourse and thereby collapsing it into the despotic.

When Derrida talks about "the very concept of democracy as concept of a promise" (Derrida 81) which is always fixed at the cusp of a messianic arrival, not only does he underscore the idea that democracy is more of a process than a product—a conviction shared by Negri's Spinoza and Alain Badiou, but he also gestures towards a complex relation between democracy and theology. If democracy is permeated by this "weak messianism" without an actual messiah, isn't it a secularization of religious faith in the messiah to come or in Badiou's terms, a fidelity to the rupture of the revolutionary event? In an era in which religion has gained more momentum than ever, we have to deconstruct the simple binary of the sacred and the secular and as Agamben has suggested, we must translate if not "profane" the former into the latter. Derrida's meditation on the "democracy-to-come" puts the accent on not only the profanation of the sacred into the secular but also on the more complex inter-contamination of the two in our democratic world as it is. In his 1994 lecture "Taking a Stand for Algeria," Derrida takes a stand for "the effective dissociation of the political and the theological" where he observes:

Our idea of democracy implies a separation between the state and religious powers, that is, a radical religious neutrality and a faultless tolerance which would not only set the sense of belonging to religions, cults, and thus also cultures and languages, away from the reach of any terror—whether stemming from the state or not—but

also protects the practices of faith and, in this instance, the freedom of discussion and interpretation within each religion. (Derrida 306)

In this passage Derrida is aware of a double bind in the relation between the political and the theological even though he strategically opts for an effective dissociation of the one from the other. Let's mark that this dissociation is "effective" and not complete in any sense. The dissociation produces a residual "neutrality" of a radical nature, which Derrida still names "religious" and while democracy must ethically uncouple state power from religious power, it must also uphold the right to religion, religious tolerance, freedom and a culture of emancipatory and egalitarian polysemy in religious texts and practices. We must add to this already complex transaction between the political and the theological, a messianism of hope that perpetually awaits an ethical face of the Other in what is to come. What all this clearly highlights is that in our world, there is no sidestepping the question of religion in the hypothesis of a secular democratism. To take this point from the perspective of literary practice is to ask the question whether literature can contribute to the deconstruction of the sacred-secular binary and secularize the paradigm of faith and belief by offering an alternative model of literary faith.

### Literary Democracy

Is literature, understood as a field for the practice of different kinds of artistic expression, apart from being a mimetic representation of our contemporary socio-political world and its complex democracies, also a democratic institution in itself? In other words, does it have any inherent claim to democracy? If so, what are the ways in which we might understand this question of literary democracy? In a Badiouean sense, the literary work brings something new into the world. It's the creation of something which previously didn't exist and in this sense, literature is of the order of an event. Anterior to the task of representation, every artwork, be it a film, a book, a play or a painting fundamentally creates something which had no prior existence in the world. It adds something to the world as it was before it came into being and the political question is situated in what literature can add to the pre-existing universe of discourses. Can this literary

addition be supplementary to that which had pre-existed it? This is the elemental question about literature's agency in effecting any change *of* and *in* discourses.

French political thinker Jacques Rancière in his 2004 article "The Politics of Literature" suggests that the anonymous and potentially universal address of literature invests it with an emancipatory principle, which isn't far away from the ideals of democracy. If democracy in its ideal manifestation is for one and all, so is the literary text or any other artwork for that matter. The literary work isn't addressed to one particular class, race, gender or nationality but to everyone and no one at the same time: "Literature is this new regime of writing in which the writer is anybody and the reader anybody." (Rancière 14) For Rancière, this is the literary expression of Platonic "mute letters" and these letters are on the side of democracy insofar as they speak to anyone and everyone. Having said that, in this absolute anonymity, which knots literature with democracy, there is more than a risk involved and Rancière is sensitive to the danger of indiscriminate empowerment:

The "mute letter" was the letter that went its way, without a father to guide it. It was the letter that spoke to anybody, without knowing to whom it had to speak, and to whom it had not. The "mute" letter was a letter that spoke too much and endowed anyone at all with the power of speaking. (14-15)

Elsewhere in the same article, Rancière refers to this problem as the "democratic disorder of literariness" (15). Far from being a rosy solution to questions of equality and justice, the essentially democratic function of literature thus raises its own problem.

To take the problem at an even more fundamental level is to ask once more, the age-old question: what is literature and to what extent the nebulous and indefinable nature of literature frames its problematic democratism. Jacques Derrida in a 1989 interview with Derek Attridge, titled "This Strange Institution Called Literature" identifies the strange "authorization" of the literary institution "to say everything" with modern democracy and its freedom of speech (Derrida 37). Like Rancière, Derrida too is aware of the problematic aspect of literary democracy where the absolute expressive freedom can make literature conservative as much as it can make it revolutionary. It is here that Derrida's thoughts on *literature-to-come* and *democracy-to-come*

as structures of “endless promise” can be useful. If we read Derrida’s provocative formula “there is ever so little literature” (72) to the letter, it gives us a certain notion of work in literature that will never maximize itself within the work. In other words, there will always be an unrealizable and unfinishable promise of the literary in the work of literature, which will defer it from a finite present to an infinite future. And this minimalism of literariness is tied to the lack of a defining trait in what we call literature.

As Derrida observes, ‘no *internal* criterion can guarantee the essential “literariness” of a text’ (73) because there is no essence to this “essential literariness” or again, “if you proceed to analyze all the elements of a literary work, you will never come across literature itself” (73). Following Derrida, we can formulate that there is no literature inside literature and this precisely goes back to the unanswerability of the question: what is literature? Derrida not only argues for a post-foundational idea of literature where it lacks a discursively irreducible defining trait but more importantly articulates what he calls the “singularity” of the literary event which is unique in each of its iterations in the historical continuum. For him, the real strangeness of the literary institution consists of the fact that it overflows its own institutional laws each time it *happens*. Derek Attridge has demonstrated through his expansion on this Derridean premise in his 2004 book *The Singularity of Literature* that each literary work is singular at the level of the event of reading.

As Derrida would say, each literary work is “a new institution unto itself” (74) which ruptures the pre-existing status quo of the institutional field. In this sense, the literary democracy can only maintain a claim to equality and resistance by not fulfilling itself but rather by remaining an incessant and unceasing process— a signature of things to come. The literary singularity is both unique and repeatable at the same time like the Derridean signature and there are no odds between its singularity and its generality. This figure of the singular general if not the singular universal, for the literary critic Terry Eagleton, is key to the idea of literature. In his 2012 book *The Event of Literature*, Eagleton holds onto the indefinability of literature but not at the cost of its basic dialogic function and the promise of opening a community, built into the Sanskrit word for “literature”: “Sāhitya” with strong connotations of a condition of togetherness. Eagleton writes:

In one sense, all our experiences are exemplary ones. Nobody can commit to writing a thought or feeling that is in principle intelligible only to himself, not even the author of *Finnegans Wake*. [...] There is an implicit dimension of generality to even the most apparently private of experiences, which is part of what makes literature possible. (Eagleton 85)

If there is no literature inside literature, the nomination of the literary must come from the outside of literature i.e. from other non-literary discourses. This begs the question: when does a non-literary discourse become literature? This impossible question troubles Derrida's *intimate enemy* Michel Foucault in a 1975 interview with Roger-Pol Droit titled "The Functions of Literature" and Foucault has a clearly different view of the literary institution. Although he too underscores the democratic indefinability of the literary discourse by drawing our attention to what he calls its "intransitivity" (309) or lack of an object, Foucault is more critical of the literary institution insofar as it locates itself in the academy of literary interpretations. Foucault's critique of literature as a possible manifestation of dominant ideology and power is inextricable from the university as the site of the literary institution which already comes at the question from a different angle than Derrida's. While Derrida is interested in the literary text as its institution which is endlessly auto-deconstructed with every unique iteration, Foucault seems to intervene at the level of the pedagogic locus of literary dissemination where the literary institution can be square bracketed with the university:

[...] literature functions as literature through an interplay of selection, sacralization, and institutional validation, of which the university is both the operator and the receiver. (Foucault 309)

Foucault's critique of literary canonization, as we see it in this passage, mobilizes the word "sacralization" which would bring us back to the point at which we had concluded the previous section namely the question of literary faith or to put it more radically, literature as faith but before we do that, it's important to mention another aspect of Foucault's remarks where he marks the complex position of literature in culture at large. According to Foucault in this

interview, literature has a curious place in culture which is both significant and insignificant:

Our culture accords literature a place that in a sense, is extraordinarily limited: how many people read literature? What place does it really have in the general expansion of discourses?

But this same culture forces all its children, as they move towards culture, to pass through a whole ideology, a whole ideology of literature during their studies.

There is a kind of paradox here. (310)

Foucault relates this paradoxical position of literature in culture to an unexamined and taken for granted sense that all literature is inherently subversive and hence valuable and teachable. As we have seen, this presupposition about the subversiveness of literature is inseparable from its problematic status as an inherently democratic phenomenon. In this interview, Foucault credits Blanchot and Barthes as literary critics who launch a “de-sacralization” of literature through ideas like the death of the author and literature as its own disappearance respectively. With this trajectory of de-sacralization in mind, let’s come to the question of literary faith now.

Literature insofar as it’s the conjuring of a world which doesn’t exist outside itself and in spite of its plotted similarity with the social world outside, is never quite reducible to the external reality, is fundamentally counter-factual. A book brings a world with its unique set of characters into being and the act of reading or reception is all about believing that the inexistent world exists or in other words, believing that something exists which we know doesn’t exist. It is here that literature mobilizes the problematic border between faith and knowledge which as Derrida points out, is the crux of the theological question.<sup>3</sup> Insofar as the act of reading encourages us to believe in the existence of something which doesn’t exist alongside the knowledge that it doesn’t exist, it triggers the gap between faith and knowledge. The Australian fiction writer Gerald Murnane in one of his most self-reflexive texts, draws our attention to this realm of faith activated by literature. This is the passage in question from Murnane’s 2012 short story “The Boy’s Name Was David”:

There was never a boy named David, the writer of the fiction might as well have written, but if you, the Reader, and I, the Writer, can agree that there might have been such a boy so named, then I undertake to tell you what you could never otherwise have learned about any boy of any name. (182)

Although the reader knows that there is no boy named David as the story would have him believe, the story nevertheless invites the reader to take this fictional hypothesis at the level of faith and as Murnane states, the story can only unfold and express itself on condition that the reader is faithful and open to this hypothesis of narrative presence.

To think further about literature as an invitation to secular faith, we can consider Irish novelist Colm Tóibín's 2012 book of fiction *The Testament of Mary* which imagines the life of Christ's mother passing into death from extreme old age. Through this counter-factual portrait of a Mary who is deeply suspicious of the salvationism of crucifixion and the whole project of Christian martyrdom and sacrifice, Tóibín dares to de-sacralize the sacred thematically from within the world of the text but crucially on condition that we take this literary figure of an intensely human and corporeal Mary on good faith. When Tóibín invites his readers to grasp this portrait, he knows full well that this figure i.e. Mary in her advanced old age, years after the event of crucifixion is an absence in religious texts and for the book to work, the reader will have to have faith in the possible existence of this figure, all the more so when the book is written from the first person point of view of this character. Terry Eagleton follows Raymond Williams in claiming that literature and other arts from the late eighteenth century function as "forms of displaced religions" (90) and if we buy this proposition, it becomes all the more exigent for us to pose the question whether literature can transform this displaced religious form into a different form which can resist the religious sacralization of dogmatic meaning effects.

It is here that we see how the narrative profanation of transcendental religious mythology into secular human narrative is premised on a readerly faith in the imaginary reality of fiction as hypothesis. Understood in this way, literary faith doesn't comprise absolute identification bordering on fanaticism but teaches us to believe something along with a knowledge that it's fictional and not real. This is faith only as possibility, as hypothesis. It's a faith which knows its own falsity. Stated differently, it's believing something without believing in it. This reflexivity of

the unreal shields our literary model of faith from the threat of religious dogma and totalitarian propensities. To end this strain of thought about literary faith on an ambitious question, impossible to answer within the scope of this introductory intervention, we must ask ourselves whether this literary model of faith as hypothetical belief and not as dogmatic absolute can or should rectify, if not replace altogether, the dangerous religious model of faith with inevitable proclivity towards dogmatic totalization. Can't we use this critical faith as believing without believing in, in the form of a strategy to undercut the religious dogma of faith? As Eagleton eventually concludes in *The Event of Literature*, the literary is a strategic construction perhaps even more than being an ideological apparatus. Let this partial critical faith be our literary strategy.

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### Literary Strategy and Act

Literature as faith has another strong dimension – that of implementing it as an “act.” Eagleton’s understanding of literature as strategy goes back to his studies of aesthetic ideology in the 80s. In *Criticism and Ideology*, Eagleton efforted to devise a materialist science of the text by showing the manifest links between the general mode of production, the literary mode of production, aesthetic ideology and the authorial ideology.<sup>4</sup> Literature appears in such categorical exchanges both as hegemonic strategy exploited by a class and its ideology and a “product” constitutive and resultant of a particular mode of economic production. Compelling as it is, what this line of criticism fails to notice is the role literature plays as an act in itself. Literature is not a passive or mimetic reception; neither is it only a thoughtful reflection and/or active provocation. Literature is a strategy that consolidates and constitutes agency in trying times. In order to fully understand the literary act one needs to critically consider what literary strategy could also mean in terms of literary faith.

Let us posit the question in a broader understanding of literature and political resistance. This is a wide field, sensitive and various to different nations and contexts.<sup>5</sup> To set it in a particular

time, say the 80s, one can instantly name a range of writers such as Nadine Gordimer, Athol Fugard, Mahasweta Devi, Naguib Mahfouz, Wole Soyinka, Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, Assia Djebar and others who all challenged particular orthodox regimes they wrote in and the deliberate political injunctions that the humanity entrapped there had to serve. They used literature as a strategy or a weapon to tell the world the narratives of deprivation, tyranny and oppressions that plague their society. Literature played in such capacity the most innate, natal role it was born to play with: telling stories, and also provoking minds, inviting empathies and protests therewith. In that sense, literature appears as intense labour, some form of material practice with a presupposed intention. Such an understanding has a long Marxist history, sometimes working as a critical provocation as in the dialogues between Sartre and Adorno or Lukács and Brecht,<sup>6</sup> sometimes transforming itself into a monolithic agendum, as in Stalinist Russia.

Literature when slotted to work as a material act of resistance often invites the other side of such commitment: propaganda. Not that all the writers exploit the practice with such presuppositions, but resistance can also turn into authoritative tyranny when it loses an actual target or, rather ironically, when it attempts to create a target in order to validate itself as resistance. To take a recent example, the noted Sanskrit scholar Wendy Doniger's liberal humanist study *The Hindus*, which was published in 2009, was brought to scathing criticism by the so-called upholders of Hindu religion, Shiksha Bachao Andolon (Save Education Movement), headed by Dinanath Batra in 2014 before the Hindu nationalist party, BJP, came to power in India. The resistance against such studies also means a glorification of a counter-study, the saffronization or rather the deep Hinduist interpretations of Indian history and culture, championed by the works of historian Arun Shourie or entrepreneur-cum-visionary Rajiv Malhotra, which could be used as a preamble to a rearrangement of the methods and ethics of teaching and research.<sup>7</sup> Whether Doniger's book could be categorized as literature is a different question altogether. But the practice of employing writing or research as a tool against the received traditions or authoritative diktats is both powerful and counter-productive.

In this sense, literary practice has an ambiguous role in relation to resistance: one needs to understand what one is resisting against or rather how one aims to define the target body. However, what takes much force further away is that it appears to be an embodiment of values one is inculcating. The word practice has a sense of agency in it, but literary practice if considered in the form of a work speaking against a rule of terror or if seen as a product in tangential relation to the mode of production has little to “act” beyond holding “mirror” to the necessary values or problematic aspects in them. Literary practice is not the product or alibi of resistance, neither is it the source of it. It is rather the very existence of it. This is not a philosophical hypothesis or postulate that the act of resistance itself is some kind of aesthetic sublime. That there is aesthesis could be comprehended by the very gesture of the multiplicity of bodies speaking in plurality of tones and voices the same word: say, liberty or down with fascism. This is definitely an act itself and could be studied in relation to polyphony and revolutionary practice for instance. But what appears to be an even more compelling example of literary act is the practice of using slogans from literary works in political gatherings or the very act of creating them right there within the movement. This is how literature receives both voice and pays back to the world what it took from in its act of creation.

### Slogans, Resistance, Democracy

The question of voice should be integral to the question of literary act. Much work of theoretical intervention in art and literature over the last few decades has been done on crediting writing over speech. The relations between literature and writing, or the philosophical descent into the dynamic world of signs and signifiers have conceded little space for the literary act of voice-making. Quite similarly, though reading as a category of knowledge or practice has received widespread attention, reading aloud, that is reading as the act of reading heard, is relatively scantily engaged. If literature is a critical combinatory act of writing and reading, the act of reading loud, that is speaking as reading or rather throwing back to the world what the word folded deep in its sediments while writing the world in, has had relatively low purchase. This has been done as a gross violation of the innate or primordial characteristic of literature: that of storytelling. How literature becomes a discipline in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century could be read with

Raymond Williams or Jacques Rancière, or how such a refashioning conceded more primacy to writing in general could be philosophically understood with Derrida,<sup>8</sup> but how such acts took away the force and presence of telling and voice as in the longer oral traditions of reading out stories to a group of people remains a dark chapter. Reading out stories also meant speaking them out, making a conversation, and sometimes a possibly heated argument over the “true” course of the narrative – in short it embodied an act of collaboration based on group speech. It is this act of making a voice, heard to the other, and inviting a dialogue that has been slowly subdued with the rise of silent reading, most probably with the rise of fiction and the middle class readership.<sup>9</sup> It is only visible now-a-days in the practice of open-stage recitations or reading out part of a work of art by an author to an audience which allows the literature to “act upon” the listener and in an imminent dialogue consolidate the full circle of the act through speech or dialogue. However, nowhere can the practice of literature as acting upon be better seen than the act of chanting/creating literary slogans in political gatherings.

Slogans have a long history in warfronts with the commanding leader in arms encouraging the soldiers with jingoist patriotism. The root of the word goes back to a Scottish “Slaughghairm,” meaning army shout.<sup>10</sup> In modern history, slogans appear to be a phrase or a sentence taken from the leader of a movement or may be a poet or a saint who may not have used the words in exact contexts. A very oft-used slogan for the working class has been the Marxist phrase: “Workers of the world, unite!” One could surely find literary aspect in such a slogan as one could claim political gathering as a form of aesthetic itself, as we have mentioned. But what should be acknowledged before that is the historical links between slogans in political movements or revolutions and the literary credit. For example, during the Swadeshi movement in British India, 1906, the supporters of the movement used the songs composed for the occasion by Rabindranath Tagore, Rajanikanta Sen and others. This song by Sen was very popular: “Mayer deya mota kapor mathay tule ne re bhai” (embrace the clothes of mother India to your heart and rest it on your head, brother).<sup>11</sup> Similar songs, poems, phrases by Bengali poets such as Nazrul Islam or Sukanta Bhattacharya have been phenomenally used during intensely political times and movements, most certainly for anti-colonial nationalism. It is not much of a curiosity that Franz

Fanon read anti-colonial nationalism as a magnificent song sung in collective numbers, an element that is often ignored in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>12</sup>

In what follows, this introduction will present three recent examples of the literary practice of sloganeering and analyze how it constitutes the most potent literary political act. In Tunisia, Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi's poem, *The Will to Live* which begins: "When the people demand freedom, Destiny must surely respond" sparked more tension and promise amongst protesting people than acts of violence and destruction. Tarek Bouazizi's only word when his cart was confiscated by the patrolling police which initiated nation-wide street protests turning into the magisterial Arab Spring was "dégage" which in French means "leave." Quickly the word "leave" received not only an increasing number of use on banners or chanting, its dimensions broadened to connect to many similar conceptual slogans which had a wider national-political appeal, slogans such as "the people want to bring down the regime." Al-Shabbi's poem, with its tight links with Tunisian national anthem, became all the more powerful in driving a collective imagination towards a possible moment or space of liberty. Mazen Maarouf, the Palestinian poet, doubly exiled to Iceland for criticizing the Syrian government records how certain phrases or poems have always been influential in both setting up and running a movement in the West Asia, and how in course of the movement new poems and phrases came to be, making history repeat itself. Ruminating the import of the words like "Game Over" in the 2012 Egyptian protests from the 1950s Egyptian poet Fouad Hadad or the use of the poetry by another Egyptian poet Ahmed Fouad Negm in the Palestinian resistance against the Israeli escalation, Maarouf concedes, "However, the mission of the poet today, in the midst of mass uprisings and revolution, is different. It is more precise, direct and fateful. The poets must articulate their words clearly and sharply to agitate people while knowing it can be deadly. The agents of the regime may prosecute the poet at any moment, which means that the written poem might be a final word. The poet cannot deny it later."<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the fear of expulsion, exile, or death has little asphyxiated poetry or slogan making during trying times as the rest of his essay aims to chart out.

A similar situation took place in the Bangladesh of February, 2013 when thousands of people gathered at Shahbag to protest the declaration of life imprisonment of Abdul Quader Mollah by the International Crime Tribunal as too lenient and unjust, and demanded capital punishment for the convict. This movement, like the Arab Spring before it, was largely

orchestrated by the bloggers and the new social media, encouraging people to gather at different streets and protest the declaration. Several bloggers such as Ahmed Rajib Haider were killed during the protests, intensifying the tenacity of the movement further. One of the slogans that was often used in that protest was “tui razakar!” which was taken from Humayun Ahmed’s play and the most watched Bangladeshi serial on Bangladeshi Television, *Bohubrihi*. This phrase was used by the playwright to designate in derogatory tone those Bangladeshi people that assisted the Pakistani Army during Bangladesh’s war of liberation in 1971. The phrase consigns treachery to one’s land and sentiments and points finger not only at those that were the traitors to the generations coming after but also those who continue to belittle and hide the crimes or glorify the heinous deeds of the past. The phrase quickly took currency as a very popular music band *Chirkut* composed a song titled “tui razakar” based on the impassioned unceasing protests at Shahbag. The continuous work by the bloggers and the protesters who chanted the words or coloured them with different sketches or drawings on banners electrified the atmosphere and opened up the possibility of some kind collective triumph or the liberation from the long painful memories of history that the birth of the nation is immersed in. Blogs, songs and doodles continue to use this phrase.<sup>14</sup>

A very recent example of slogans literally sparking a movement is the “hok kolorob” student movement at Jadavpur University, India. The movement which is still underway gained momentum on 17<sup>th</sup> September (starting officially on the 3<sup>rd</sup>) when the Vice Chancellor of the University called in the armed policemen to beat up the students who were protesting against the callousness and inefficacy of the authority at tackling issues of gender harassment by cordoning off the central administrative building that also houses the VC’s office. At the dead of night, several armed policemen entered the campus and flogged the students, inviting a huge protest amongst the city and the state’s students that slowly reached nation-wide support and display of bonding. The movement’s name was taken from a popular Bangladeshi singer Shayan Chowdhury Arnob’s song of the same name. Not that the song had anything to do directly with the movement, it asked for “kolorob” which means clamour or noise. The students as several blogs, facebook/twitter status posts or newspaper citations clarified, wanted to make noise so that their agendas could be heard to the authorities, not only of the institution but also of the State that has vested interests in the formation and employment of authorities in institutions. More than

fifty thousand students marched the Calcutta streets in torrential rains singing songs, screaming slogans, doing street plays, and chanting in routine manner the name of its movement, hok kolorob. Though the method and political possibilities of the movement have been amply dissected, reasoned away or argued over by noted social scientists, historians, and critical thinkers, the aesthetic dimension of the movement had to be conceded with appraisal by all and sundry. The movement continues with more noise, graffiti, political steps such as hunger strikes and student awareness campaigns.<sup>15</sup> One can go on referring to similar protests and the use of slogans in recent times, i.e. the Eric Garner case in New York which used the words he said before dying, “I can’t breathe” which has been rightly adduced to historical racial links with Fanon’s “I Can’t Breathe.”<sup>16</sup>

Slogans, though now an overbearing territory of the market industries, have always been influential in organizing and strengthening a political movement; and popular slogans have furthermore added a historical proximity and value to it. In most cases, the slogans appear to have a long line of history, such as the Marxist phrase of workers uniting the world, which adumbrates a linked transition of the struggles and travails of ages long past. As in the case of Shahbag, the slogans tend to both preserve historical memory of the nation and provoke the minds to thinking as to where exactly the memories became painful. Slogans in that sense appear to be the most potent and direct appeal to justice. What is interesting about slogans is that this is not an individual intervention, but a phrase voiced by many at a particular time and space. And since this phrase, though might have been created by someone on board or taken out from history, comes more often written on a banner or chanted together, this adds a certain indirectness and precision of demands. But at the same time slogans are also chanted by individuals in a group. So, to put it another way, slogans form the individual in the most rooted sense. It undivides the person by bringing him/her in a group, compelling him/her the same language, and interpellating the voice with the historical value adduced to it. It historicizes the being and politicizes the body, the politics being the politics of group formation through collective imagination and demand. It is this aspect of the slogan that transforms the mere gathering into a vibrant multiplicity, some kind of forceful carnival, and affixes an aesthetic appeal to it.

The aesthesis however is doubly performed by the slogans’ umbilical link with literary works. Any slogan taken out of Tagore or Shakespeare’s work, or of a film or popular song, has

the ability to connect to a wide array of people; also, it gives an interesting reading of the work or phrases, shaping up a new context and a new meaning in the act. But where the literary slogans mark out is in the aspect of giving voice to writing. The words as in “tui razakar” for Shahbag were taken onto the literary plane from the world outside, the specific but everyday utterance of those words. Transformed into the world of written language, the words continued to receive valence both in playacting, where the words were spoken out, and reading within, that is, reading silent. As the context reappeared, the text of these two words which continued to carry deep historical narrative with it, was revived too and thus hurled back again from the territory of words to the everyday practice of the world. With the added armory of social networking media, song-making, and different graphic visuals, it both sang back to the old and decorated a new meaning of collective demands against injustice to a nation. It is this act of giving voice to writing or more precisely to the literary practice of folding back the voice within its signatory layers that slogans appear to be the most potent form of literary “acting upon.” So, if the mode of production and aesthetic ideology for Eagleton manufacture the strategic function of literature, suppressing the practice into a body of involuntary production means, recent critical theories’ flirtations with writing and signs doubly suppress the possibility of giving voice to literature. Slogans’ voice-making not only brings back or cultivates a primordial act, of giving back in return what it took from the world, but also in doing so transforms the aspect of strategy or practice, which has market production ethic lined with it, into an act that impinges on acting upon some body. This meaning of act-making is further escalated by the group formation and collective voice-making which allow the act a democratic picture. Slogans form political subjectivity and invite consolidation for justice, insinuating in the act the possibility of pure democracy, a voice by the people, a democracy that is short-lived but ever-present, a democracy that is the ideal behind all human gathering, an ideal of humanity. This is the element of literary faith that the first part of the essay aimed at, a faith that would not only critically teach us the meaning of living together beyond the official strappings of multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism or the dogmatic meaning of fanatic uniformity based on fear-mongering, but a faith of living as an act where living could hark back to the livings of ages past, to the politics of protests and resistance where the act is hindered, to the world of voice-making and empathy which is how humanity was ushered in in this world, in short the act of living democratically.

This is how we see the link between resistance, democracy, and the literary. The word practice or act is how we define the literary both in this issue and the journal at large. Such a meaning not only allows us to think the literary anew but also ask us to be more tolerant towards what is known in official language as academic disciplines. The articles that engage the topic in this issue are from differing disciplines and/or use strong interdisciplinary rhetoric, motive or method. In what follows, we will give a brief picture of the various directions they hail from or point to and leave the rest at your disposal.

Matthew Feldman and Andrea Rinaldi trace the famous Modernist American poet Ezra Pound's contemporary influences on the far-right in "‘Penny-wise...’: Ezra Pound's Posthumous Legacy to Fascism." The article shifts the emphasis from an iconic poet's texts to his public persona and biography to construct a politically charged history that has the disturbing agency to reshuffle the canons of Anglophone literary Modernism. Rahul Kamble in "Resistance and Street Theatre: Democratizing the Space and Spatializing the Democracy" takes up the direction of literature as mimetic social critique. Analyzing Vinodini's street play *Thirst*, Kamble's article gives us an idea about the literary act not only in terms of street performance but also in its theatrical world which itself becomes a set of acts in a larger field of practice.

Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha's piece "Fyataru and Subaltern War Cries: Nabarun Bhattacharya and the Rebirth of the Subject" focuses on the importance of a dissenting author. Using Jacques Rancière's critical tools of interventions and Gayatri Spivak's idea of aesthetic education, Purakayastha locates the materialist ontology of dissent and a new collectivity of subaltern historiography in the Bengali author Nabarun Bhattacharya's work. Arijeet Mandal's article "Little Rebellions: Demands, Transgressions, and Anomalies in the Kamtapur Struggle" shifts the sphere to the Kamtapur movement, which is marked by the State and the major political parties in Bengal as a deliberate ploy by the divisive forces. He seeks whether this tribal or subaltern movement could be read as a new social movement in India. Enquiring the intricate links between ethnicity and economy, reading the various strands of leftism in Bengal and the larger national geography, and conducting wider ethnographic work, Mandal proposes to take a more sensitive stand towards the factious and largely multiethnic quality of the movement and the ample economic reforms needed to this section of society. In doing so, Mandal asks us to both read anarchism and redefine it as a possible political strategy for social movements in India.

Joseph Shafer's article "Academic Publishing on Student Debt: Homo Academicus Americanus" brings another intervention: it investigates the student-debt culture in the US academia and calls for a strong attention to the critical university studies. Built on a wider set of statistical data and critical studies, Shafer argues how neoliberal business strategies are shamelessly imported and implemented in the university space, and whether any possibility of resistance is near on sight. Shafer's tone and intention remain more to reveal and set the motion in public than to strategize a possibility of redemption at this moment; however his subtle differentiation between the academic and the intellectual does prefigure an important possible direction. Karly Berezowsky's article "Fractured Identities, Moral Mediations..." draws our attention to the representation of class and gender in the American literary movement of Realism. The piece allows us to see an important connection between the New Woman and the Nouveau Riche Man in novelistic representation.

Debashis Bandyopadhyay's article 'Literary Debate on the Civil War' takes up the diplomatic texts of Goldwin Smith thus expanding the realm of the literary to political and polemical discourses like economic treatises and epistles and demonstrates a subtle irony within the imperial discourse where the liberal democratic strain reveals a curious counterpoint in its insistence on global imperial mercantilism. Argued in a historical way, Bandyopadhyay's article underscores the ironic contrast between Smith's anti-slavery position in America and his preaching of colonial cultivation in India, resulting in the cotton famine of 1877-78. The article problematizes the polemical logic of diplomatic discourses and it's interesting to see how the ironic undercurrent of the apparently democratic anti-slavery position opens up questions of discursive strategies in relation to postulations of democracy, resistance and practice.

Vineet Mehta adds another important area of study to resistance and literary practice in today's world: the petrofiction. His "Hydrocarbon Genre: The Oil Encounter in Abdul Munif's Cities of Salt and Amitav Ghosh's The Circle of Reason" aims to study the link between oil, the global capitalist modes of production and extraction built upon it, and the effects they have laid down on human lives in certain geographies for generations. The link between oil and literature has been scantily studied in postcolonial interventions until now, and Mehta's work is a welcoming addition. In "Late Capitalism and the Problem of Individual Agency: A Reading of the Poems of J. H. Prynne" Rupsa Banerjee advances a complex analysis of Prynne's poetry in relation to questions like the function of language, the status of the subject and the mapping of nation as a spatial dimension. The article contributes to a philosophically mobilized dialogue

around literary democracy not only in the realm of literary representation but also in terms of the form, style and register of the literary text.

These as we said are all separate contributions to separate fields of studies and may work more as introductions or inter-linked texts themselves. But together all of them respond tellingly to the topics we raised: resistance and democracy. We hope their contributions, as ours is, can start dialogues or help proceed an existing one a tad further. In the end, we would like to acknowledge Palgrave Macmillan for kindly allowing us to re-use the piece by Matthew Feldman and Andrea Rinaldi appearing in a revised version in *Sanglap* from the 2014 anthology *Post-War Anglo-American Far Right* edited by Paul Jackson et al.

### Notes:

1. For a useful elaboration of the term “precariat,” see Simon During’s essay “From the subaltern to the precariat”  
[http://www.academia.edu/4547447/From\\_the\\_subaltern\\_to\\_the\\_precariat](http://www.academia.edu/4547447/From_the_subaltern_to_the_precariat) (accessed December 12, 2014)
2. See Badiou’s essay “Highly Speculative Reasoning on the Concept of Democracy”, translated by Jorge Januregui in *Lacanian Ink*:  
<http://www.lacan.com/jambadiou.htm>  
(accessed December 12, 2014)
3. See Derrida’s article “Faith and Knowledge” in *Acts of Religion*.
4. See especially the chapters “Categories for a Materialist Criticism” and “Towards a Science of the Text,” pp 44-101.
5. A good introduction in this context would be Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature*, 1987. For more specific national/geographical contexts, see, Selwyn R Cudjoe, 1980; Neil Lazarus, 1990; Joe Cleary, 2002; Minoli Salgado, 2007; Margaret Hillenbrand, 2007; Laachir and Talajooy, 2013.
6. See Sartre, “*What is Literature?*” and *Other Essays*, 1947/1988 and for Adorno’s response, “Commitment,” 1962/1974; for the Brecht/Lukács debate on realism and committed literature, see “Brecht against Lukács,” 1974. Also see, “The Brecht-Lukács

- Disagreement (Marxist Philosophy)” *Radicalsociologist*, Sep 11, 2010. Accessed Jan 07, 2015.
7. For a summary of the event, see “Penguin to destroy copies of Wendy Doniger's book 'The Hindus'” *The Times of India*, Feb 11, 2014; for popular protests over it, “Outcry as Penguin India pulps 'alternative' history of Hindus” *The Guardian*, Feb 13, 2014; For Batra’s views, see “Sex, Lies and Hinduism: Why A Hindu Activist Targeted Wendy Doniger’s Book” *Time*, Feb 12, 2014; for the question of Hindu Fundamentalism, see “India’s Fundamentalists triumph in Case over Wendy Doniger’s The Hindus” *Huffington Post*, Feb 26, 2014. Accessed Jan 06, 2015
  8. See Raymond Williams’ chapter “Literature” in *Marxism and Literature*, 1977; Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, 2011; Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 1978.
  9. For a useful critical historical study, see Elspeth Jajdelska’s *Silent Reading and the Birth of the Narrator*, 2007.
  10. According to Oxford English Dictionary, the origin of the word ‘slogan’ is early 16th century Scottish Gaelic *sluagh-ghairm*, from *sluagh* 'army' + *gairm* 'shout'. See the link: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/slogan>
  11. For a comprehensive study of Swadeshi Movement and the cultural influence including Tagore, see Sumit Sarkar, 2011.
  12. Fanon, 1967. p. 203.
  13. Already quite a lot has been written about Arab Spring and cultural dimension; seminal in them might be Hamid Dabashi’s work, 2012. For an interjection between poetry of protest and Arab Spring, these two articles published at *Aljazeera*, “Adunis, the Revolutionary Poet” July 11, 2011 and “The Poetry of Revolution” Sep 2, 2012 (Mazen Maarouf), might be useful. Accessed Jan 06, 2015.
  14. See “Spring of Protest” *BDNews.24*, Feb 13, 2013 or a more recent one, “Quader Mollah, Shahbag Movement and Bangladesh’s Search for Identity – Analysis” *Eurasiareview*, Dec 30, 2014 for a summary of the event; for the killing of bloggers or influence of blogging in this context, see “Anti-Islamist blogger killed in Bangladesh violence” *The Times of India*, Feb 16, 2013 and “Shahbag Protests. Observations” *Sohel’s Blog*, Feb 10, 2013. For ‘tui razakar’ in “Bohubrihi,” see *YOUTUBE*, July 24, 2012. For the song titled

‘tui razakar’ by the music band ‘Chirkut,’ which became immensely popular and galvanized the use of word into a catchphrase for the movement, see *YOUTUBE*, Feb 13, 2013. Also see “‘Tui Razakar!’ – Picturing Revenge and Reprisal in Bangladesh” *Khichri*, Feb 26, 2013.

15. To consult the case, see “A Brief History of #Hokkolorob, the Hashtag that Shook Kolkata” *Quartz*, Oct 9, 2014; For the role of social media, see “#Hokkolorob Movement Takes Social Media By Storm; 1 Lakh Jadavpur University Students March Against The VC To Protest Against Sexual Assault” *IBNLive*, Sep 22, 2014; For an understanding of noise and political aesthetic, see “#Hokkolorob – The Politics of Making Noise” by Rajarshi Dasgupta, *Kafila*, Sep 29, 2014; For the recent updates, see “Jadavpur University Students Launch 'Fast Unto Death' Demanding Vice Chancellor's Removal” *NDTV*, Jan 6, 2015. Accessed Jan 07, 2015.
16. For what ‘I Can’t Breathe’ could mean for us, see “‘I Can’t Breathe’: Eric Garner’s Last Words Symbolize Our Predicament” *Huffington Post*, Dec 18, 2014; On the question of racial history and Fanon, see “From New York to Greece, We Revolt ‘cus we can’t breathe” *Roarmag*, Dec 7, 2014. Accessed Jan 07, 2015.

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