

Encounter with the shadow

OP-ED



Society
Institutions

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The pursuit of 'truth' and its propagation comes at a price and some of us are not willing to pay it. Hence, we couch our evasion of paying the price in high-sounding terms like 'social pressure' and 'censorship'

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The term shadow with reference to analytical and clinical psychology carries a special meaning. It was first used by the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung to describe the inferior, hidden, unconscious aspect of one's personality. Inferiority (real or perceived), dishonesty, greed, incestuous attraction, homosexuality, disdain for one's demigod, repulsion for the beloved, disregard for the aesthetic, procrastination, laziness and the like, form part of one's personality. This is the base, dark side of one's personality that one does not like to own; one denies its existence in the self. This is one's shadow.

One adopts two strategies to cope with the baser side of the self. One may own it and may couch it in high-sounding catchwords, i.e. poetic licence; or one may deny it in one's self and project it on to others e.g., such and such is immoralist, he is a homosexual etc.

This inferior self, the shadow, expresses itself in myriad forms in one's daily life. Thus the philosopher's apparent neglect for his clothes may be his way of hiding his laziness towards daily chores, a mechanism to avoid physical discipline. He invokes his philosopher's persona. The artist may hide behind 'artistic licence' to cover up for his lack of commercial success. The politician camouflages his dishonesty by shouting hollow slogans from a high moral ground; the pseudo-intellectual hides his lack of knowledge by mouthing platitudes; and the physician's greed is hidden behind his use of highly technical diagnostic procedure which costs the patient a bundle but is not really needed.

The immoralist usually sees immorality not in himself but in others and the world; the dishonest sees nothing but dishonesty in the world around him but never in himself, and the homosexual accuses others of homosexuality. All high-sounding slogans and denial-strategies. A characteristics of this inferior side, the shadow, is that one fails, or avoids recognising the problem in one's own self, and sees it manifest in other people.

Last week I was invited to talk about the role of media in promoting health. The group that one was invited to address consisted of media people, from radio, TV and the print media. They were all middle and upper-middle level experts in their respective spheres; they had different backgrounds though. Some had degrees in mass communication, some in literature, and some in liberal arts. Others in finance, and at least one of them was a medical doctor.

They came from all the four provinces of

Pakistan, a majority were from Punjab and Sindh, and the rest from NWFP and Balochistan. One third of the group were women; all but one of the ladies was married and had children. With the exception of two gentlemen, all others were married and had children. It was a diverse group; the people were not 'babes in the wood' so to speak. They had been in their professions for a reasonable number of years.

One focussed on the massive psychological impact of media on the recipients, the real effect of the written word on the reader, and therefore the burden of responsibility that media people and the writers carried as disseminators of 'correct' information and as vanguards of change-agents in society.

They listened patiently and attentively and then the dialogue, or shall one say, confrontation began. One had put forward the idealistic view that perhaps the foremost duty of the media personnel was the relentless pursuit of 'truth' in all its possible forms and conveying it 'effectively'. 'Effectively' meant that this

'truth' reaches the maximum number of people and perhaps changes them for the 'better'. The pursuit of truth and its communication with reference to health, were the main focus of the dialogue with the group.

The ladies and gentlemen in the group generally agreed with these basic premises put forward. They however had their reservations about the two lofty goals, 'truth' and its 'effective communication' and how they could be attained. The discussion and dialogue between the group and the resource person continued for about ten to twelve contact hours. In those discussions three main points, or objections were raised as to why the goals could not be attained.

One writer from Sindh, echoing the sentiments of others in the group, put forward the view that creative people, writers, artists, and others, convey and reflect what exists in society. If there were dirt, grime and slime around them in the society, they, the creative people, were bound to dwell upon it, deal with it, and write about it. Hence the present stock of TV, radio and the print media writers were preoccupied with such issues.

A typical example of invoking one's artistic privilege to hide one's own psychological dirt and grime; one may be lacking in effort or suffering from inertia or laziness and simply that one may fail to adopt a proactive attitude and perhaps discover new, cleaner, lighter, progressive and futuristic topics to write about.

Writing about the so-called dirt and grime in society is the fad. The run-of-the-mill writer takes the easy way out rather than make an effort to discover something new to write about. He then rationalises and defends his lack of effort by dubbing it a social trend, the prevailing social milieu that needs to be written about.

Perhaps there are hundreds and thousands of topics that the writer could choose. But looking for those topics requires effort, breaking free of one's laziness and inertia, which is a difficult proposition. Hence he takes the easy way out, couching it in high-sounding, 'rational' justifications.

The writer chooses to write about certain topics and yet he portrays this conscious choice as something thrust upon him by outside-forces? How self-deceptive! This is one expression of one's inferior self, the shadow.

The other point made by the participants was that they would like to write and portray the 'truth', but were hampered by familial, departmental, social and censorship constraints. Lame if not out-right deceptive if viewed from an objective and historical perspective. From

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Socrates to Christ to Galileo, Mira Bai to Ameer Khusro, to Marx, Lenin, Mao and Ho Chi Minh, people have defied censorship, pursued the 'truth' and boldly gone forth to propagate it.

The pursuit of 'truth' and its propagation comes at a price and some of us are not willing to pay it. Hence, we couch our evasion of paying the price in high-sounding terms like 'social pressure' and 'censorship'. How untrue! Again the shadow appears to operate.

The third argument put forward was that creative artists were often not beyond market forces. They could only create/produce what the market demanded, for if they went against the market forces, they would not be able to 'sell' their 'product' and hence would be out of a 'job'.

The argument of the market, the consumer, being the sole or even the major determinant of one's creative effort is really a circular argument. It holds no water. It's a circular argument

because it goes something like this: One creates trash, because market demands trash and it sells; and since there is nothing but trash available in the market, the viewer/reader/listener has to be content with trash!

Whatever happened to the lofty ideal of pursuit of 'truth'? The argument does not carry any weight but can and is used to defend one's reluctance and incompetence to explore new avenues to entertain, inform, and educate on the part of the creative artist.

Is it not the main role and duty of the creative artist to inform, entertain, and educate the people? And if he invokes the argument of market forces, as a deterrent, he is most certainly shying away from his role and avoiding his social responsibility. Avoidance of social responsibility is indeed an inferior function of the self, a part of what is dark and shadowy in one's self.

One needs to face up to one's responsibility boldly and squarely rather than couch it in half-baked circular arguments. The shadow may be expressed and encountered in many other forms apart from the 'rational' justifications of one's behaviour described above. To the credit of the group that one interacted with, it must however be said that after some heated arguments from both the sides, they got sensitised to the game that the shadowy side may play with one's psyche, and were perhaps prepared to exercise control over it in the future. The encounter with shadow thus satisfying.

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