

## *Octavio Paz on Solitude*

### *Introduction*

Octavio Paz has influenced the world of literature in a very unique capacity. He had the benefit of understanding several cultures as a practicing diplomat and had deftly contributed in prose as well as poetry. While he was constantly engaged in a turmoil on the issue of isolated and an island like nationalism; the other part of the turmoil saw him over extend socially, culturally, historically, philosophically and politically in search of a true Mexican identity when general Mexican culture was increasingly growing into a confused state as Western influences became dominant over native and ethnic influences. His works of prose and poetry complement each other in search of solution for these natty but nevertheless very critical issues. The book *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude) is the name of one of Paz's books in prose. Because of above description of the general backdrop against which Paz wrote, in general, this title could be applied to the overall background and philosophical leanings of his poetry as well, which in more ways than one resembled a labyrinth, not because its meaning was unclear or wayward, but because of its fine philosophical dialectics and intricacies. In overall sense his poetry is also poetry of solitude because the writer's core leaning and understanding is that of a man who feels alone in the world, always in need of the "other" to attain his own self-realization. As a

logical derivation of this attitude, man can be said to be a half-being who strives after his integration and completion. He intends to reach this state of fulfillment by three elements: the poetry, which reveals the unity of mankind; love, which makes the ego realize himself in the "you"; and the sacred, which shows the "other shore" of life. This is the holistic way of getting rid of cultural alienation and solitude. This paper examines the concept and meaning around the word solitude as used by Paz through an intensive literature analysis. This literature analysis banks upon Paz's own works as well various commentaries and critics of his work in order to derive arguments leading to a common understanding of the word solitude in its full manifestations.

*Paz's Solitude- An Analysis of the literature*

Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia explains the gist of the Paz's work *The Labyrinth of Solitude* in following words: "The essay collection *El laberinto de la soledad: Vida y pensamiento de México* (1950; *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, 1961) is considered Paz's masterpiece. The book attempts to explain his relationship to the Mexican way of life, in part by exploring the contradiction between the Mexican "mask" (the emulation of foreign cultural models) and the historic roots of native Mexican culture". (Octavio, 2007) While this appears as the overall gist and

kernel of the literary work Wikipedia (2007) gives out more details of the work apart from giving citations from relevant literature sources in following words, “ *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (Spanish: *El Laberinto de la soledad*) one of Octavio Paz’s best works, is a collection of nine essays: ‘The Pachuco and other extremes’, ‘Mexican Mask’, ‘The Day of the Dead’, ‘The Sons of La Malinche’, ‘The Conquest and Colonialism’, ‘From Independence to the Revolution’, ‘The Mexican Intelligentsia’, ‘The Present Day’ and ‘The Dialectic of Solitude’. The book’s first publication was in 1950 but after 1975 some editions included the essay ‘Post data’ which discusses the massacre of thousands of Mexican students in 1968. As a reaction to this event, Paz abandoned his position as ambassador in India. The essays are predominantly concerned with the theme of Mexican identity and demonstrate how at the end of the existential labyrinth there is a profound feeling of solitude. (Paz, 1961)

The same source presents the main arguments of Paz in following words: “Solitude is the profoundest fact of the human condition. Man is the only being who knows he is alone, and the only one who seeks out another. His nature-if that word can be used in reference to man, who has ‘invented’ himself by saying ‘no’ to nature-, consists in his longing to realize himself in another. Man is nostalgia and a search for communion. Therefore, when he is aware of himself he is aware of his lack of another, that is, of his solitude. (Bloom, 2002) Paz observes that solitude is responsible for the Mexican’s

perspective on death, 'fiesta', and identity. Death is seen as an event that is celebrated but at the same time repelled because of the uncertainty behind it. As for the fiestas, they express a sense of communality, crucially emphasizing the idea of not being alone and in so doing helps to bring out the true Mexican that is usually hidden behind a mask of self-denial. This represents the way in which the Mexicans have inherited two distinct cultures, the indigenous and the Spanish, but by denying one part of their identity they become stuck in a world of solitude”.

Wikipedia (2007) goes on to explain the philosophical leanings of the other essays in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* so as to derive a comprehensive, political and cultural understanding of the meaning of solitude in following words, “From the essay ‘The Conquest and Colonialism’ onwards, Paz makes a detailed analysis of Mexican history beginning with a look at their Pre-Columbine culture and in particular reflecting on the 1910 Revolt. In his analysis, he expresses how the humanists take a primary role as the intellectuals of the country. His major criticism is that to be an intellectual it is necessary to distance oneself from the subject that you are studying so that the argument remains critical yet rational and objective. While the intellectual gets more involved with the political environment, his arguments can often become influenced by other factors such as political motivation and pressure to conform”.

What is solution to cultural anomie, confusion and alienation and solitude gathering out of it? Paz's writings seem to be clear on the wall. He defines a well adjusted itinerary. This itinerary begins in solitude, is continuously stimulated by desire, and tends to arrive at the communication. Paz's literary technique of expression is that of surrealism, so that he may appear incongruous and unnatural on the surface. Though this is true on some occasions, Paz is not, however, a poet of mere free associations and emptiness of message. His poetry has both width and depth. He embraces all the basic problems of man and deals with them in a tragic and sympathetic way. He hates the easy expression because he thinks that poetry is a very serious, complex, almost magic task, not reserved to the multitude but to a very few people capable of delving into the analysis of the most intimate problems surrounding human life.

However it must be noted those realities of the politics as practiced affect the man and his solitude much more than cultural roots if the practiced politics is polemic enough. While Paz first published in 1950, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*; it addresses issues that are both seemingly eternal and resoundingly contemporary: the nature of political power in post-conquest Mexico, the relation of Native Americans to Europeans, the ubiquity of official corruption. Noting these matters earned Paz no small amount of trouble from the Mexican

leadership, but it also brought him renown as a social critic. Paz, who went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, later voiced his disillusionment with all political systems--as the Mexican proverb has it, "all revolutions degenerate into governments"--but his call for democracy in this book has lately been reverberating throughout Mexico, making it timely once again. Thus a desire to improve the politics as practiced in its present day vitriolic form is also seen as a part solution to the solitude or alienation of the man in the street.

A closed door nationalism is not the Paz idea of a strong cultural identity. Paz moves on a wider and much more tolerant canvas when he opines that the man when thus confused and alienated has a desire to speak and communicate which may subsequently grow into a desire to assert as well. The core think plan of Paz's essays and, to a large extent, of much of his writing, is dialectic between the fact of the individual's solitude and its need for suprapersonal reality. Paz treats the individual as alone by virtue of the totally solitary manner of birth and death; all else for him is the *Other*. It is here that he states: "The Mexican and his Mexicanism must be defined as separation and negation." This notion, with time, is not limited to the Mexican context; rather it becomes in Paz's view a milestone of human life. Paz then goes on to narrate how the Mexican reacts to his solitude: his life can also be defined "as a search, a desire to transcend this state of exile." As Paz's arguments climb higher ladders, this search becomes another hallmark of

human beings as they try to communicate, to form community, to make society and life a communion through understanding and love. While philosophizing thus, Paz is abundantly aware that an increasingly dominant theme in the Hispanic world is the acceptance of the cultural models of post-industrial societies. In *Postdata* ( 1970; *The Other Mexico* ) and the 1975 interview " *Vuelta a El laberinto de la soledad* " (Return to *The Labyrinth of Solitude* ), Paz concedes and reacts to such sociohistorical change in Mexico. Subsequently he discusses the conflicts created, for instance in the Miskito Indian homelands of Nicaragua or in the Mexican state of Chiapas, when pressure builds on underdeveloped Hispanic and third-world countries to reach the levels of material prosperity and political maturity which developed countries have achieved as part of their organic evolution. While Paz is very focused on the specific themes, issues, and problems treated in his essays, it may be argued that there is something more important to him than the content of any of his essays: the commitment to disinterested observation, akin to a bystander, and thought guided by critical reason. For Paz human life and history are totally dynamic. He habitually approaches his subject by means of a historical study, and identifies the ongoing synthesis of new and old which is the history of the entity being considered. The fact of change and the need to understand its direction and consequences make the method of critical thought more important than any specific subject to be studied.

Comparing the cultural attitude of Paz on Modernism with that of some other writers, Kozlarek(2006) states citing literature that , “Of course, Paz participated in the mission of defining the character of ‘the Mexican’. Enrique Krauze writes: ‘[...] the permanent subject and object of his passion and his critique was Mexico, his country [...]’ (Krauze 2003: 141). But Krauze also recognizes a ‘permanent fascination for duality’ (142). This means that for Paz it was always imperative to understand Mexico as both a culture which has developed its own ways of coping with the most import aspects of the human self-understanding – solitude, communion and death – and, at the same time, as a culture which, despite all its particularities, participates with its own voice in the ‘polyphonic’ concert of a global modernity. The task of a *modern* Mexican intellectual as Paz understood it, was, consequently, the ‘fabrication’ of a new tradition (Zermeño 2003: 7), one able to recognize these dialectics of being one self without being detached from the rest of the world”.

The same source goes on to explore the philosophical inspiration of Paz and correlates the same to the depiction of characters and contents of his work in following words: “Paz found his major source of inspiration in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95), a nun and also poet of New Spain. At a time when the power of Spain in the American colonies started to fade, and in which a new Creole society started to take over, Sor Juana became the ‘mother’ of modern Mexican intellectuals. She ‘transformed natural maternity into a symbolic or spiritual’ one . The stress on ‘maternity’ is crucial. For Paz,

Mexico is a maternalist culture. Already in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), he wrote about two other important female characters; but while *Doña Malinche*, an Indian aristocrat who became the wife of the conqueror Hernán Cortés, is still today the symbol of treason but also of Mexico's cultural and ethnic hybridity, and the *Virgen de Guadalupe* the representation of the Mexican unity under the roof of the catholic church, Sor Juana is presented by Paz as *the* Mexican key to the modern world. In her poetry, Paz senses an important step towards a 'universal' tradition he himself was longing for. 'Universal,' however, does not refer to universal and abstract principles, but first of all to a universal language". (Kozlarek,2006) Here it is important to understand that Paz treats a particular character as a hybrid of culture and that he treats as an equivalent of slippery and deceiving character that has no notions of simplicity and honesty. The life objectives are different in the characterization of people that emerge out of cultural confusion and those that have cultural clarity. It appears that Paz is overwhelmed by the predominance of hybrid characters in his time and is thus worried about the growing solitude in masses.

Kozlarek (2006) then goes on to revisit Paz much later after the date of writing of his *Solitude* work. He observes that for Paz, "It is the 'comparison of cultures' that Paz declares 'explicitly as the guiding principle of his essays' . But the essay is the 'formless form' (Adorno) and therefore also a privileged

instrument for critique. In his 'Vuelta a *El laberinto de la soledad*', Paz explains: Critique is for me a *free* form of commitment. The writer has to be a sniper, he has to stand the solitude and he has to know that he is marginalized. That we writers are marginalized is a condition which is a blessing. To be marginal means to give a value to our writing." Thus Paz is defining a different kind of solitude for writers as well, akin to that felt by man in the street. However, this solitude seems to be helping the writer and seems to be the outcome of his activities as a writer.

In the final analysis Kozlarek(2006) explores the spiritual and philosophical core of the Paz feeling of solitude by comparing the solitude to that related to the soul and the human quest to locate and place the meaning of soul in his/her life. For Paz there is no doubt that solitude is part of the human condition. He seems to indicate that this solitude is not merely based in cultural confusion and social and political existence but has deeper spiritual meaning. Kozlarek states about Paz as follows on the issue, "He writes in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: the feeling and consciousness of being alone, of being alienated from oneself and from the world, even of being separated from oneself is not an exclusively Mexican condition of the soul. All human beings feel sometimes alone. [And] Life means to separate ourselves from what we once were, in order to become what we will be at one point in the unknown future, and solitude is the most stable foundation of the *conditio humana*. But

solitude, and the awareness of it, is only one part of a much more complex condition. Complementary to it, Paz sees the constant search for new ways of 'communion' with the other. In this sense Paz writes: 'The human being is the only creature which knows that it is lonely, the only one that searches the "other"'. This sentence could not express more clearly what Paz means when he speaks about the 'dialectics of solitude'. The sensation of solitude is part of the human condition; however, to it belongs a complementary moment, the desire and search for communion with the other".

### Conclusion

Thus the multifarious meanings of the word solitude ,as used and interpreted by Paz, have been synthesized to a deep rooted spiritual quest to search for the meaning of soul and the quest to free the soul. At existential plane social, cultural and political spheres and the activities that go on in these spheres tend to play an important part in nudging the man to solitude faster than ever before. In the end one must agree with McDuff (2004) who explains the gist of the Paz's works and he concepts of solitude, alienation and cultural confusion wile contrasting the South American example with the North American experiences min following words, "The history of Mexico is the history of a man seeking his parentage, his origins. He has been influenced at

one time or another by France, Spain, the United States and the militant indigenists of his own country, and he crosses history like a jade comet, now and then giving off flashes of lightning. What is he pursuing in his eccentric course? He wants to go back beyond the catastrophe he suffered: he wants to be a sun again, to return to the center of that life from which he was separated one day. (Was that day the Conquest? Independence?) Our solitude has the same roots as religious feelings. It is a form of orphan hood, an obscure awareness that we have been torn from the All, and an ardent search: a flight and a return, an effort to re-establish the bonds that unite us with the universe. Nothing could be further from this feeling than the solitude of the North American. In the United States man does not feel that he has been torn from the center of creation and suspended between hostile forces. He has built his own world and it is built in his own image: it his mirror. But now he cannot recognize himself in his inhuman objects, nor in his fellows. His creations, like those of an inept sorcerer, no longer obey him. He is alone among his works, lost - to use the phrase by José Gorostiza - in a "wilderness of mirrors".

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