Nobel Prize in Literature - Controversy

Why in news?

The Swedish Academy recently announced the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2018 and 2019 to Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke respectively.

Who is Olga Tokarczuk?

- Tokarczuk, 57 is one of Poland's most successful authors.
- She has found a wider English-reading audience in recent years.
- She has won the Man Booker Prize in 2018 for Flights, a translation of her 2007 novel Bieguni.
- Much of her work is marked by historical/mythical settings with realistic details, and themes of conflicting cultures and perspectives.
- She constructs her novels in a tension between cultural opposites; nature vs. culture, reason vs. madness, male vs. female, home vs. alienation.
- **Works** - She made her fiction debut in 1993 with Podróz ludzi Ksiegi ('The Journey of the Book-People').
- The plot is set in 17th century France and Spain where the characters search for a mysterious book in the Pyrenees (Mountain range in Europe).
- Her breakthrough novel Prawiek i inne czasy, 1996 (Primeval and Other Times, 2010) is again set in a mythical place, yet full of realistic details.
- Tokarczuk has claimed that the narrative was a personal attempt to come to terms with the national image of the past.
- The novel is an excellent example of the new Polish literature after 1989, resisting moral judgement and unwilling to represent the conscience of the nation.

Why is 2018 prize awarded in 2019?

- The 2018 award had been postponed for a year on account of a scandal involving the Academy's close ties with a man convicted of rape and jailed that year.
- The scandal followed the imprisonment for rape of Frenchman Jean-Claude Arnault, with whom the Academy has close ties.
- He is married to then Academy member Katarina Frostenson, who resigned.
- The couple ran a cultural club in Stockholm that received funding from the Academy.

- The scandal caused a rift among members over how to manage their ties with him and seven of them resigned, causing conflicts of interest.
- It led to the first postponement of the Literature Nobel in 70 years.

Who is Peter Handke?

- Handke, 76, published his debut novel Die Hornissen in 1966, dropped out of his law course at the University of Graz.
- He then went on to write novels, essays, dramatic works and screenplays in a vast body of work spanning more than 50 years.
- The Swedish Academy described him as one of the most influential writers in Europe after the Second World War.
- Handke is the son of a Slovenian-minority woman in Austria and a German soldier whom he would meet only as an adult.
- Handke chose to "revolt against his paternal heritage that in his case was perverted by the Nazi regime", and "chose the maternal line of heritage".
- He has found much of his own literary inspiration within the New Novel-movement in French literature.

What is the controversy over Handke's prize?

- Handke was awarded "for an influential work that with linguistic ingenuity has explored the periphery and the specificity of human experience".
- There is concern over the 'Eurocentric' choice for 2018 and 2019 prizes.
- Apart from this, picking Handke have left many writers and critics dissatisfied.
- This is because Handke has disregarded the Serb atrocities against Bosnian Muslims in the Balkan war (1912, 1913) and has taken a Serbia-as-victim stance.
- Handke's prize has attracted criticism, including from survivors of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre (genocide of more than 8,000 Bosniaks, mainly men and boys, in and around the town of Srebrenica during the Bosnian War).
- They have called for the academy to revoke the 9 million Swedish crown ($930,000) award.
- Handke, now based in France, is widely seen as sympathetic of the Serbian far right.
- His attending of the funeral of former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic in 2006 is also questioned.
- [Under Milosevic's regime, thousands of ethnic Albanians were killed and at least a million had to flee.
- The Serbian president was indicted for war crimes in 1999 but died in 2006 before a ruling was reached.]

What is the Swedish Academy's response?

- The Swedish Academy has defended its decision to award the 2019 Nobel Prize for Literature to Austrian writer Peter Handke.
- It says that he had made provocative comments but had not supported bloodshed.
- The Academy has not found anything in his writing that constitutes an attack on civil society or on the respect for the equality of all people.

Source: Indian Express, The Hindu

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