

DEPICTION OF REALISTIC & SOCIAL SETTINGS IN POST-INDEPENDENT INDIAN DIASPORIC FICTION

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Abstract

An attempt is made in this paper to give an overview of the development of Indo-English fiction in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's and living in the later periods. The paper also focuses on the themes of Indo-English fiction in general. Post Independence Indian writings in English with special reference to fiction have been significant in the sense that the total output is highly far more than the output in pre-independence writing though the triumvirate or the Trimurthy of Indian English writing belonged to the pre-independence era. However, they, who could be considered as the trend setters in Indian English continued to write in the post-independence period as well.

Key Words: *Indo-English fiction, pre-independence, post-independence.*

A distinctive Indian quality is the reason-die-re of Indian novels in English. According to this viewpoint, a truly Indian work, would be the arc which is about India or Indians, 'presents an Indian point of view and has a style, which fits, well into the matrix of the Indian culture and way of life. To create an identity is part of the essential business of artist, to arrive at, or even to contribute towards, a declaration of literary nationality. It is not essentially relevant to his concerns and may even infringe on the honesty of those concerned. A writer's quest for his identity, however is a meaningful pursuit and is fraught with serious implications. Unless he has a clear sense of his identity, the literary offshoot is bound to be superficial and arbitrary.

It is very hard to establish the sense of identity of any people chiefly or centrally from its literature since most of the media, which form the culture of the mass of the people by-pass literature. The quest for identity in a country like India is socially oriented and less personal.

This quest which is a common and recurrent theme in Indo-English fiction, has taken two main directions: Philosophical and Sociological. The philosophical quest involves a web of dualisms from which the protagonist must disentangle his complex identity. For instance, search for identity through knowledge of self is the basis of R.K. Narayan's fiction. The sociological on the other hand involves the protagonist who is in search and trial for a space for his existence. The sense of Indianness finds an expression in Indo-English novels in certain other important ways. The regard for the past is the cornerstone of Indian culture. Among other feature associated with the unswerving devotion to the past, the most important is being faithful to one's cultural heritage and traditions and the reverence for age, which is in one's bones. Although modernity and tradition come into clash in many Indo-English novels, one can note the repeated affirmation and the value of the past in its re-discovery.

Alienation or rootlessness also has become a very common theme in the English novel. The loss of identity leads to the problem of alienation.

A feel of loss of identity is a dreadful feeling that cuts one off from all kinds. One begins doubting one's identity. The dispossessed personality's search for identity is in fact, a commonplace theme in modern fiction. It is true in Indian fiction too, but with a difference. The difference lies in the novelists' quest that has peculiarly Indian immediacy.

In a statement made in 1979, Shyamala Narayan unwittingly predicted the advent of the new Indian novel in English; She observes:

“The Indian-English novel has a bright future. Great work can come from Malgaonkar's pen, while Anita Desai or Arun Joshi can produce a psychological masterpiece. Neither R.K. Narayan nor Bhabani Bhattacharya or Mulk Raj Anand can be considered a spent force. And one cannot know what new talent is waiting in the wings to be discovered.”

The new talent turned out to be Salman Rushdie, who with his *Midnight's Children* (1981) made a tremendous impact on a whole generation of writers both new and established.

Since then there has been a bursting forth of Indian novels like myriad flowers on a laburnum tree. This significant decade, came to be a gorgeous post-modernist novel era, governed by a subjective, relativist, scientific worldview and it represented skewed perceptions of socially alienated writers. It was however in line with the mainstream of twentieth-century thought. The novels of this era reflect and stand as samples which have come out with new forms and themes.

Many, Indian English novels of the 1980's have the impression of *Midnight's Children* that is, they combine the post-modernist vision with the Indian oral narrative style.

These novels differed from the earlier novels that were characterized by solemnity and self consciousness. However, unlike the earlier ones they neither idealistic nor are sentimental. Politics (national and international) has been their most important theme of the novelists of the era, and the displaced, marginal modern men their favourite protagonists. The writing is brisk, vigorous, racy impressive. They express the deep urge of the protagonist to speak out, unfretted by restraints who virtually scream to be heard. The characters are cosmopolitan, de-regionalized citizens of the world. For example, *Rich like us*, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Golden Gate*, *The Circle of Reason*, *Yatra*, *Sunrise in Fiji*, *Days of the Turban*, *The Bubble*, etc. The new Indian novel which portrays the awareness is not the novel of exhaustion but is one of tremendous creativity, dynamism, hope and confidence. The 1980's novels have a vast emotional, political, cultural, geographical and historical sweep. They seem to have the ability to face life in the harsh, to confront it unflinchingly and yet to laugh at the lighter side. They are different from the earlier novels of idealism. Here fantasy, magical realism, parody, humour take over and subvert unseemly reality. The individual has become the centre besides his sensibility and the provisional quality of life known to him. As against that, the protagonists of the novels say of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, had belonged to a securer world where eternal reality stood ultimately dominating the temporary vicissitudes of life. By contrast, the protagonists of the 1980's Indian novel are insecure, anxious, tense, sceptical, and they are the people sitting on the edge of the world, waiting to be catapulted into plumb-less depths and declivities because of the tremendous power that reposes in twentieth century governments. The parallels between the life of the individual and history of nation are dovetailed in these novels. In novels such as *Clear Light of Day*, *The Circle of Reason*, *Plans for Departure*, *Yatra*, *Rich Like Us*, *English August*, *Shame*, *Midnight' Children* and *Sunrise in Fiji* we can note such things.

The Indian novel, which showed concern with national or social problems in the 1960's were introspective, and the individual's quest for a personal meaning in life was the main theme in them. They differ in their approach and change - they reflect a recognizable change in the national sensibility, expression and literary form. Both periods are also characterized by tremendous literary creativity and it is all the more interesting to look at them from different aspects such as the economic, political and intellectual trends that prevailed in India during those years.

The more recent Indo-English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicament. In the more recent days there has been a group of writers who have got settled in a foreign land and yet writing on Indian ethos. They have been also looking at India as expatriates. This group of writers include David Dravidar, Rohinton Mistry, Mukul Kesavan, Salman Rushdie, Meenakshi

Mukherjee, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amitav Ghosh and a few others. They belong to what is called the group of Diaspora writers. Their protagonists are those having experienced differently.

Indian English literature is today undeniably one of the many modern Indian literatures. The difference between the other Indian literatures and branch is that other literatures have well defined communities of readers who speak those languages as their primary languages. The majority of readers of Indian English literature within India use English as their second language. The actual readership for Indian English literature within India is provided by those who use English as their secondary language, while for all other Indian literatures the readership is confined to the primary speakers of those languages.

On a global scale the position of literature in English is similar to the bilingual literatures in India. The bilingual literatures record a rapid enrichment of vocabulary and a remarkable syntactic flexibility. On the other hand, they continue to survive with anxiety of imminent breakdowns. English fears the American, Sanskrit feared the Apabhramsh languages. These literatures tend to grow more and more obsessed with theme of language itself. They thrive by a process of excess of social heterodoxy, though tolerant of linguistic hybridization. It is actually quite sad that writers as diverse in religion, culture, upbringing and politics as V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood and Patrick White should write on the same themes, though their linguistic styles are so different. It is also sad that the four writers named claim to engage in the theme of colonial victimization, none of them ever take up the cause of the really deprived people in their respective communities. A bilingual literature works through linguistic hybridization but faces a serious social exclusion. The trouble with Indian English literature is not that it is the literature of the minority but that it has been a literature of social exclusion.

The history of any literature, except those bilingual literatures mentioned above, will show that literature grows by assimilating many tributaries flowing from the margins to the centre. Sometimes the marginal occupies the centre-stage, and turns a regional class register of language into the dominant literary register. Such assimilation of marginal speech and concerns deepens the expressivity of a literature on the progressive frontline of social changes. On the other hand, the bilingual literatures assimilate numerous language registers belonging exclusively to social advantaged classes from different geographical areas.

Twenty years ago one rarely spoke of Indian English fiction. Ten years ago, writers like Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Manohar Malgaonkar and Kamala Markandaya were inducted to universities courses of English. In comparison, the quantity and variety of fiction published during the last ten years are impressive. About seventy-five novels that appeared during the last ten years have attracted comment whether in review criticism or more serious thought. Several writers published their novels during the span, which makes it possible to speak of a new generation of Indian English novel. Among those that came to prominence during this span are: Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Allan Sealy, Bapsy, Sidhwa, Shashi Deshpande, Rohinton Mistry, Pratap Sharma and Shashi Tharoor.

It is possible to link the recent Indian English fiction to the following background factors:

Nearly four decades after the Second World War, and after the decline of the British Empire, the present generation of Indian (and other) immigrants in English no longer suffer from a sense of black-inferiority; and this generation is politically alert and linguistically articulate about the minority cultures of contemporary Britain: Kureishi, Dhondhy, Rushdie are the products of this new black freedom in England.

With Mrs. Thatcher's ascendancy in British politics, and the induction of a glamorous Diana in the royal family, in the early eighties there was a sudden nostalgia for the Raj. Books on all kinds of Indian subjects became commercially profitable for British publishers. The one unwritten condition for getting accepted for publication was that the fantasy picture of India forged by some three hundred years of hard British labour need not be upset. Gita Mehta's Raj and Nina Sibal's Yatra are end products of this trend.

The Canadian government decided to invest large amounts of producing Canadian multiculturalism as a subtle political solution to the vexed problem of Francophone Quebec. Multiculturalism has become a very big industry in Canada during the last decade. In this industry research grants, publishing subventions and literary prizes are generously distributed to all manner of ethnic and linguistic minorities. Bharati Mukherjee and Uma Parameswaran are products of this phenomenon. Had they continued to live in India, one wonders if they would have got the capital support for their creative expression. Perhaps, they would not have been noticed at all.

One of the major international movements of the last decade was the feminist-literary movement. There were a number of publishing houses, magazines and literary organizations devoted to women's literature in the Western world. The English-speaking Indian women found the new ideology of subversion very attractive. That they did feel so was in itself a desirable event; but since most of them have little interest in activism at the grass-root levels in Indian society, they found it liberating to imitate American and French feminisms and produce fiction giving their ego-graphs. Namita Gokhale's *Paro* and Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings* are examples of this imitative liberation. Shashi Deshpande and Jai Nimbkar are themselves creative, and politically and culturally more alert feminists. The latter kind has a great future in India.

Earlier in the century nationalism was a great force in Indian literature. During the sixties and seventies, disillusionment about it set in, producing a literature of disillusionments. During the eighties nationalism was a dead theme. It was a decade of regionalism and sectarianism. Therefore two types of political fiction were produced: (i) works which made India their subject used subversive narrative forms and black humour (Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel*; Anita Desai, *Clear Light of Day*), and (ii) novels emphasizing regional sub-cultural identity (Balraj Khanna, *A Nation of Fools*; Pratap Sharma, *The Day of the Turban* both about Punjab; Rohinton Mistry and other Parsi writers about a sub-culture).

The story tellers Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Nina Sibal, Gurucharan Das and Balraj Khanna seem to enjoy the speech-act with the excitement as the poets Jayanta Mahapatra, Vikram Seth and Dilip Chitre enjoy their poetic rhetoric. A similar love for speech is evident among the post-colonial critics like Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Susie Tharu and Makarand Paranjape. However, this love for speech does not stem from the discovery of communicative energy. In fact, in the post-colonial proliferation of language there is at work a kind of desperation which comes out of growing isolation; the linguistic displayed by the post-colonials is reminiscent of the compulsive story-telling by men surrounded by dark forests.

Thus, the distinguishing features of the post-colonial Indian English literature originate in its peculiar sociology. Though English fiction has in India at present enough readers to make publishing of books possible and even profitable, English is still largely a second language of those who form the reading community. It is still largely a second language of those who form the reading community. It is still not a language that pervades all areas of the reading community's emotional and social life.

References

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