

HISTORY, POLITICS AND CULTURE IN THE INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION OF THE LAST TWO DECADES

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A dozen or more distinct languages and literatures flourish today on the Indian literary scene, and most of these are distributed on a broadly regional basis. However, there are three exceptions – Sanskrit, Urdu and English. The Aryan conquest brought Sanskrit to India, perhaps three or four thousand years ago. The six centuries of Muslim rule led to the rise of Urdu, as an expression of a composite culture; and the two centuries of British rule made Indo-Anglian literature possible. Sanskrit is the classical language, Urdu is now rather more in evidence in North India than in the South, but English is almost uniformly distributed all over the country. Although it is the first language of only the Anglo-Indians, a microscopic minority, English as a second language forms the dominant minority in India. For all practical purposes, English is the official language in India. Though Indo-Anglian literature is a matter of more recent history, Australian, Canadian and other commonwealth literature also are of the late or recent beginning.

While Britain as a colonial power held sway, for periods long or short, over the countries that now form the commonwealth, the English language and literature became inevitable as the nations passed from colonialism to self-government, from ‘Empire’ to ‘Commonwealth’. Srinivas Iyengar (2001: 693) rightly puts it,

One can perceive a rhythm or a pattern in the history of all these territories that have affected the difficult passage from colonial subjection to political independence, covering a period ranging from 100 to 200 or more years. First came the shock, the trauma of conquest, a stage of demoralization and mute acceptance of alien rule. Then came the period of slow awakening, the sense of hurt and shame and resentment, and also the desire to imitate the rulers and adopt their language, their manners, and even their religion. Then followed the slow stirrings of dissent and to rumbling salvos of revolt. Be the struggle long or short, the end of the dialogue or struggle was the coming of

independence to the former colony. Call it self-government, Swaraj, Uhuru, it meant the substance of independence and with it a new era began with high hopes, with grandiose plans, only soon to be followed by giant disillusionment.

But the British conquest also meant English education and renaissance in literature and culture. Soon the freedom movement began and Indian leaders from Raja Rammohan Roy to Mahatma Gandhi tried for the liberation of the heart from fear and hatred alike. They worked for unity, progress, prosperity and liberation. This political idealism of the twenties and thirties could not be sustained later. Indian independence in 1947 resulted at the cost of the partition of the country, the partition of Punjab, the partition of Bengal.

It has fissured and flawed freedom that came to us on 15 August 1947, proceeded by the communal holocausts and followed by even bloodier massacres and the heart rendering mass exodus of people across the frontiers. Independence was no doubt welcome, but there could be no cry of exultation or fanfare of rejoicing. (Ibid: 694)

Literature has been the means of giving form and utterance to the hopes and despairs, the enthusiasm and apathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain, in a nation's history as it moves from freedom

to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence, and again from independence to the tasks of reconstruction involving further experiences of success and elation or futility and failure-such is the zig-zag movement in literary and cultural history. Without denying the inherited tradition, the new writer has been able to grow wings of creative self-expression and is boldly careering towards the future.

The base for Indian literature in English is much wider and stronger today than at the time of independence. Though literature is the creation of gifted individuals, the environment, the atmosphere are very important; in fact the individual talent and the tradition and environment are so much mingled together that the fictional output has a miraculous effect. During the last two decades, Indian literature in English gained popularity all across the world. What makes Indian literature in English truly an Indian literature is the quality of 'Indianness' in the choice of the subject; in the texture of thought and play of sentiment; in terms of 'form' and in the creative use of language. There has been abundant experimentation in form and content and such like phenomenon begins with writers like G.V. Desani, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh,

Shashi Tharoor, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy and others to name a few.

The Indian novel is neither revivalist nor imitative of the western models, it is modern and it does conjure up the many dimensions, India's national identity." K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (2001: 700).

Writing during the pre-independence period, Indian fiction writers confronted to issues that were largely defined by India's relationship to imperialist Britain. But after independence, it is the various problems that independent India had to face. In the recent times, with the changed global scenario a multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, socialist country like India has an altogether different status, background, it was felt necessary to study various aspects like history, politics, and culture reflected in Indian fiction during 80s and 90s. The Indian English short story till 1960 especially nursed a monist philosophy of British colonialism. However, since the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's children*, Indian English fiction seems to be mainly preoccupied with disillusionment at the political and the social levels. It also witnessed a withering of national euphoria romanticizing the Indian culture and history. The representation of history, politics and culture by writers like Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa

Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee, Anjana Appachana, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and others is rather with photographic fidelity and point blank frankness. The element of greatness and happiness for being Indian that is celebrated in the writings of the triumvirs, especially in the novels of R.K. Narayan, where ideal Indian society with all its culture and tradition is reflected in *Malgudi Days* and other writings is being replaced by frankness of expression, and blunt representation of the adulterated Indian political and cultural scenario. The post-independence Indian literature also brought into question the notions of historiography, challenging thereby the early bourgeoisie related to social and cultural ethos. The post-independence Indian literature, specially the fiction, experiences a shift from literary elitism to the commitment of minority voices, such as the Dalit, the feminist, and the subaltern. In the post-modern sense, as against the unity of earlier times, one witnesses what Partho Chatterjee calls, "fragmentation of nation" and "plurality of cultural voices". The literary scenario now presents a structure signifying the emergence of the subaltern studies, which subsequently went on to a critical enquiry into Indian society, culture and politics. Owing to the decolonization of the Third World countries, the global

awakening for women's emancipation, Indian literature, especially the novel and short story, seems to be strongly in tune with the post-structuralist ideas where every literary cite seems to be undergirded by the dissenting mode. The Indian fiction around the Eighties and Nineties therefore seems to be belonging to this dissensual culture, making a loud proclamation that the earlier notions of history, politics and culture of the pre-independence era need to be restructured in the context of changing conditions after independence.

The early novelist talked of ideals like the upliftment of the depressed classes, widow remarriage, education of women and child-marriage, dowry, superstition, sati system, untouchability and so on. The greatest of these liberal and progressive causes was the Indian freedom struggle. The influence of this great movement was so wide spread that there is scarcely a major Indian novelist who, having lived during the first four decades of this century, has not written about it. The novelist of the Twenties such as R.K. Narayan, MulkRaj Anand, Raja Rao, contribute substantially to the Indian Literature in English which to a larger extent forged a path for the literary artists of the future times. May it be Narayan's *Waiting for Mahatma* or Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* or Anand's *Untouchable*, they

present a picture of typical Indian lower and middle class society with all injustices and atrocities, amidst which Gandhian principles bring out the sole ray of hope. A cross section of India and Indian society is presented with a photographic fidelity by these novelists.

The aftermath of independence has figured in the works of Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Salman Rushdie and others. The discussion of the literary cannon of post-independence times proclaims a stronger necessity that the question of fresh definition of history, politics and culture is of paramount importance in this changed situation. The ideological status quo of the earlier times comes under a severe attack in the writings of Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, and a host of women and minority short story writers. All these writers seem to be inordinately preoccupied with the idea that history and culture have been severely subjected to sexual and textual politics. This cannon also proclaims that the history is no longer a unified entity. Rupture of history and culture becomes the focal issue for writers such as Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee in their later phase. Abandoning the earlier notions of history and culture, these writers seem to place their short fiction in a new context seeking

alliances with the fragment of society, and the issues of the masses. In the words of Lestly Fiddler, these writers seem to be “Crossing the border and closing the gap” between high and low, popular and non-popular cultures. Marxism in literature, Foucauldian notion of history, Derridian laws of subversion at the level of politics seem to be actively at work in the creative acts of all these writers.

As against, the notions of history, politics and culture reflected in the writers mentioned, Indian literature from 1960 onwards presents high ideological vibrancy where in Lyotardian sense, literature seems to be an account of "little voices" or "petite narration" doing away with the imbricating metanarration of the earlier times. Owing to the encampment of the national emergency, the Blue Star Operation, Indo-Pak war, Indian history and politics underwent a radical change challenging the nationalistic fervour and euphoria.

The feminist ideas in the works of Simon-De-Beauvoire, Kate Millet, Betty Freidan and others began to affect the consciousness of many an intellectual, particularly the educated Indian women. So the 1980s have seen a number of novels by a host of writers on the theme of womanhood. Such feminist sensibility with the nativized Indian variety is seen in the fiction of Shashi Deshpande, Bharati

Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Anjana Appachana, Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Desai.

Thus the 1970s in literature looked for a shaping of the new Indian sensibility. The assassination of Mrs. Gandhi in 1982, the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, the call of Khalistan, the sporadic cries for a fundamentalist Hindu/Muslim identity - although disturbing, these events have only worked the need for national integration and the recognition of plurality. The 1980s novels reflect, as never before, the theme of the mixed Indian tradition. The controlling temper of the period is synthesis, mixed Indian tradition, polymorphism where all religions, all communal groups including the minorities have an important place.

The fiction of Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Anjana Appachana, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie and others whose writings reflect these modern trends, fall in the last two decades of the twentieth century and try to present the modern India, the effects of globalization and various subaltern concerns. As artists have from the earlier times been the historians, they are the interpreters of contemporary society and culture and are the prophets of their people. To what extent such historical

traits which include moral, philosophical, social, political and other important contemporary trends are reflected in the Indian English fiction written in Eighties and Nineties are the post modern concern and accordingly, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee have elaborated the Indian history. Both being expatriate Indian writers are very much concerned about the history of India and its historical and socio-political details as in their memories.

The term 'political' would mean the various suppressions that are seen in the society. It could be the influence of external forces on the Indians in the name of globalisation, the oppression of the political parties over the common folk, the religious authority over the innocents; the master class over the servant class, the industrialists and capitalists over the workers, the upper caste over the lower caste or the untouchables or vice versa; man over a woman; adult over a child or an adolescent; or to say in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak - "The subalterns" which would simply mean 'the underprivileged'. To observe the changed notions of nation, nationness, nationalism and nationalistic fervour the short stories of Salman Rushdie could be dealt. His stories in the collection *East and West* are richly nuanced with the bitter irony of the

writer for the various political turmoil that the country had undergone during the 80s and 90s.

It is hard to define 'culture' and 'cultural studies' because the word 'culture' is notoriously hard to pin down. May be, it could be said as a "loosely coherent group of tendencies, issues and questions" as Patrick Brantlinger points out. Arising amidst the turmoil of 1960s, a cultural study is composed of elements of Marxism, New Historicism, feminism, gender studies, anthropology, studies of race and ethnicity, film theory, sociology, urban studies, public policy studies, popular cultural studies, and post-colonial studies- all those fields that focus on social and cultural forces that either create community or cause division and alienations. As the culture of the next century will put the premium on people's ability to deal productively with conflict and cultural difference, an understanding of the cultural reflection in the texts of 1980s and 1990s would enable one to fully cope with "culture wars" of Orientals and Occidental worlds. How far the British cultural materialism or the American multi-culturalism influenced the Indian mind and is reflected in the Indo-Anglian literature is a new perspective.

A host of women writers in the Indian scenario in the 80s and 90s

acknowledged Indian culture and offered realistic representations of different models of womanhood. They tried to sculpt new models of female characters in relation to the Indian culture and changed socio-political situations. Lacanian unconsciousness mind is poured out in the writings of Shashi Deshpande, Chitra Banerjee, Anjana Appachana, Anita Desai and Rohinton Mistry, so that their characters were “thinking the unthought”, in the words of Michel Foucault (1970) and “Speaking the unspeakable” as Tony Morrison (1990) affirms. Besides sexuality, -motherhood, marriage, married relationship with husbands and children are some major concerns of these writers. Bharati Mukherjee, Anjana Appachana, Chitra Banerjee, Shashi Deshpande and other women writers’ fictional corpus indicate the arrival of a new Indian woman eager to define rebelliously against the well-entrenched, moral orthodoxy of patriarchal Indian culture. The writing of Rohinton Mistry presents the Parsi Zoroastrian culture in his fiction.

In the writings of Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry and other modern writers, one finds the representation of the predicament of modern youth in this global and westernized Indian society. They are

historiographers unfolding history with its multilevel and variegated nuances; They give a different colour and perception to the notions of nationalism and nativism; The changed cultural scene, the position and role of women in the society and in the domestic framework, with all prejudices and predicament is well presented by the female writers of the last two decades. Whether it is women voices or the dalit voices, one finds in their literature, which they have crossed the establishment phase from subjugation and are looking towards future beyond the horizon.

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