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INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: GROWTH OF NOVEL AS A LITERARY FORM

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Abstract:

The European novel, the English novel, the American novel, and the Indian English novel have different nuances, but their general achievement has been the creation of a world a fictional world where fact and fancy intermingle, a populous world in which we find the living characters the novelists have created: men and women who live a vibrant, reverberating life, who compel the attention, evoke the sympathy, deserve the repulsion, and stimulate the thoughts of readers.

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Novel has a very wide following, the privilege, perhaps, no other genre enjoys in the world literature today. This is mainly because novels bear witness to the curiosity of mankind about itself, they show us how writers see men and women in their societies, and they often demonstrate men and women coming to terms with society in the process of growing up, of learning, of making crucial judgments, of taking decisions, either carrying out actions themselves or reacting to the thoughts, the emotions, and the behaviour of others. In this creation which reaches into realism of the infinities of imagination, or mingles these extremes there is, almost inevitably, the human desire to tell a story, a story about people. Henry James notes in *The Art of the Novel*, "...the novel remains still, under the right persuasion, the most independent, most elastic, most prodigious of literacy forms" (186). One of the most rewarding ways of reading a novel is to see it as belonging to that long tradition of fixation that includes *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* on the one hand and *Travels with My Aunt* and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* on the other: fiction, that is, that examines its symbiotic relationship with fact and explores the role of imagination in creating and evoking reality, which, in the artist's sense is always something created: it does not exist priori.

Novelists continually add to the richness of our human experience; they bring before us new topics, new characters, and new attitudes. The story of the Indian English novel is a one-and-a-half centuries of fascinating history. It reveals the dialectics of imperialism in its journey from the periphery to the centre and echoes a deep core of neo-colonialism based on power politics. Again, the Indian English novel as the "Third World Novel" refers to representations of colonialism, nationhood, postcoloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, and their corruptions. Though engaged in postcolonial consciousness, the novel also attempts to universalize humanistic gesture, for human nature and social relationships are as important as the interplay of power and national relationships. The first English novel in English is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*. The Indian English novelist seems to have begun as an exile in his own land. Creative displacement appears to be the norm of success: Mulk Raj Anand writing in England, Raja Rao in France; Anita Desai in wartime England; Rushdie, Vikram Seth, and Amitav Ghosh also in countries other than their own. V.S. Naipaul can be described as a writer without a country. R.K. Narayan did not leave the shores of India until he was fifty but he had moved, early in life, from Madras now Chennai to Mysore, and spent his formative years there and was domiciled there.

Perhaps the confident prose of Narayan's award winning novel *The Guide* owes something further to the novelist's sojourn in the U.S.A. where he was actually paid to write his book. Exile appears to do good even to writers in Indian languages, Anantha Murthy wrote his Kannada novel *Samskara* in England.

This “exile” shaped the Indian sensibility by setting in motion a complex evolutionary process in different circumstances. This cross-cultural shift results in the writer's loss of mother tongue as a potential literary medium. This loss, perhaps, works to the advantage of the artist's natural affinity for an alien tongue. English opens up literatures of the world. The foster-tongue becomes, at a critical point, the writer's creative medium. R.K. Narayan admits that he never wrote in Tamil. Vikram Seth admits he hardly knows Punjabi. So the Indian English novelist can be said to be the product of two environments: the native ethos with regional culture and the assimilated language milieu. Getting these two to collaborate is the crux of the matter.

In the nineteenth century, in the southern part of India there was a vigorous and fervent social criticism against the economic exploitation, the rigidity of caste system, and the miserable condition of young widows in society. Novelists like Rajam Aiyar, Madhavaiah, and K.S. Venkataramani published in English after Bankim.

However, these novelists were bilingual and even if they wrote in English, the address was to the regional audiences. This is apparent by the large number of Indianisms in their work. Also they were didactic: the nation was shaping and the Indian English novelist played his patriotic part in it.

In the early 1930s the Indian English novel underwent a great change it went abroad and became international. Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan wrote on authentic Indian themes and wrote like Indians and for their compatriots, but they also achieved a double audience. Anand and Narayan had to wage an epic struggle to establish themselves. It was Graham Greene who came to the rescue of Narayan and saved him from a crippling despair. It was their self-faith that made novelists of the 1930s to stand the test of time.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes, “What makes Indo-Anglican literature an Indian literature and not just a ramshackle outhouse of English literature is the quality of its 'Indianness' in the choice of its subjects, in the texture of thought, and play of sentiment, in the organization of materials and in the creative use of language” (8). In spite of its diverse culture, races and religions, Indian Writing in English has successfully recaptured and reflected multi-cultural and multi-lingual society. As a result it has aroused a good deal of interest at home and abroad also. V.K. Gokak also remarks in this contest, “The Indianness of Indian writing consists in the writer's intense awareness of his entire culture” (24). The distinctive differences between Indian and alien cultures resulted in a quest for cultural identity among Indians. This is where the Indian English writing focussed its attention. It also served as a medium for Indians with different mother tongues to find a common thread in India's rich and kaleidoscopic yet pluralistic culture. Meenakshi Mukharjee quotes the American critic, Marius Bewley's observation, “The American novel had to find a new experience and discover how to put that experience into art. And the process by which it has been done was one of progressive self-discovery for the nation”(24) and also says, “By and large, this finding of a distinctly national experience and its legitimate expression in art is what distinguishes the literature of one nation from that of another” (24). She also thinks that “whatever be the language in which it is written, a novel by an Indian writer demands direct involvement in values and experiences which are valid in the Indian context” (24).

When it comes to choosing the language for the novel, English seems to be very appropriate as it is understood by most of the readers, whatever be their mother tongue. Also, English can no more be considered a foreign language. It has now become part and parcel of our cultural spectrum. The Indian English writer is in an advantageous position being able to draw from the perennial sources of Indian literatures. Kamala Das, in the context of choosing the language pleads:

I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.
Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave

Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
 Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
 Any language I like? The language I speak,
 Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
 All mine, mine alone.
 It is half English, half Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
 It is as human as I am human, don't
 You see? (32)

Thus the novel in English has become part and parcel of Indian literature. The “Big three” Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan were followed by other distinguished writers like Manohar Malgonkar, Kushwant Singh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Balachandra Rajan, etc. Thus the aims of the 1930s were consolidated in the fruitful decades that followed. Especially, novelists like Manohar Malgonkar brought professionalism to the literary form. The post-1930s period produced some classics.

Women writers were able to establish a position of importance only much later, though they attempted to write novels in as early as in 1879. *Nectar in a Sieve* of Kamala Markandaya brought immense glory to the woman novelist. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sehgal and Anita Desai established themselves as distinguished women novelists. Kamala Markandaya was familiar with the east-west encounter in different contexts and her novels reflect the resultant identity crisis of this encounter. Nayantara Sehgal's novels present an authentic picture of India after independence. Anita Desai carved a niche for herself by her delineation of the inner lives of hypersensitive women. These women writers added a new dimension to Indian English fiction with their exquisite perception of feminism.

The 1930s were the Age of Faith, followed by decades of professionalization, and the 1980s were the Age of Confidence. The 1980s were marked by infusion of new blood into the genre; several new novelists many of them young published their first novels.

As elsewhere, majority or novels in India have been written in response to historical movement or events such as the Gandhian movement, Imperial Rule, partition of the country, and the emergence of new India. The heroic effort to throw away the foreign yoke was an epic struggle covering the first half of the twentieth century. The nation was in ferment; a massive movement for liberation from the foreign rule was raging in the country. The British, who were exploiting India utmost, were in no mood to withdraw. The struggle was long and grueling.

The freedom struggle caught the imagination of the entire nation, no less the Indian English writers. No significant writer could escape the impact of the mighty movement sweeping the country. The novels written in 1930's and 1940's reflect the vitality of a people elevated to a cause. This is amply reflected in the novels of the period Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Anand's *Coolie*, D.F. Karke's *We Never Die*, and C.N. Zutshi's *Motherland*.

The novels dealing with the freedom struggle give vivid pictures of the exploitation and the arrogance of the foreign rulers, as also the portrayal of an awakened people struggling for their birthright. The growth of the historical novel coincided with the intensification of the struggle for Indian freedom, especially after the First World War. Novels written previously had confined to religious aestheticism now the focus shifted to contemporary socio-political concern.

The Indian English novelists have been most responsive to the call of equality, freedom, and human rights: for literary artists have an intrinsic quality and ability to look beyond their time. It is they who hold before the common man a lens, as it were, through which he can see what threatens him socially, culturally or politically, and which makes him aware of the precipice that lies ahead. A number of novels were written during the period that portrayed the unjustness of the British rule and the grim fight the people were determined to give to get rid of it. Politics became synonymous with nationalism.

No doubt, the most important historical event of our age, as is evident from the writings of Indian

English novelists, was the partition of the subcontinent. The Indian English novelists, like their counterparts in Indian languages, responded to these happenings with a sense of horror. A number of novels were written on the theme of partition, the destruction it brought and the plight of the refugees. They faithfully record the reign of violence that characterized the period and provide a sad, telling commentary on the breakdown of human values. A strain of despair and disillusionment is predominant in these novels. Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, and Shiv K. Kumar's *River with Three Banks* are some of the novels that depict the horrors, trauma, and suffering of people. K.S. Srinivasa Iyengar views, "The 'leaders' had sowed the wind of communal suspicion, and Partition was the result; like a whirlwind, the mad act of Partition was uprooting masses of humanity, mangling them, and throwing them across the border in heap after heap." (498) Balachandra Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* also deals with the theme of partition. *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal can be considered a comprehensive account of the holocaust in its vividness with many moving episodes. K.A. Abbas's *Inquilab* depicts the periods of Rowlett Bill, Jallianwalla Bagh tragedy, Salt Satyagraha, and Gandhi-Irwin pact of 1931. Our freedom movement is the greatest historical fact of contemporary India. Whatever we may regard to interpret it, no one had conceived, not even the shrewd British, the dimension this movement would acquire in a matter of a few decades. E.M. Forster, publishing his *Passage to India* in 1924, is also completely silent about this movement.

Some of the contemporary novelists Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, and Vikram Chandra made their mark in the contemporary fiction writing. Amitav Ghosh belongs to this group. These novelists give convincing evidence of wholesome body contact with reality: their range of engagement is wide and full, from comic hilarity to philosophic serenity. These novelists are also sensitive to nature; one of the attractions of Seth's novel is the steady flow of the seasons in California. The new breed of novelists shows their appreciation of music and painting; bird-watching is a characteristic pastime in Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* and Gopal Gandhi's *Refuge*. Again, these novelists demand much from their readers more often than not, they are voluminous but the reader keeps company with them because of their magnetic powers they realize with competence: action, dialogue, scene, and all the staples of fictional art.

The Stephen's factor is also important. Irwin Allan Sealy, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Gopal Gandhi, all have graduated from St. Stephen's, Delhi. The significance of the Stephen's factor points in a social direction; most of the 1980s brigade share a metropolitan, even a cosmopolitan background. The novelists of the 1930s were born in a rural or semi-rural milieu or were brought up there and spent their most impressionable years there. In the 1980s, there was in the Indian English novel a sub continental shift. This national literature has come a long way since the 1930s; the centre of gravity has moved to the urban end. Over the decades even R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao revealed a growing intercontinental awareness. The nation itself has moved from the village centrism of the Gandhian era to the city centrism of the post-Nehru period. So, these novelists reflect, confirm, or even dramatize this movement from the rural to the urban, to the cosmopolitan. In Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*, his first novel, the hero Alu progresses from rural Bengal through the subcontinent to the Middle-east and on hopefully to Europe. The action of the novel is a representation of the direction the national psyche has tended since Independence. Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* was the high watermark of Indian literary scene of the early nineties. Salman Rushdie shot into fame with his famous *Midnight's children*, which fetched him Booker Prize in 1981, Booker of Bookers in 1992, and Best of Bookers in 2008. His language hybrid peppered with Indian terms conveys the theme representing the vast canvas of India. He mostly makes use of magic realism popularized by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Vikram Seth fan of Jane Austin uses pure English, and realistic themes. Attentive to story in its details and twists, Seth is also a good poet, though neglected. Shashi Tharoor in his *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) employs the technique of storytelling.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has drawn a great range of opinions, though some of them could be reactionary responses to the hype. This Booker Prize winning novel seems to have survived

a flurry of critical darts flung at it. It is predominantly a novel by a woman, about a woman seen through the eyes of a woman. *The God of Small Things* breathes the spirit of youth. It is a protest novel radical and subversive. In its ability, its keenness to view things as they are, the book is young. The story is about authentic India, but the sensibility is urban, westernized, and modern. Political conditions of the 1970s and emergency made the novelists turn to history for a new theme. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a classic example of basing the theme on history and politics. When Rushdie evokes history of India since the coming of the Moghuls, through British colonization, and brings it up to date with the imposition of the emergency and its consequences, the objective is not to raise public consciousness or to inspire apathy. It is, rather, a kind of assault on the state for its brutal use of power and authority on its own citizens. Other novels of worth consideration with different themes of the period are Rushdie's *Shame*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*, Nayanatara Sehgal's *A Mistaken Identity*, and Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*. Other writers of worth consideration are Rohinton Mistry, Farrukh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, and Bapsi Sidhwa. Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* is based on real facts pertaining to the conspiracy case of Nagarwala, employee of the Parliament Street Branch of SBI. The title of the novel is taken from T.S. Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rohinton Mistry, and Vikram Seth write with individualistic tone, no more imitative of British model or apologetic about writing in English. These writers use English with much more degree of confidence than the earlier writers. The credit for liberating Indian English from the colonial yoke goes to writers like Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, and Amitav Ghosh. So these novelists need not have to defend their choice of using English for creative writing. Many of them are free from the British way of using English. There is no restriction of spelling, sentence structures, grammar, etc. This displays a careless intimacy with English, which enables them to play with it.

Among the new young writers, Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center*, *Five Point Someone*, *2 States*, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, and *Revolution 2020: Love, Corruption, Ambition* greatly influenced the Indian English novel. Another contemporary writer who has gained immense popularity in recent times is Amish Tripathi. With his novel *The Immortals of Meluha*, based on the origin of Lord Shiva, Amish Tripathi has made his mark in contemporary fiction. His second novel, *The Secret of the Nagas*, deals with the origin of Nagas and their encounter with Lord Shiva.

Meenakshi Mukharjee termed the Indian English novel the “twice born fiction” because of its dual parentage. She says, “By designating Indo-Anglican novel as 'twice born' I have not tried to promote it to a super caste. I find it the product of two parent traditions, and suggest that recognition of this fact is the first step towards granting the Indo-Anglican novel its proper place in modern Indian literature.”(6)

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