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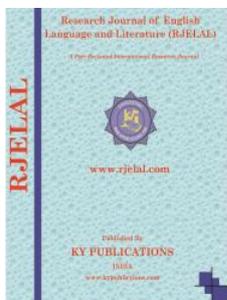
INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL: AN OVERVIEW

Dr. A. SREEDEVI

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nizam College, Hyderabad

Email: sreedevi6@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

The present paper, *Indian English Novel: An Overview*, traces the history and tradition of Indian English Novel for a period of 150 years. It analyses the themes and backgrounds of the English fiction in India at micro level. It raises questions about the limitations the writers face when they write about Indian culture, tradition, society in a foreign language. And the paper concludes that fiction writers in India, dealt with diverse subject matters in different backgrounds and settings and successfully portrayed the unique Indian sensibility at great length.

Key Words: English, fiction, India, themes, development.

Novel writing in English in India began with the publications of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohna's Wife* (1864), Raja Lakshmi Devi's *The Hindu's Wife* (1870), Toru Datt's *Binaca* (188). But since they had loosely constructed plots, they have not been called pure novels. Later, up until the middle of the 19th century, there was no trace of novel writing in India. After the Western novel's influence on Indian writing during early 20th century, the 'literary renaissance' first manifested itself in Bengal and gradually spread to the other parts of the country.

It is said that the novel in Bengal has passed through three stages. Ananda Sankar Ray, a prominent Bengali novelist says, "at the time of Bankim's writing, the chief question was how to restore the national self-respect, in Rabindranath's time, it was how to bridge the East and West and in the dynamic age, it is how to identify with the common people."¹

Rabindranath Tagore, a prominent figure in Indian English Writing won Nobel prize for his *Gitanjali*. He became popular with his first novel

Choker Bali (1902) which was rendered into English with the title *Binodini*. Though initially Tagore tried to imitate Bankim in his work *Choker Bali*, later he found his own voice and came out originally. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) avidly read the works of both Bankim Chandra and Tagore and was greatly influenced by them. He courageously portrayed the lives of the down-trodden and middle class people in his writings. The three novelists Bankim, Tagore and Sarath (B.T.S) are fondly addressed *triune glory* in Indian literary circles. Bankim Chandra exposed the plight of characters caught in the severe and rigid system of joint family. Tagore dramatizes the sociological and philosophical problems faced by young woman due to their widowhood. Sarat Chandra attempts to appraise the Indian mind through realist technique. The trio wrote fiction covering subjects like politics, economic exploitation, caste system and the miserable condition of young widows of the then society.

A major change that occurred in the treatment of subject in Indian English novel before

Independence and after Independence can be seen in Srinivasa Iyengar's thought:

"After the advent of Independence, the more serious novelist has shown how the joy of freedom has been more than neutralized by the tragedy of the 'partition,' how in spite of the freedom there is continuing corruption, inefficiency, poverty and cumulative misery, how, after all, the mere replacement of the white sahib by the brown sahib cannot effect a radical cure for the besetting ills of India."²

Indian novelists have also artistically exploited the socio-political changes that took place in India during the time of struggle for Independence. The image of Gandhi in R.K. Naryan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, K.A. Abbas's *Inqilab*, and Chaman Nahal's *The Crown and the Lion Cloth* suggest that writers showed realistic image of the contemporary society.

Tagore's *The Home and the World*, Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* and K.A. Abbas' *Inqilab* deal with politics in the context of the revolutionary movements of the Independent era. Kushwanth Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* (1956) gives a graphic account of the pangs of separation of the two nations, India and Pakistan. The theme of this novel is mixed with horrors of communal rites, and humanity and compassion for all races. Balachandra Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* is a powerful comment on the problems and the chaotic conditions that India faced after the partition. In Rajan's words:

"India today is facing radical challenges not merely in its sociological landscape but perhaps even in that immemorial landscape of the heart. The clash is not simply between East and West (a conventional but deceptive stylization) but between the modes of a pre-urban civilization and one committed to drastic industrial growth."³

Some of the subjects, pertaining to religion that are very central to the Indian life, have been examined by writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bhabhani

Bhattacharya and R.K. Narayan. After Bankim's use of the sanyasi (in the form of masquerade) in his novel, the theme appeared in many fictional works

in India. For instance, Bhabani Bhattacharya creates a fake swami in his novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger*. The protagonist Kaloexploits the weakness of people and their blind beliefs, and cheats them in the name of 'Lord Shiva.' In R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, Raju becomes a swami by chance. Through Raju's character the reader understands that, though there is a temporary gain in easy fortune, a false personality never endures it.

To discuss about the narrative techniques that the Indian novelists employed in their writings, stream of consciousness is one of the major narrative techniques taken up by writers like Shakuntala Shrinagesh in her *The Little Black Box* (1955) and Anita Desai in her *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965). For the background of the novel the novelists in India used different settings. Many of R.K. Narayan's novels have their setting in an imaginary town situated on the bank of the river, Sarayu. In the famous novel *Kanthapura* of Raja Rao, the river Hemavathy is a person and a presence too. There is no lack of variety in novel writing in India to meet the needs of all kinds of readers. Purushottam's *The Living Mask* and the novels of Suddin are works of fantasy. Also we have detective novels like S.K. Chettu's *Bombay Murder* and Kamala Sathinandhan's *Detective Janaki* and philosophical novels like Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*.

The importance of the novel lies in its dealing with social evils and resurrection out of the sphere eventually. A novel's primary purpose is sometimes to spread and carry successfully a message enabling the identity of a man. R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, and Salman Rushdie have all exposed different sociological issues according to the demands of time and contemporary imperatives. Narayan opines about novel, in his *Reluctant Guru*:

"a novel is about an individual living his life in a world imagined by the author,

performing a set of actions contrived by the author. But to take a work of fiction as a sociological study or a social document could be very misleading. My novel *The Guide* was not about the saints or the pseudo-saints of India, but a particular person.⁴

Mulk Raj Anand sensitively treats the atrocities suffered by a scavenger in his *Untouchable*. Scavengers are looked down upon because they are viewed as 'pariahs,' the low-caste people. Basically, the caste system is exploitative and practiced to protect the interests of a few people. Anand depicts the tensions of low cast people in Indian society: their poverty, suffering, sincerity, and humility. Through Bakha he exhibits to the readers the cruelty and villainy of the upper caste people. The irony of the novel is that Bhakha was sacrificed for the 'dirt' of the upper caste people. "...they call us dirt because we clean their dirt." Anand is aware of the social change that has taken place with the appearance of Gandhi on the Indian political and social scene. Gandhi strongly argued that the Bakhas of India should find a place in the temples of India and feel the experience of redemption. The remedy is suggested by the novelist to avoid the manual scavenging by machine, to adopt western method of toilet. He says:

" I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view. Art is not necessarily for art's sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgment."⁵

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is very different from Anand's *Untouchable* since Raja Rao shows how a Brahmin boy has to encounter prejudice and harshness in order to mobilize and unite a rustic community against injustice and economic exploitation. Like Anand, Raja Rao is realistic in his novel.

Though novelists like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan started writing in the early thirties and continued to write throughout 20th

century, about the changes on the political, social and cultural fronts, they never deliberately related these changes to the individual psychology. R.K. Narayan gave a little importance to psychological exploitation in his fiction. The reader is entertained with an account of the thought process of his characters. Anand reserved a lot of sympathy for and gave importance to the characters who are down-trodden and in the same measure he brought poetic justice to the characters representing rich and high class. His fiction thus deals with the class norms rather than the personal mores of the characters. Raja Rao exclusively views the people from philosophical heights. Later Bhabani Bhattacharya and Manohar Malgonkar too have not varied much in their fictional concerns.

In Rajan's *The Dark Dancer*, the protagonist Krishna finds the West attractive but unstable and the East unattractive but compelling. Many Indian novelists treat the East-West encounter with varying degrees of success. The question of East-West encounter often arises when the writer wants to express his feelings and opinions about his/her society in a foreign language. The major problem that the writers faced during this time was their interest to write about their culture, tradition and society, and which medium they must choose to paint the diverse picture of Indian life. Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright, who writes in English says, "We must remember that tradition can be an oppressive force."⁶ The writers concentrating on the special ways of using English, use of idioms and phrases, face some questions which need to be discussed. But critics like William Walsh in his book *A Manifold Voice* stress the hospitable nature of the English language. "...Through the passage of time English has acquired a wide provenance capacity to move in the profoundest rhythm, and to be in sympathy with an extraordinary range of sensibilities."⁷ At the University of Hawaii in March 1971, some students asked Bhabani Bhattacharya 'why should an Indian depicting the life of his country should write in a foreign language such as English?' And his answer was:

"I have loved writing in English. The creative writer must have full freedom to

use the language of his choice. If he decides on a foreign tongue, he will have to cross immense technical hurdles, but that is his headache. I have enjoyed the challenge of this literary problem -expressing Indian life in the idiom of an alien language.”⁸

It is true now, more than ever before, a large number of novels are being published in India. Though there has been a lot of demand and encouragement to the novel, only a few novelists, making a reasonably comfortable living out of their art are continuing with novel writing. Indian novelists in English are facing many difficulties: the problem of the choice of a subject, the choice of the medium and the choice of the technique. However, the novelist is basically an artist. He expresses his understanding of man, nature and spirit through language, form and technique. The novel is a means of expression for the writer and it is ultimately love and compassion for nature. Whatever may be the subject, an account of life in the past, a segment of contemporary life, the problem of ethics or politics, a revolutionary movement, the novelist's comprehension of it with sympathy and sentiment will make his work transcend the local and topical, and attain the vitality and dignity of the universal. The novel is a living and evolving literary genre in India, and is cast by the hands of its practitioners. It is rich in content and is wide in range. In recent years the English novel in India has shown a marked tendency to address itself to the western audience.

In the modern age, the pull towards expressing or making room for an international culture has had considerable sometimes beneficial, sometimes devastating impact on writers. But it is recognised that several writers have fashioned out their art to resist such a homogenizing and the kind of cultural conflict caused by the relationship of colonizer to the colonized. Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Upamano Chatterjee and Aravind Adiga have made daring experiments with the form and language and have been accorded with great recognition around the globe. Upamano Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* is rightly regarded as one of the best novels of

the nineties. Arundhati Roy with her debut novel *The God of Small Things* made waves all over the world and was given The Booker Prize in the year 1997.

A typical modern work in India shows the interaction of cultures more vividly than a typically English or even American work. As Amirthanayagam rightly says:

The encounter between cultures does not often take the form of a mature interpretation. Many times immigrants had necessarily to cope with a desire to draw on separate, external cultural sources, if only to assert a personal voice in the chaos of a vast, unopened country.⁹

Writers of Diaspora struggle to give form and meaning to a double experience, the first one is attachment to his own culture and the other an understanding of a foreign culture. Many writers like Chitra Divakaruni Benarjee, Bharathi Mukharjee, Kiran Desai, V.S. Naipal and Vikram Chandra, in the contemporary times, have elevated the Indian novel to a style and feel of its own.

To conclude, the Indian English novelists through their writing demonstrated Indian sensibility and portrayed the nation's diversity of culture and tradition with all its vigour. Maintaining the artistic excellence and identity, they elevated the canon to the levels where European and Western novel stand.

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