

Cultures In Contemporary Indian English Fiction : An Introduction

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Abstract :

In recent times Indian English literature has attracted worldwide interest, both in India and abroad. It has now been unanimously accepted as part of world literature in English. Fiction, being the most powerful form of expression today, has not only acquired a prestigious position in Indian literature but it is independently recognised as Indian English Fiction. Indian literature in regional language acclaims an unparalleled standard since ancient times. But, the genre of Indian English fiction made its diffident appearance in 1864 with the publication of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's Rajmohan's Wife. The period from 1864 to 1920 witnessed sparse publications like Krupabai Sathinandhan's Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life in 1894, Sarath Kumar Ghosh's The Prince of Destiny in 1909, S.N. Mitra's Hindupore, A Peep behind the Indian Unrest: An Anglo-Indian Romance in 1909, Bal Krishna's The Love of Kusuma, An Eastern Love Story in 1910, and T. Ramakrishnan's The Dive for Death: an Indian Romance in 1911. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Indo-Anglian fiction, the last to be born and to grow up among various branches of Indian fiction" (p.30-31 TBF) and gained momentum after nineteen-sixties. The path to establish the genre as an independent body saw two major impediments- "first, it endeavors to create literature in a language which in most cases has been acquired rather than spoken from birth: second, it seeks to establish a distinct literature in a language in which great literature already exists." (p.33 Twice Born Fiction) However, the rich literary harvest produced by the Big Three (Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and M.R. Anand) elevated Indian English Fiction to a new height. The contributions ascertained by some other highly acclaimed novelists along with these three masters firmly grounded the genre in world literature.

Keywords: Indian Writing in English, Fiction, journalist, linguistics.

The interplay of a number of material and cultural factors has brought tremendous change in recent times. The rapid developments in the field of technology and the influence of mass-media have resulted in an unprecedented interaction among various cultures. All these factors may not have resulted in the emergence of a global village yet the developments in one part of the world certainly have an immediate and immense impact at local and global level. It has a deep influence on the lifestyle and thinking of the people at a mass level. The intervention of these influences has introduced new trends in the emerging art forms including literature.

Literature no longer remains limited to particular geographical, national or cultural circumstances. The global concerns and shifting paradigms informing different art forms have transformed the nature and the understanding of literature. The diversity of the reading material available in the market has changed the desires and expectations of the readers also. There has been a spurt of writings that not only mark interdisciplinary nature of literature but also provide an impetus for competition under unreasonable pressures to innovate. It has resulted in a form of writings that contests categorization based on traditionally accepted literary canons.

The fictional writings of many of the recent Indo-English fiction writers also register a marked shift. Instead of informing a typical Indian cultural background and traditional Indian cultural ethos, their works exhibit global concerns through the presentation of multi-cultural reality. The changed nature of their concerns has resulted in their ever-increasing readership. The expansion of the scope of their thematic concerns and development of new forms of expression have won them many prestigious international awards including the Nobel Prize won by V.S. Naipaul. Their writings have won acclaim far and wide. Instead of the presentation of typical Indian socio-cultural background and typography these writers concentrate on different forms of life concerning various cultures. Similarly, the presentation of traditional Indian middle class society and its contradictions has been replaced with the life and experiences of the rich and to a large extent socially liberated people. Their works are not limited to the representation of commonly experienced epistemological world of the poor and the socially down-trodden. They make efforts to bring out new forms of life showing multiple possibilities of human existence in a new world. Not only this, their fictional writings also exhibit a tendency of mixing fact and fiction that marks a shift from the view that treated literature as an artistic social document. The writers

like Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth Namita Gokhale, Kiran Sawhney and Shobha De exhibit this tendency in their works. Apart from an interest in global concerns that tends to broaden the scope of their fiction, there are other factors that mark a new trend in Indian-English fiction. These factors are related to various changes in life and the shifting paradigms of understanding in literary theory and practice.

Similarly, the quick urbanisation of Indian society and the influence of mass-media have brought immense change in contemporary Indian life. The traditional moral values and static, all-pervasive norms of behaviour have collapsed under the impact of multi-cultural nature of reality and the influence of new means of communication including tv, cable tv, computers, internet and print media. A part from this, the democratisation of power has destabilised the traditional hold on moral and social values. All these factors have resulted in the emergence of new forms of life. And the role of media-generated images providing fantastic and romantic possibilities of life has made life more complex. Consequently, the form of fiction has undergone a corresponding shift to give an expression to the complexities of life. The complexity informing human life finds fictional expression in the depiction of multiple human selves. Human life and experience no longer follow a set pattern based on pre-fixed norms of behaviour. It marks a shift in the presentation of systematic development of human life. Instead of understanding experience on the basis of stable norms and values, multiple responses of different people in particular situations find more relevance. Consequently, fictional writings of most of the contemporary writers concentrate on the creation of different possible human situations instead of the depiction of major incidents having epic dimensions. The nature of the narrative concentrating on the presentation of these situations becomes complicated and complex. And the overwhelming presence of the story elements now seems to have been replaced by the creation of different situations and the expression of the responses of different characters in these situations. Jhumpa Lahiri's stories exhibit this tendency in abundance. Amitav Ghosh also marks this tendency by presenting multiple aspects of human self and identity through the intervention of power in human relationships.

Another aspect of the changed social scenario is the quality and nature of the readers. Instead of the traditional middle class educated people the contemporary readers form the generation of people fed on media-generated images and growing under the cultural mix of MTV, or the western reader eager

to know about new forms of Indian life. Catering to the demands of these readers, Indo-English novelists exhibit a tendency to include different elements in their works that corresponds with the expectations of the readers. It makes them depict a mixed culture and the life influenced by media-generated images. This new orientation can be ascertained from the fictionalisation of simulated reality instead of social reality. The depiction of constructed reality instead of the representation of reality brings their works close to the art forms manufactured as a commodity. Moreover, the contemporary readers influenced by the fast growing consumerist culture are more interested in the reading material having immediate popular appeal. For them the fictional works are not the sacred works of art meant to be preserved or reread. They view fictional works like other art forms related to popular media having transient entertainment value like television serials and advertisements. This tendency of the readers has also impacted the nature of Indian-English fiction. In order to make their works reader friendly these writers tend to include popular and easily understandable elements in their fictional works. The message, if at all there is any, is flashed in these writings in a quick succession of images like scenes in advertisements and films. As a result of this, the descriptive passages and philosophical views that earlier used to adorn the pages of different fictional works seem to have been replaced with narrative details presented at a break-neck speed. It marks the repetition of similar scenes and incidents presented in the fictional works of the writers like Shobha De.

Apart from the changed attitude and reading behaviour of the people the commodification of art and commercial interests of the writers have also impacted a change in the nature of fiction in contemporary times. The commodification of art is an important aspect of the consumer culture. The aesthetic considerations that earlier determined the worth of a work of art seem to have been replaced by its commercial viability. In the changed perspective, the use value of everything, including art, decides its worth. This commercial aspect makes the writer manufacture market and reader friendly product. In order to make their novels commercially viable, the novelists tend to include various elements like fantasy, romance, sensational incidents, mystery and even pornographic material in their writings. Media plays a significant role in promoting the sales of different novels. And the publishing industry, with an easy access to the means of production and advertisement, seems to play a decisive role. The big publishing houses tend to promote the works having a mass appeal. Some of the writers like Shobha De

openly admit writing fiction as a project given by certain publishers. The role of the publishers in encouraging a new type of fiction can also be ascertained from the means they adopt to earn more profits through this form of literature. The appearances of reviews much before the publication of the work and celebrity status of the writers are used as ploys to enhance the acceptability of the work. As a result of this publicity most of the readers have made up their mind to buy or borrow the work much before its publication. Of course, no fictional work is worth its salt if it does not appeal to the readers. But the type of fiction that the contemporary Indian publishing industry is patronizing has developed a purely popular brand of fiction. The abundant use of titillating reading material and the presentation of popular themes in the novels of Shobha De, Namita Gokhale, Shashi Tharoor and many other contemporary writers is ample proof of the commercial considerations having an impact on the literary writings.

Along with the economic, social and cultural materiality the philosophical and theoretical developments in recent times have also influenced novel writing in contemporary times. In the shifting paradigms of understanding the very nature of reality and its presentation in literature have undergone immense change.

In the changed scenario reality is no longer treated to be stable, monolithic, absolute and transcendental in nature. It is considered to be pluralistic, provisional and contextual. Corresponding to these ideas the fictional reality depicted in literature is comprehended as constructed and discursive instead of being mimetic and representative. In the present scenario signifiers do not have fixed signifieds. Instead, there is an endless play of signifiers that makes the ultimate meaning incomprehensible. Historical and cultural context plays a crucial role in determining the meaning. The provisional and contextual nature of reality marks the indeterminacy of meaning. It implies that the concepts like Truth, Goodness, Justice, Right, Wrong etc., cannot be understood in absolute and ultimate terms. These concepts are immanent in the process they tend to govern. They are not fixed entities. In a sense everything is fiction.

These ideas have challenged the understanding that treats history as an objective and authentic account of historical events. Now history turns out to be another kind of fiction. Therefore, the treatment of history in contemporary Indian-English fiction is directed to highlight the constructed and fictional nature of the historical truth. The writer, instead of providing an objective, ultimate, all pervasive

understanding of historical reality, tends to provide multiple views about historical events. Even the treatment of contemporary Indian history in the recent novels of Shashi Tharoor, Manju Kapur and Rohinton Mistry exhibits this changed perspective. The other Indian-English fiction writers who have treated history from a different perspective include Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh and Amitav Ghosh. Similarly, the view that does not treat literature as a representation of reality finds expression in the writings of the contemporary fiction writers in their presentation of constructed and contextual reality. Instead of the question how to understand the world created by these writers, the question what kind of world has been constructed in their fiction becomes more significant. It has led to the presentation of life and experience not based on mainstream reality informing common human experience. Consequently, the forms of experience which were earlier considered to be unworthy for inclusion in literature have also found a place in it.

The new ideas have destabilised the difference between 'high' and 'low' culture and art. As everything is now treated to be fiction and constructed then how can one fiction be better than the other. Instead of looking at literature and culture in terms of binary oppositions they are seen as multiple forms of cultural expressions. It has further contested the difference between commercial and serious art. This rejection of the boundaries between the high and the low has provided an opportunity to the writer to concentrate on the forms of life on the margins. The forms of life that were earlier treated to be deviant now mark the acceptance of the existence of multiple valid voices in a given socio-cultural context. Consequently, the fictional world of recent Indo-English novelists also gives expression to surprisingly different, startling and bizarre ways of life.

The novelists like Shobha De seem to have exploited this aspect of the shift in paradigms of understanding to make their fictional works acceptable. As the forms of life presented under the garb of giving expression to mute-voices and traditionally marginalized aspects of human experience serve the commercial ends of the writers, more and more contemporary writers have started including such material in their writings. The recent novels of the writers like Khushwant Singh (*The Company of Women*), Manju Kapur (*A Married Woman*), Shashi Tharoor (*Riot*) also mark this tendency. It implies that instead of concentrating on the expectations of the critics and academicians the contemporary fiction writers are more concerned about the masses interested in popular fiction. The

implied reader of these writers includes reader on the run, bored middle class housewives and the romance-loving casual readers who fantasise about deviant forms of behaviour as depicted in movies and presented in glossy magazines. It tends to bring fiction close to different forms of popular visual and print media. Consequently, the forms of life—like the experiences of sexual perverts, sexual exploitation in the film industry, business world and the world governed by underworld dons, intimate marital experiences etc.— that usually form a part of popular media have started showing overwhelming presence in literary writings, particularly fiction. Apart from this, contemporary popular subjects related to recent communal clashes and political controversies also find a significant place in contemporary Indian-English fiction.

The theoretical perceptions propagated in different critical theories like post-colonialism and feminism have also introduced a new trend in contemporary Indian-English fiction. These perspectives have not only provided an opportunity for the expression of the life at the margins but also added political dimensions to fiction. Under the impact of the new perceptions the fictional writings of the contemporary writers also explore the working of power politics in human relationships. It tends to make their works a politically symbolic act. As a result of this, the images of particular classes of people and the fictional stereotypes of different cultures are presented and studied from a different perspective. The postcolonial perspective, with its emphasis on the experiences of the erstwhile colonies of the British empire, has resulted in the depiction of cross-cultural contexts from a different view. It adds political overtones to literary writings. The colonial experience and the process of de-colonization finds powerful expression in Amitav Ghosh's novels. An interesting aspect of the depiction of the experience of the colonised culture is the continuation of colonial oppression in postcolonial cultures in a different form. Moreover, how the process of decolonisation finds extended meaning in man-woman relationships has been presented by feminist Indian-fiction writers, particularly women writers. Here again the constructed nature of historical truth, cultural stereotypes and the concept of gender gets highlighted.

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