

Reflections on Contemporary Indian English Fiction

Edited by:

Kulbhushan Kushal, N. K. Neb

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INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction has always been responsive to the changes in material reality and theoretical perspectives that have impacted and governed its study since the time of its inception. At the earlier stage the fictional works of the writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao were mainly concerned with the down-trodden of the society, the Indian middle class life and the expression of traditional cultural ethos of India. At that time, even to a much later stage when writers like K. S. Venkataramani, Markandaya, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Chaman Nahal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Arun Joshi, and Khushwant Singh wrote, Indian English fiction concentrated on the depiction of social reality of the times. And the study of these writings was largely based on realist ideology. The critical studies of their works were directed to explore how far they had been successful in giving expression to the reality around them. Much of the study was based on sociological and Marxist theoretical perspectives. Apart from the views related to the study of external reality, the psychological reality expressed through different characters formed another aspect of literary criticism.

The interplay of a variety of material and philosophical developments marks a discernible shift in the nature and study of Indian English fiction. Consequently, Indian English fictional scene has become variegated, complex and thematically richer. The writers settled abroad and the ones who divide their time between India and abroad have contributed much to this rapidly developing sub-genre of English literature. Now Indian English literature no longer remains limited to the writings necessarily of the sons of the soil. It has broadened the scope of fictional concerns of these writers from purely Indian to the global and transnational.

The diaspora writers in particular interweave the Indian and the global that marks the emergence of cultural mix at a mass level in the times impacted by globalization and unprecedented growth in the field of technology and communication. Their writings show how the developments in one part of the world have immediate and wider impact in different parts of the world. Their fictional works become more significant for giving expression to cross-cultural encounter from a different perspective. The writings of Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Kavita Dasvani, M.G. Vassanji, V.S. Naipaul and Hari Kunjru, to name a few, provide an inside view of the problems faced by the displaced people in their adopted homes in a way that questions the traditional understanding of the concepts like home, nation, native and alien. These writers contest essentialist nature of the difference between cultures premised on binary division informing the east and the west. Whereas the earlier writers depicting cross-cultural encounter often created stereotypical forms of life and characters to mark the essential difference between the cultures, diaspora writers often contest fixed notions of identity and stable norms that govern life at home and abroad. Diaspora fiction highlights an altogether different attitude of the people from the erstwhile colonies in the postcolonial times.

Postcolonial perspectives have also impacted the critical and the creative aspects of Indian English fiction. How the colonial rulers created a particular image of their subject races to perpetrate their hold on them forms an important feature of the emerging forms of narrative.

Contemporary writers hailing from the previously colonized nations, particularly India, explore forms of life that existed during the British rule and expose the subtle strategies employed to make the colonized people take their subjugated position as something natural and transcendental. These writers also bring out the functioning of almost the same power politics that defines the relations between the power wielding people and the people kept at the margins even after the end of political imperialism. A number of contemporary writers fictionalize these aspects of life and the postcolonial critics analyze and expose the way colonialists propagated constructed reality about different societies and cultures as *the* reality. The theoretical perspectives used for the purpose are usually based on the insights provided by Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and the other postcolonial thinkers. All these ideas contest monolithic, unitary and totalitarian views about reality and its understanding. The study of literary works is taken up to find how the writers have presented experiences of the colonized people. The variety of life that forms the subject matter of postcolonial creative and the critical writings also includes different forms of oppressed human existence even after the end of British Imperialism. It points out the colonialist nature of the native rulers and challenges the essentialist understanding that treats certain races as always the colonizers and the others as fundamentally free from such cultural traits. The postcolonial fictional writings often provide a revisiting to history and contest its existing interpretation. The fiction writers often mix fact and fiction to re-examine the earlier happenings, incidents, views and assumptions. Their major concern being the nature of reality that existed during the colonial period, these writers often concentrate on the political and social happenings with a view to contesting the academic or the accepted versions about them. In the process these writings use the historical facts and references to persons and places to subvert the earlier discourses. The fictional polemics in such writings is often premised on the ideas that treat history as something constructed, hence a kind of fiction. The major function of these writings is to expose and criticize the subjugation of man by man in all its forms. Therefore, the critical stance used by post colonialists turns extremely relevant in the works concentrating on the decolonization of the social groups oppressed in the name of class, caste, gender and race. Instead of objective and realistic, this kind of fiction tends to be purposive and political as it involves the assertion of specific views in the name of giving voice to plurality, multiplicity and heterogeneity informing life.

Another theoretical perspective that asserts multiplicity, heterogeneity, and plurality in socio-cultural reality and the world of ideas relates to Bakhtin's insights about dialogic nature of discourse and significance of interactive voices. His insights in terms of heteroglossia, polyphony and dialogism have provided new ideas for the understanding and analysis of fictional works. Earlier a fictional discourse was understood to be governed by the singular perspective of the narrator or the author or some dominating character. All the fictional details were supposed to move towards a unified world view presented in a work of art. All other voices were subordinated to the governing consciousness of the author or the character assumed to carry the ideas of the writer. In the changed scenario, reality presented in a novel as well as the world view of the characters form 'polyphony' of voices. Sometimes even the characters subordinated to the predominant voices in a novel represent multiple valid voices. These ideas have challenged the unitary nature of reality, the authority of the omniscient narrator and presence of a centralized perspective. It points out a decisive shift in the understanding of reality and its presentation in fiction. As reality is no longer treated to be unitary and singular, the meaning of a work of art too is no longer considered to be ultimate, complete, total and limited to the intended meaning of the writer that he can convey in authoritative terms.

The ideas contesting stable and fixed nature of reality and rejecting the possibility of complete and ultimate understanding of reality along with the insights provided by existentialists who challenge the existence of essential human self and reality, thinkers like Foucault, Derrida, Jean Francis Lyotard, Frederic Jameson, form what is commonly considered postmodernist perspective. In spite of the difference in their approaches their views taken collectively contest originary, unitary and transcendental nature of reality and the concepts like humanism, idealism and other overarching systems like spiritualism, Marxism, humanism, etc. used to make sense of human experience. The reality and ideals like truth, justice human self and identity are treated to be constructed and contextual. By implication, the stable, pre-given and fixed nature of values stands contested. In the study of literature it displaces the canonical view about culture and literature. According to these ideas the difference between high and low serious and popular culture and art is constructed and fictional. The life in the mainstream or kept at the margins or periphery has equal relevance and significance for art. These theoretical views have impacted the thematic as well as the formal features of literary writings, particularly fiction. According to these frameworks a work of art is not supposed to follow set literary patterns and parameters. It has encouraged experimentation in fiction writing. Consequently, a shift from traditionally accepted standards and forms of life to the popular, and marginalized forms of life, and from fixed literary norms of presentation to altogether new, striking and wonderful has resulted.

Apart from different theoretical views, quick urbanization of the Indian society in recent years, emphatic role of institutionalized form of democracy and an unprecedented awareness of human rights have resulted in self assertion and individual independence that can be observed from a lack of the sense of community and a disregard for moral and social values. Corresponding to these developments, there has emerged a spurt of writings about what is commonly called the marginalized forms of life. These writings concentrate on the life and problems of the people kept at the margins due to the compulsions of gender, caste and ethnicity. For example, the writings concentrating on the problems of women are now explored with a view to ascertain how far they support women's struggle for liberation from patriarchy. Using theoretical ideas propounded by different western feminist thinkers, the critics study the fictional works of art as an expression of a specific reality related and limited to women's existence in society. Similarly, the life and experiences of the people related to specific, particularly minority, ethnic group also form the subject of study in a number of fictional writings. Although these writers tend to give a realistic view of the life around but the way they fictionalize these forms of life marks a study of reality from a specific point of view that makes the presented reality created and constructed purposefully rather than being representation of reality understood traditionally. Consequently what has been presented does not seem as important as how it has been presented. It highlights the fictional nature of the reality depicted and tends to make these writings a politically symbolic act. Such writings further highlight multi-layered and heterogeneous nature of reality and the vertical nature of cultural division instead of horizontal.

The foregoing views about the nature of fictional writings and their study suggest some predominant aspects of Indian English fiction. These ideas in any case, do not mean that these are *the*, and *the only* features of Indian English fiction and fictional studies. Moreover, a creative artist does not consciously take up writing to suit or support some philosophical, ideological or critical perspectives. On the other hand, critical studies may apply specific critical tools without limiting the meaning of a work of art. However, the recurrence of some elements in creative and critical writings marks the predominant trends.

The present anthology of critical writings on a variety of fictional works is aimed to trace the gradual growth and maturity of creative and critical expressions related to Indian English fiction. The critical analysis taken up in different papers marks the variety of perspectives used for the study of fictional writings and the shift that Indian creative and critical perceptions have registered. In her study of Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* Tejinder Kaur explores the nature of fictional discourse that concentrates on the problems of diasporas at home and abroad. Her analysis points out the broad nature of the term 'Diaspora' that also includes displaced people even within their own country. The promise of comfortable and prosperous life acts as a great pull for the people particularly from the Indian sub-continent to settle abroad. These people experience inhuman life, discriminatory treatment at the hands of the people of the host country including the earlier settlers from different countries. On the other hand, political compulsions and peculiar socio-economic conditions result in people's migration within their own country. Apart from this, how diasporas respond to their adopted homes also forms the subject of study concentrating on Kiran Desai's fictionalization of diaspora life.

P.S.Ramana's paper concentrates on the nature of the fictionalization of diaspora experiences. He points out the difference between the migrant novel in vernaculars like Punjabi and the novels written in English about people's lives in an alien land. He observes that whereas the Punjabi novel about diaspora life explores the hardships faced by the illiterate and semi-literate, farm and industrial labour the novels like *The Namesake* are mainly about the problems that the educated middle and upper middle class people face in their adopted homes. Apart from this, Ramana critically examines how Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* remains silent about the political and the broader social issues and limits to the personal and the familial. Such observations provide valuable insights for the critical evaluation of diasporic fiction. Looking from a postcolonial perspective Ramana asserts that novels like *The Namesake*, no doubt, bring out the hardships and tensions that immigrants undergo in their adopted homes in general and in the western countries in particular, yet they fail to draw attention to the marginalized position of the migrants in socio-political terms. The silence about larger ethnic, demographic changes and cultural and economic conflicts is more intriguing in this novel. Emphasizing the role of a literary work for the consolidation or the subversion of certain ideologies Ramana considers Lahiri as writer complicit with neo-colonial forces for suggesting assimilation into the adopted culture.

Diaspora writing mostly constitutes the works by the writers settled abroad. Exception to this can be seen in Manju Kapur's novel *The Immigrant*. She depicts the immigrant experience without herself being one. How her novel offers a counter narrative to the ideas often expressed in fictional writings concentrating on diasporic experiences forms the main thrust in Narinder Neb's study of this novel. The novel subverts the discourse that tends to treat all kinds of immigrant experiences as diasporic. The paper discusses how the novelist brings out a highly pragmatic approach of the immigrants who willingly leave their native places tempted by a promise of bright future or as an escape route out of some economic or personal problem. They do not leave their earlier homes under political compulsions or due to hostile circumstances that result in forced exile. Therefore, these people's desire to settle abroad is completely the result of their own conscious choices. They are ready to make all sorts of compromises to fulfill their dreams. The sense of alienation, discrimination and being marginalized is not as harrowing and painful for them as it is for the people who have to leave their country against their wishes. It points out a different narrative stance adopted by Manju Kapur in her novel *The Immigrant*.

The interaction between different cultural groups particularly related to the East and the West has been studied from post colonial perspective by Jagroop Singh in his paper “Colonizing the Mind: Civilizational Imperialism and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*”. His study of Amitav Ghosh’s novel brings out how colonialists use strategies of “physical usurpation of territories” through militaristic and civilizational imperialism for the colonization of the minds of their subjects. The material and ideological instruments go a long way in subjugating the subject races. The paper studies this novel as a postcolonial text as it exposes the colonial designs of the British Empire. Jagroop Singh finds this novel ‘a probing critique of the civilizational imperialism of British rule which colonized the native mind by re-framing the existing structures of human knowledge into East-West binaries of orientalism’. He also points out how the novel challenges the propagation of certain constructed forms of reality and ideas as something essential and transcendental. In the process he emphasizes how the subtle ways of civilizational imperialism function as more potent, though invisible, tool in the hands of the colonialists. Premised on Said’s insights provided in his seminal works and Foucault’s concept of power knowledge discourse, Jagroop Singh’s study of *The Glass Palace* explores the implications of post colonialism in Ghosh’s novel.

Using Foucauldian perspectives Anand Bajaj, explores the role of power structures and the discourses in the fictional world created by Arundhati Roy in her novel *The God of Small Things*. In the process, he explains the nature of power, knowledge and discourse the way they are understood and interpreted by Foucault. His paper analyzes the functioning of casteism and patriarchy as the discourses that impact the lives of different characters in Roy’s novel. How the variety of perspectives interact and supplement one another to award meaning to human experiences also finds relevance when he coalesces Althusser’s perceptions about the functioning of ideology with the concepts of knowledge and power as propounded by Foucault. It brings out the similarities in the way ideology and power function as discourses of truth to “hide the essential nature of all relations”.

Bakhtin, like Foucault and other theorists, has impacted literary studies to a large extent. His concepts of polyphony’ ‘heteroglossia’ and the dialogic nature of discourse are used to study the co-existence and interactive role of plurality of ideas presented in a work of art, particularly novel. Seema Singh uses these ideas to show the presence of multiple valid voices in Amitav Ghosh’s novel ‘*The Shadow Lines*’. Her study shows that the author\ narrator does not have absolute authority at the same time nor do they turn irrelevant. On the other hand, their voices along with the other characters and the context in which the novel is being read form the fictional discourse constituted of multiple voices. These voices always stand in a dialogic relationship that makes the novel polyphonic. Consequently different shades of reality and ideologies find expression through multiple consciousnesses. The simultaneous co-existence of different literary and artistic motifs highlights the hybrid nature of novel.

The fictionalization of women's problems and their study forms another significant aspect of contemporary Indian English fiction. How women suffer due to patriarchal hegemonic structures and the way these women protest against their subjugation forms the central concern in a number of fictional writings. The study of such writings is aimed to explore the extent to which they serve the purpose of giving voice to women and support their struggle for rights. The critical perspectives used for this study involve the study of the kind of images of women the writers present and the way these images serve the feminist ends. Sunita Goyal and Manmeet Sodhi

present feminist critique of Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* in their respective papers.

The theoretical perceptions applied for the study of life and its creative representation highlight the plurality of existence and challenges the existence of a commonly experienced epistemological world. The assertion of separate cultural identities based on religion, caste ethnicity and gender in contemporary Indian English fiction can be studied against this backdrop. Jagroop Singh's paper on Rohinton Mistry's *The Family Matters* studies the ethno-religious politics that makes the minority communities in India, like the Parsis, wary of the majority community. Rohinton Mistry himself being a Parsi gives expression to the fears and anxieties of his community. The present study of his novel highlights the limitations and relevance of the fiction concentrating on particular ethnic groups. In the process it expresses the view that the novel does not remain ethnocentric as it celebrates hybridity and multi-culturalism in the on going process of globalization and transnationalism. The study also highlights the peculiarities of the post-modern, globalized world in which identity is considered something fluid and constructed. At the same time the concept of identity acquires greater significance for the minorities and marginalized groups who seek a space within the larger cultural groups through the assertion of their ethnic identity. It can also be understood in terms of emergence of micro narratives against the hegemonic nature of meta-narratives. These aspects of life, their presentation and study also forms a significant feature of post-modernist aesthetics.

Post modernist writings share the elements of modernism in breaking away from traditions, experimentation with form and a markedly different attitude towards life and its understanding yet they do not have everything in common. While modernists lament the loss of order and try to re-create it, the postmodernists celebrate it. The postmodernist art registers the disintegration of social and literary traditions and values. All these aspects, along with other thematic features of postmodernism form the subject of study in Surekha's paper on Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*, and Rohit Phutela's analysis of Hari Kunjru's novel *The Impressionist*.

The variety of critical perspectives used to study fictional works marks a radical transformation in the attitude towards reality and realism. In spite of taking the artistic and the formal aspects of different writings the major thrust of such studies often remains thematic. Considering this as a kind of overconscious critical focus on themes Kulbhushan Kushal believes that it usually ignores the formalistic and the aesthetic. His paper on Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* brings out the relevance and significance of the study of the formal and the technical aspects of the narrative. His paper analyzes the interactive role of different structural elements, particularly theme and character in the novel. In the course of the study, he observes that the presentation of a contrast between two cultures in this novel reveals 'the protagonist's consciousness as it passes through various emotional and spiritual problems'. Kushal's paper exhibits yet another dimension of the change informing the study of fiction in general and Indian English fiction in particular.

Another dimension related to the variety informing critical perspectives deployed for the study of fictional writings and the understanding of reality presented in these works can be ascertained from Surekha's paper presenting an existentialist study of V. S. Naipaul's *The Magic Seeds*, and Narinder Neb's paper in which he discusses the nature of Shobha De's fictional world that finds relevance in the shift informing paradigms of understanding life and its fictionalization.

The present collection of articles offers valuable reflections on theoretical and creative aspects of contemporary Indian English fiction impacted by different

material and ideological spheres of life in recent times. A study of contemporary fictional works and their analysis based on different theoretical perspectives certainly points out how contemporary creative writings and their studies have moved ahead to explore uncharted lands.