



# Contributing Factors and Issues in Contemporary British Fiction

Adarsh

Research Scholar

Department of English

BHU, Varanasi.

**Abstract:** The question of contemporariness of the contemporary has always tricked the scholars and critics. The paper has tried to investigate the concept, contributing factors and issues of contemporary British Fiction. The paper highlights the social, political and economical issues and factors which has not only affected the British history but has also been a great influence on contemporary fiction. The paper thus attempts to analyze what does contemporary British fiction mean and what has made it so.

**Indexing Terms:** Contemporary British Fiction, Contemporariness, Politics, Class, Gender, Sexuality, Subculture, National Identity, Multiculturalism, Hybridity, Third Space.

## Contemporariness of the Contemporary:

The above title has three words and all of them contribute to the meaning of the whole phrase. It has been a controversial job to decide the contemporariness of the contemporary. Where some scholars opine that the contemporary literature comprises written works since World War Second, others believe this time period is too long to encompass the contemporary literary insights. The reason behind this belief seems to be logical as Britain has been involved in various wars and conflicts, such as successive Cold Wars, Falkland Wars (1982), Afghanistan War (2001-2014), Iraq War (2003-2009) are few among many, since the World War Second that it cannot be used as a departing point any more. Today majority of the scholars believe that the contemporary literature starts from somewhere in 1970s and this belief has valid points in its support. The decade of 1970s is known today for witnessing a cultural, political and social change that makes contemporary Britain different from its past since World War II. After the World War II, Britain was successful in achieving a politics of consensus which made it a Welfare State, a state where government took care of its individuals through various government controlled institutions. The difference between Left and Right diminished as people of the UK stood in solidarity after the fatal World War II. However, all these changed dramatically when Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of United Kingdom in 1979 and remained into the office till 1990. The divide between the Left and Right widened and this happened due to her policies of privatization. She came into power at a very important juncture of time when the Welfare State was losing its relevance in British society and politics and demand for liberalization was high. The Welfare State was like a security net for citizens from cradle to grave and came into existence in 1900s with an aim of improving living standards by providing proper education, health care, employment and social security was now labeled as capitalist. The reasons behind the refusal of this Liberal initiative were World War, rising poverty in Britain and conservative party which came in power in late 1970s. The Welfare State, which was believed to be a security net from cradle to grave for citizens, was now replaced by

the policies of liberalization. After coming to power, in 1979, Margaret Thatcher worked for freer markets and privatization in the economic sector of United Kingdom and ensured little state intervention. So the British society was changing rapidly both before and after Thatcher.

The economy of the United Kingdom was also changing. When Thatcher came into power in late decade, the economy sank and the country was struggling with depression and negative growth of GDP in 1980 and 1981. In addition to this, the inflation was very high, in double digits, and unemployment was soaring.

Novel, as literary genre works as a mirror of political, cultural and social changes of its time since its inception. As a result the novel also changed. The whole atmosphere was so much politically charged that writers were divided among left and Right. However, the majority of fiction was written against Thatcher and her policies and the effects on the society and culture were highlighted. This was something new for the British Fiction.

One more word in the phrase is British and this word is difficult to define since who is British and who is not and what is British. Several successful writers are migrants to the United Kingdom and their novels are also often set in their homelands, so this question arises who is a British writer. This is a long debate, however, critics and scholars believe that all those living in the United Kingdom are British. According to this assumption, Salman Rushdie and Kazuo Ishiguro are as British as Ian McEwan and Martin Amis.

### Politics:

If we notice the time period of mid 1970s up to the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was a period of turmoil in the British politics. The working class was protesting in different ways. Trade unions were also actively participating in their protest demanding higher wages and better working conditions. One such instance is that of the '**winter of discontent**' (1978-1979) and this movement of private as well as public employees was so strong that the ruling Labor Party had to agree to their demands of higher wages. Moreover, the movement brought divisions inside the Labor party itself and eventually the party lost the general elections to Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in 1979. The change in the political power heralded various transformations in social and political policies of Britain. With the change in power the focus for social welfare shifted from the State to the individual. This was the end of Britain as a Welfare State, a notion set by Labor government after the Second World War. Under the name of privatization and cost cutting government sold public assets such as British Petroleum, British Telecom, British Gas and British Rail. These steps of the Thatcher's government gave rise to dazzling double digit inflation and unemployment was at record high. The situation contributed to the increased number of working class labors who were now resisting against the government. These resistance and sometimes violent riots were spread almost all over Britain including the underprivileged parts of the country. **The Miner's Strike** of 1984-1985 is a burning example of a resistance which came into existence due to the government policies and its outcome, unemployment. It was decided by the Thatcher government that all the collieries in the country will be shut down. Fearing the loss of livelihood, miners under the leadership of Arthur Scargill stood against the National Coal Board (NCB). The move from the government was seen as a step towards reducing the powers of trade unions. The year long strike sometimes turned violent and ended with the victory of Conservative government. Consequently, most of the major collieries of Britain were closed, however, today this victory is remembered as a suppression of one of the largest strikes in the world.

These were turbulent times, the state of affairs helped the rich to become richer by accumulating vast sums of wealth. Contrary to the expectations, the situation remained almost the same after the change in political power in 1997. Labor Government, led by Tony Blair, advocated for the 'new Labor' accepting and continuing the policies introduced by the Conservative government in 1980s. With these unchanged changes British politics entered in a new era of **consensus politics**. Nonetheless, the approach to the politics changed towards the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century and all the problems including the labor movements subsided gradually. The British politics now emphasized on the conscience and environmental issues.

This political milieu is manifested in a number of fictional works highlighting the political and social conditions of the time. The writers were divided according to their beliefs, some extolled the politicians and their policies but majority of them are against them. Jonathan Coe, for example, has been skeptical and critical to Thatcherism in his 1994 novel *What a Carve Up?* and opposed New Labor in his 2004 novel *The Closed Circle*. Another writer is Iain Sinclair opposed the policies introduced and implemented by Thatcher's government in his

works. Other writers soon joined the unnamed anti-Thatcherite movement and these were Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, Alan Hollinghurst, Mark Lawson, Pete Davies, Tim Parks and many more. In fact, politics interestingly influenced literature heavily during this period which makes it different from other ages. The politics in the works of fiction of this time is clearly visible. In a very famous instance Ian McEwan once said in an interview that her notable achievement as a politician is “to make politics matter, both for those who loved her and those who opposed her.” The influence of politics on the literature of the time is immense, moreover, there are various other international incidents along with British politics which affected the contemporary British writers. The historic incidents like Cold War between US and Soviet Union which fuelled the fear of Third World War and nuclear wipe out, the fall of Berlin wall in 1989 and attack on WTC are the major influencers. Ian McEwan and Zadie Smith used the theme of Cold War and Fall of the Berlin wall in *Black Dogs* (1992) and *White Teeth* (2000) respectively. In *Saturday* (2005) uses the incident of the Attack on WTC as its beginning point. These incidents, especially 9/11, Iraq War and Afghanistan War, are still informing the subject matter of the fiction written today.

### Class:

The Labour and the Conservative Parties, 1980s and 1990s, were ideologically divided and these differences and divisions were fundamentally based on social class. On the one hand, the Labour Party, since its inception on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1900, has tried to advocate for the rights of working class, as its name signifies. Whereas, on the other hand, the Conservative Party is conceived as a party of aristocracy in Britain (although it would be wrong to say that only class played detrimental role in deciding election results). According to the famous economic theories of development there are basically three classes i.e. working, middle and upper class and these structures became very strong in Britain after Second World War. Affecting the political movements, the class consciousness became stronger and overt in the society.

The understanding of the class, as categorization of people, and its structures in the society experienced a shift in the decade of 1950s and this shift significantly affected the role of fiction and literature in society. This shift emphasized on the cultural rather than economic aspects. This transformation was pioneered in Britain by the writers such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and E.P. Thompson who were known as cultural critics and thus **Cultural Studies** emerged and came into existence in the universities. The Cultural critics strongly believed in the premise that class should be analyzed as a cultural phenomenon as it is closer to culture rather than economic status of the individuals in the society. Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart are considered as pioneers of the Cultural Studies whose groundbreaking works *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Uses of Literacy* (1958, reprinted 1992) respectively established this cross-disciplinary enterprise. Roland Barthes with his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957, trans. 1972) is one major precursor of the cultural studies in Britain. Other significant works in the field include E.P. Thompson's *The Making of English Working-Class* (1963) and essays and articles of Stuart Hall. Cultural Critics focused on the analysis and reformation the power structures and social relations in the privileged culture, race and gender. This approach has changed the way of perception of class in the last fifty years and has paved way for the growth of subcultures such as popular (POP) music, pub and football culture, film and television in Britain. These subcultures were earlier associated with lower class but are now adopted and cherished with pride by the whole country. This huge cultural shift since 1950s has made it difficult to identify the old categories of class, however, it does not mean that the British society has become classless. Although the politicians from both major parties and prime ministers in office such as Macmillan, Margaret Thatcher, Major and Blair have claimed to make Britain a class less nation, the class divide has increased further. Rich have become richer and poor poorer.

Like politics, class has also provided subject matter for novelists and writer. The whole period since 1950s is dominated by middle class writers such as Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Jane Rogers, Alan Hollinghurst, J.G. Ballard, Jonathan Coe, Margaret Drabble, Kazuo Ishiguro, A.S. Byatt, Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie. Their novels have several working class settings and often found advocating for the solution of working class issues. The prominence of class as a subject in fiction can be understood with the emergence and establishment of ‘working class’ novels in British literary world. The ‘**working class**’ novel gained importance and popularity in British households and the practitioners include famous names like Monica Ali, Angela Carter, Zadie Smith, John King, Sarah Waters, Irvine Welsh, Alan Warner, Pat Barker, James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Jeanette Winterson and Courttia Newland. However, it is not only the politics and class that influenced the contemporary British fiction but also gender, sexuality, national identity and ethnicity.



## Gender and Sexuality:

The 1949 book *The Second Sex* by the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir is perceived as the inauguration of the second wave feminism in the West. The line from the book 'I am not born a woman I become one.' is so famous that today it has become a maxim on its own. The statement highlights the role of socialization in the formation of masculinity and femininity in the society and finds it a patriarchal construct to maintain the male hegemony. This is the fundamental proposition which fuelled the new wave of feminism and witnessed movements and agitations, throughout the West, in 1960s and 1970s. The **Women's Liberation Movement** came into existence in 1960s and continued to challenge the biasness towards women till 1980s. WLM was basically a political organization of women who came together and proposed that women should be psychologically, socially and economically free. Their presence and activism brought in positive changes and uplifted the quality of women's life. As a result the perception of women across the Western Cultures changed, respecified the gender roles in society, politics and economics and changed the mindset of mainstream Western society. Nonetheless, this does not mean that every demand of women was granted and society became equal, the disparity still existed but situation improved.

In the field of literary criticism, the movement followed two lines of action: the first was intended to identify and address the male dominated and misogynistic instances in the literature of the past and this was led by critics such as Kate Millett; the second was focused on challenging the established literary canon along with deconstructive, postcolonial, New Critics, Marxist and new Historicist critics. The latter approach advocates demolition of the patriarchal standard canon and strives to establish a new literary canon for women is led by critics such as Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The feminist movement of 1970s has profoundly affected the course and status of contemporary British fiction. Unlike the previous ages, the contemporary women writers of Britain are now seen on the award lists and the university syllabuses. As a result, more and more British women writers emerged successfully in 1960s and 1970s and established themselves in British literary world. Writers such as Angela Carter, Doris Lessing, A. S. Byatt, Fay Weldon, Margaret Drabble, Emma Tennant and Janice Galloway became popular and their works engaged with the feminist issues. Like Anglo-American feminists, British novelists have been substantially influenced by French feminists such as Helen Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray who were closer to the poststructuralist approach towards language. However, this was not a new concept for British feminists as Virginia Woolf had already talked about the gendered nature of sentence structures. In contemporary British feminist tradition writers such as Janice Galloway and Jeanette Winterson have experimented with the sentence structures of language. Margaret Thatcher was an example for feminists that a woman, due to the changed atmosphere, can, for the first time, reach to the top position in Britain. However, it is sometimes misleading example as most of the members in the parliament and the government were still males and the percentage of women representation was very poor. According the Second wave feminists, the **Second wave feminism** (1960s to 1980s) was very successful and ended in 1980s. Excited with the success of Second wave feminists, scholars started discussing a new concept of Post-feminism which means all the goals of earlier model of feminism are achieved.

The success of feminists also rendered help in the emergence of the concept of **New Man** in the 1980s, basically a form of masculinity which is present in every age. The idea of the New Man is that of a male (usually heterosexual) who is standing in solidarity with his female counterpart on the issues of equal rights in the society. The New Man is no longer an enemy of the feminists and women in general instead he is with them in their struggle. Writers such as Julian Barnes, Tony Parsons, Martin Amis, John King and Nick Hornby engaged with this theme and assessed the transformation from earlier generations in their works.

In the decade of 1960s a lot of things and attitudes were changing. The established institutions and authorities were challenged unlike ever. British Empire lost its grip over its colonies and all of them slipped from its hand one by one. Literature also witnessed several revolutionary movements and schools of thought such as deconstruction, feminism, post colonialism, multiculturalism, new historicism and Queer studies. The decade of 1960s is important for the change in attitude of the society and the literature towards homosexuality. Like Women's Liberation Movement, **Gay Liberation Movement** came into existence to demand a rightful place in the society and its institutions. The 1967 Sexual Offences Act decriminalized homosexuality in England and Wales with the age bar of 21 for the consenting adults. This was a legal success but the social challenge was still unconquered. The society did not accept gays and lesbians and the incidents of violence against them were

common. One such incident is the riot in a lesbian and gay club in New York in 1969 named Stonewall Inn. Though, it was not in Britain but served as a lesson for the country and accelerated the movements for the rights of Gay and Lesbian in 1970s and 1980s. After a long battle, more success came to this section recently in the form of 2004 Civil Partnership Act which permitted the same sex couples the same responsibilities and rights to civil partners in United Kingdom. It was altered in 2019 to include the opposite sex partners also.

To deconstruct the gender and sexual identities established in the society, the queer theory developed in the second half of the 1980s and 1990s in United Kingdom. This development, however, was limited to the intellectuals of the society and was heavily supported by the seminal work of Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality* (1976). It is this theory that ascribed positive connotations to the word 'queer' which was earlier used as an abusive term. Notable theorists of queer theory are Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Their works helped the theory to develop in 1990s. It is due to the success of Gay and Lesbian movements of 1970s and 1980s that more recent writers such as Hanif Kureishi, Jeanette Winterson, Alan Hollinghurst, Julie Burchill, Adam Mars-Jones, and Sarah Waters are enjoying success and acceptance today.

### **Postcolonialism, Multiculturalism and National Identity:**

Towards the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the hold of Empire started to weaken on its colonies and voices against colonialism emerged from inside the United Kingdom and other colonizers. One such strong voice was that of Joseph Conrad who advocated for the freedom of natives and highlighted their sufferings. It was the time when the doubt and questioning spirit was intensified against the Empire. Various texts of 1890s are now interpreted as voices of dissent against British actions in foreign lands such as H.G. Wells' 1898 novel *The War of the Worlds* where the attack of Martians is compared with the actions of European Colonizers by the critics, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is also seen as a parody of colonizers and a new term 'Imperial gothic' came into existence to mock the existence of white people in alien parts of the world.

All the colonies witnessed violent and non violent uprisings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The policies of empire were challenged and the silent orientals were gaining voice. India, the jewel in the crown, gained its independence in 1947 followed by other colonies Sudan (1956), Ghana (1957), Kenya (1963) and all African nations except Namibia gained independence from the Empire in the decade of 1960. After the Second World War Britain lost its control on almost all its colonies and the sun started to set once again. The term **postcolonialism** was coined to assess the effect of the new state of affairs on the colonies and England itself. This shift also brought in several discourses and theories. The most prominent and influential is the Orientalism by Edward Said which deconstructed the construction of the orientals as uncivilized and barbaric. He opined that this negative image of the orient is fabricated by the European colonizers in order to justify their rule in the foreign land and according to him this fabrication is done with the help of Euro-centric biased literature. So the chief aims of postcolonial approach to the literary works is to dismantle that biasness, expose the negative representation and reclaim their glorious past prior to the British rule.

England has emphasized on preserving good relationship with its former colonies and thus developed the British **Commonwealth of Nations** in 1926 which is an organization of 54 countries which were the former colonies of the Empire. This gave rise to the migration from colonies (especially the Caribbean, Africa and South East Asia) to England. Consequently almost five hundred thousand migrants from different parts of the world settled in communities to the urban centers of England in 1950s and made it **multicultural**. The demographics of the British society changed and this process was not always a smooth one but faced a lot of opposition and friction from several political parties. However, one thing was sure that people from different cultures, places and with the different skin color started to inhabit England as citizens not slaves for the first time.

The concept of multiculturalism depends on the assimilation of the others (immigrants) into the Britishness while these other communities retain their own culture at the same time. However, the immigration and mingling of cultures also increased ethnic tensions and gave rise to deadly conflicts and riots. These racially motivated conflicts and violence are often depicted in the works of diasporic writers such as *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali and *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) by Hanif Kureishi. A new form emerged as a result of this multiculturalism which came to be called as '**Black British**' fiction which often addressed the problems faced by the ethnic minorities in England. Writers who can be loosely labeled under this heading are Monica Ali, Hanif Kureishi, Courttia Newland, Salman Rushdie, Caryl Phillips, and Zadie Smith.

Postcolonial theory focuses basically on the language and its use by the colonizers and the orientals and it is widely accepted that English is the language of colonizers. There has been a lot of discussion on the use of language as a tool and postcolonial writers and theorists have experimented with this tool in their works. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have also observed English as the language of the oppressor and believe that many postcolonial writers have forcefully negotiated with this fact. The issue of language is raised in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) and the characters off Zadie Smith.

The ethnic diversity and differences are analysed by various theorists. Homi Bhabha is one of them who with his concept of **Hybridity** and **Third Space** tried to analyze the ethnic variations. Hybridity as a concept refers to the cross cultural exchange in postcolonial sense. Different cultures come together and mingle without establishing superiority of any one. Whereas Third space as a term signifies a space in the community where all people (black and white) come together and feel free. Scholars believe that it is a place where colliding cultures negotiate and something new and unrecognizable is produced, both the terms hybridity and third space are interconnected and interdependent and have a significant place in postcolonial discourse. Important writers who are either immigrants or their children have significantly contributed to the new experience and culture are V.S Naipaul, Stuart Hall, Sam Selvon, Salman Rushdie, Courtia Newland, Monica Ali, Wilson Harris, Hanif Kureishi, Edward Brathwaite and Zadie Smith.

### Youth and Subcultures:

It is one of the major themes in contemporary British fiction to represent youth and their experiences of growing up. The *Bildungsroman* or the coming of age narrative has been one of the major fascinations for readers as well as writers since the beginning of novel as a narrative form in early eighteenth century. In these novels the plot revolves around the fantastic experiences and happenings in the life of the central character and these experiences are directly influenced by the cultural and social realities of the time. Some of the contemporary works and writers who have engaged with this technique are Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998), A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000).

From 1960s to the present British society has witnessed a diverse range of youth subcultures such as **skinhead, punk culture, hippies, teds or teddy boys, new romantics, hip hop and rap, generation x, rock music, Goths** and so on and so forth. These subcultures are sometimes so much intertwined that it becomes difficult to differentiate them. These subcultures have informed the literature of their time such as Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959) and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*. (1993) The influence of these subcultures can also be seen in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003).

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