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Indian English Fiction: Postcolonialism and Beyond

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Abstract: Postcolonialism is a buzzword in literary criticism that happens to be another refined and convincing term replacing traditional arena such as Commonwealth Literature or Third World Literature. The discourse emerged primarily as a reactionary force against colonizing European center. Several renowned critics have profusely contributed to Postcolonial theory. It has been convincingly contended that from the well identified geographical locations around the world which have been colonized during nineteenth and first half of twentieth century, there has come up creative literature, particularly fiction, of resistance against and subversion of Imperialism. It is the voice of protest raised by the marginalized and quite often silenced indigenous cultures or identities. The writers from postcolonial societies have been chiefly preoccupied with opposition of Euro-centric hegemonic power structure, and simultaneously they assert and celebrate their ethnicity, indigenous culture, myths, rituals, oral traditions and political identity. Their visionary actions and creative expressions essentially employ the tools of historiography. Though, in case of India, the British colonizers have denigrated Indian people as inferior community of illiterate, imbecile, superstitious snake-charmers and barbaric duckaits and usurpers of small kingdoms. As a sort of response to the White man's so-called burden to civilize the other, Indian fiction writers take up the themes of *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, pluralism, heterogeneity, multiculturalism from their socio-cultural systems and philosophical and spiritual heritage, so as to show a more authentic counterview of nature of life on the planet. The vast body of Indian English Fiction contains, in the beginning, the topics of cultural reclamation, and at the present globalization and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, culture, Euro-centric hegemony, historiography, multiculturalism, globalization, ethnicity, fiction.

Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools... but however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy (Rushdie, 18).

With reference to Indian English Fiction, Rushdie seems to express his concern for cultural hybridity, and denies the Western absolute mind. To begin with the famous Indian trio, Mukherjee Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan, it can be ascertained that they have reclaimed Indian identity through struggling against European subjugation, appropriation, rejection. Similarly, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and others have also consciously utilized historical figures, myths and archetypes glorify Indian culture as opposed to Western paradigm. In fact, decolonization is a major project of postcolonial studies. The language English was an instrument of subjugation and marginalization, which eventually became a weapon of freedom at the hands of the native writers. Raja Rao has a point there when he explains his position as a writer of Indian English fiction.

One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and impressions of a certain thought-movement that looks ill treated in an alien language, I use the word 'alien', but English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up -- like Sanskrit or Persian was before -- but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us are writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians... (Rao)

Fiction, culture, and history are intricately interconnected. Culture is, in fact, a culmination of continual dialectical historical processes, and fiction grapples with the questions of cultural identity. In Western canonical fiction the life of an individual remains the main subject, however, fiction from the Indian subcontinent informs the life of family or community a far more important matter wherein personal identity merges with the cultural identity of a community. In historical perspective, there is no denying the fact that postcoloniality is an inescapable condition informing the gamut of fiction produced by Indian writers including diaspora ones. So the present paper happens to be in two parts: the first part is about the problematic of representation, location and revival of cultural identity. To begin with the conception of the genre of fiction in the subcontinent may situate the postcolonial context with reference to assertion of cultural/Indian identity. The second part is about the crises that formulate an ongoing debate in choosing between indigenous identity and cultural plurality or multiculturalism. Herein the Postcolonialism seems to be dead. As the Postcolonial studies are fraught with ambivalence about propagating resistance and accepting the notion of hybrid modernity that dissolves the familiar cultural coordinates offering alternative possibilities of a global culture in continual flux.

I

Novel as a form never existed in Indian tradition and it came to India from the West in English language. Indians encountered the form in English but first began to write in the form in Indian languages and then in English. Imperialism and the genre of novel fortified each other so much so that one of the two cannot be comprehensively read without addressing the other. Priya Joshi comments after discussing the relation between Imperialism and novel that novel promoted the cultural and ideological agenda of empire by reinforcing upon its readers (both European and colonial) the Euro-centric hegemonic control. The novel was, in short, functional in propagating the colonizing mission. In Bengal the stirring of new nationalism were strong and such vernacular literary expressions resisted the dilution of indigenous culture under colonial regime. The very origins of the novel in India, first in vernaculars and then in English, and its subsequent indigenisation resisted Imperialism.

The use of this important form by native writers and its indigenisation in Indian languages began to articulate their own understanding of cultural space and experience. The literary conventions and discourses of the colonizers were used to voice anti-colonial sentiments, and resistance and reconstruction through the form meant self-expression. Similarly, the novel that began to be written in English by the natives also based itself on the vernacular experiments in the form to overcome deficiencies of self. Since the writers have their distinct ethnic identities, the narrative in their works becomes representative texts of cultural belonging. The novel in the hands of Indian writers, right from its Inception voiced anti-colonial concerns. It subverted the form to serve nationalist's agenda.

The genealogy of the Western novel is rooted in myths of individualism and the trajectory of individualism has left indelible marks on the growth of novel as a narrative form. However, in India, one can generalize that all narrative traditions in Postcolonial world tend to gravitate towards cultural communities, in the great Indian tradition, the epics gauged successful if they cast their networks on extended family. Mahabharata, Ramayana and Puranic literature confirms to this norm where all action is related to well known Indian idea of a family *vasudhev kutumbkam*. The novel writing in English in India grafts itself on the narrative structures of the past that go over the same history but different in kind as it gauges over life of a community, a culture that lives in India. The idea of Indian novel in English seems to question the very notion of the Western novel with its clear focus on chronicling individual careers and consciousness. Edward Said appreciates novel as a form of acculturation and accommodation of a self to society. The development of Indian novel in its various offshoots does not traverse individual terrains. On the other hand, the sub-genres of Indian novel deal with family, village, community and more in a direction where social matrix occupies the centre stage.

Postcolonial fiction is not only structured by a conscious awareness of history but it essentially restructures history. Such a narrative that seeks to invent new metaphors of cultural landscape. We find family affairs, where history of generations overrides the fictional space, domestic plots which project the concern over fast changing life-styles. The very texture of the postcolonial fiction seems to be made of kinship relations and generations coexisting, debating and intensely aware of loss of a common symbolism in a divided world. Intricately linked with such subject matter is the evolution of a nation. The condition of post colonial novel that has attracted attention for some time and has been articulated by many of the critics is the impossibility of the form to get beyond the distant vision of the white world. Aijaz Ahmed criticizes cultural hybridity of Homi Bhabha based on the presumption that in the after math of colonialism the context in which intermingling of Europe and non-Europe takes place is determined by advanced capital. In such a situation non-European hardly ever encounter each other; and European modulation plays important role in case of that encounter. Similarly, Ashish Nandi also comments on the West and its ubiquitous presence. He opines that West was everywhere within the west and outside, meaning thereby in structures and in intellect.

The choice of the subject matter in English novel in India was restricted by the experience of those writing it. When the writers mimicked Europeans they had to suffer dislocation as they wasted themselves in vain to give descriptions of the world they learnt to have confirmed inferiority on them. They were instructed about the excellence of English literature, Western systems of rationality and were simultaneously encouraged to acknowledge their own deficiencies. The colonial writers, thus, had the experience of different cultural worlds, a bilingual advantage, and had an opportunity to borrow from several traditions. No doubt, the growth of Indian novel in English was informed by the English novel, but it found its deep roots in the native written as well as oral narrative structures. They were aware of a living history different from the fossilized projections in the English novel. This colonial/hybrid text, therefore, began to dwell deep in the moorings of oral history to reconstruct narratives to rescue a nationalist self. The sincere fiction writers went beyond to shed the image of mere followers of the European idea of social realism. Priya Joshi suggests that Indian novel emerged in India as one of the most effective vehicles for articulating colonial and nationalist claims in the colonial period in the last century. The literary decolonization involved, in Ashcraft et al opinion a radical dismantling of the European codes and a postcolonial subversion and appropriation.

In the modern ICT and global mobility of wealth and work force, what post colonial studies inform as one of the basic issues is the loss of an identity or the representation of new identities. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharti Mukherjee, and Kiran Desai have presented in their fiction the extended metaphor of imagined community by interrogating the concept of nations and boundaries. They constitute Indian diaspora, and are engaged in reshaping the

constructions of both West and East by taking up ethnic, cultural, communal and political conflicts. Their major themes concentrate upon displacement, dislocation, exile, native and myths of Identity, journey as essential metaphor, migration and immigrants. As to borrow from Rushdie's term, the Empire writes back to the centre, the Indian diaspora writes back to the Indian centre. The location of the author establishes authenticity of the Representation of cultural identity. *Midnight's Children* as historiographic meta-fiction is an expression of national consciousness that presents history in mythical terms:

Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15, 1947 -- but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting moment in an Age of Darkness, *Kali Yuga*, in which the cow of morality has been reduced to standing, teetering, on a single leg! *Kali Yuga* ... began on Friday, February 18th, 3102 B.C.; and will last a mere 432,000 years! Already feeling somewhat dwarfed, I should add, nevertheless that the Age of Darkness is only the fourth phase of the present *Maha-Yuga* cycle, which is, in total, ten times as long (MC, 194).

Jhumpa Lahiri's well received debut novel *The Name Sake* (2003) portrays the complexities of the Indian other in the US. Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* highlights the nostalgic attachment to native country leading to unsettled quest for fluid identity. If the postcolonialism continues celebrating the ethnocentric cultural identities, it will be a self-destructive death.

R K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, and Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* are typical novels with postcolonial consciousness that inform the growing awareness of the nation. Also, Amitav Ghosh as a third person authoritative narrator in his *The Shadow Lines*, 1988, *In an Antique Land*, 1992, and *The Calcutta Chromosome*, 1996, is committed to create a diachronic space wherein Indian identity is constructed through history myths, memory and present. Individual memory and shared history give power to Ghosh's best work. His *The Glass Palace* (2000) releases the burden on Rajkumar to invent a family where none exists. Rohinton Mistry and Gurcharan Das in their fiction capture family and community in vivid detail. Mistry and Nayantara Sehgal trace the life of a community in critical times such as emergency. On the contrary, the fiction of Chitra Banerjee concerns itself with the subject matter wherein ethnicity gives way to multiculturalism, indigeneity to hybridity, and postcoloniality to post national globalization. Simultaneously, Bharti Mukherjee's assertion that her characters are survivors highlights the diasporic alienation and anxiety vis-a-vis the saviour power of one's native culture.

Cultural diversity is seen as a security risk today in some countries, especially the United States, better known as Melting Pot. Cultural identity can be adopted in terms of social performance, but not in essence. The imbroglia of *Marathi Manush* as well as other linguistic communities as recorded by Rushdie, is a self-adopted marginalization, restricting oneself socio-cultural context and be against the mainstream society. The writers, whose writings are underlined by diaspora recognize the presentation of a hybrid space of the contemporary metropolis. Thus, to overcome the pressures of efficiency, neutrality, and precision expected in the globalized settings the writers celebrate differences, which the hegemonic power attempts to efface. A study to appreciate celebrations by these writers needs to be acknowledged as these are the voices registering invasion of mind. These writers have registered global presence yet their works are rooted in diverse cultures competing for their survival.

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