



INDIAN NOVELS IN ENGLISH: THE RISE AND POPULARITY

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ABSTRACT

Indian novels in English have generated a considerable amount of interest both in India and in English-speaking countries, particularly during India's post-liberalization period since 1991. For India, this period has seen unparalleled consumption of global goods and exposure to international media, and has resulted in Indian writers writing in English (including writers of Indian origin) catching the attention of the Western world like never before. The nineteen nineties proved a significant period for the Indian novel written in English. This period saw some of the writers making a successful debut in creative writing as novelists and winning prestigious international award like Booker Prize and commonwealth Writers Prize. This period witnessed further consolidation of the ground won by the novel at the cost of other genres. More than the eighties, it is in the nineties that readers and critics paid their undivided attention to the Indian novel written in English. Referring to this Nanavati and Kar remark: "It is perhaps the only form of writing that instantly acquires a world-wide visibility as it is created" (14). Not only in India but all over the world, the novel is more read, more appreciated and even more marketed than poetry, "its traditional rival". Significantly enough, at various conferences of Indian Association for Studies in Contemporary Literature, held in various universities of India, the majority of papers submitted were about the Indian English novel, especially the novel in the nineties.

INTRODUCTION

A peculiar thing about the Indian novel written in English is its diasporic nature. This trend gets strengthened and confirmed in the nineties. Many novelists like Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Sashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Gita Mehta and Amit Chaudhuri are exploring the life in this country from afar. Others who like Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan and Raj Kamal Jha have so far not left for Britain, America and Canada, are based in the metropolis,

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Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi and so on and grapple with its life in their works. Their metropolitanism as well as their diasporic nature relates them to global culture, the ideal held high today. 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. Diaspora fiction highlights an altogether different attitude of the people from the erstwhile colonies in the postcolonial times.

The Indian novel in English has been dogged by the question of the authenticity of its Indianness right from the beginning. It has become particular pertinent in the nineties with the onslaught of globalization and metropolitanism. Now what our novelists of the nineties, especially the new ones, do is just to encompass metropolitanism, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in their works. Their gaze, however, is confined to metropolises, particularly Mumbai and Kolkata, and the surging waves of life beyond them are beyond their ken. In spite of piling up of realistic details writers like Pankaj Mishra, Amit Chaudhuri and Upamanyu Chatterjee, just scrape the outer surface of the seething and teeming, multidimensional and mystifying reality that India is, reality that baffles the foreigners and makes Indians feel at home.

The Indian English novel of the nineteen nineties carries the label of postcolonialism and flaunts it consciously. It is alongwith postmodernism the latest things. Every contemporary novel today, if it aspires to any greatness, has to be considered either in the terms of postcolonialism or postmodernism. 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.

The year 2000, professed to be the end of 'the perishable empire' of Indian Novel in English has proved contrary to it. The scene is bullish with novelists not only getting recognition the



world over but also fetching advance royalty in lakhs and crores like super stars of Bollywood. Vikram Seth got Rs. 25 crore as advance royalty for *A Suitable Boy*. Arundhati Roy received the highest amount ever received by a novelist for his/her first novel. Her novel *The God of Small Things* not only bagged the biggest award of commonwealth countries, The Booker, but also has become the most talked about novel of the world of its time. Kiran Desai is an Indian author. She is a citizen of India and a permanent resident of the United States. Her first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, was published in 1998 and received accolades from such notable figures as Salman Rushdie. It won the Betty Trask Award, a prize given by the Society of Authors for the best new novels by citizens of the Commonwealth of Nations under the age of 35. Her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* won the 2006 Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award. Aravind Adiga, one of the two debut novelists on the Man Booker shortlist, was last awarded the £50,000 prize for *The White Tiger*, a bracingly modern novel about the dark side of the new India.

There are great many takers of Indian novels in English. Foreign publishers like Peadar, Orion and others are paying fabulous amount to Indian novelists. In the last two decades they have bagged several awards in Indian and abroad India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award has been given to several novels, namely, R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, M.R. Anand's *Morning Face* (1971), Arun Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*, Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was the first Indian novel to be awarded the coveted Booker Prize in 1981 as well as the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. Venkatesh Kulkarni's *Naked in Deccan* was awarded B.C.F. American Book Award. Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* was selected for the Sinclair Prize in 1985 and Nina Sibal's *Yatra* was chosen for the International Grand Prix Award. Similarly, Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and other Stories*, Amitav Ghosh's *Fires of Bengal* and Amit Chaudhari's novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* have got the National Book Critics Circle Award for 1988, the Mécidís Prize of France and the Betty Track Award in 1990, respectively. The list is simply illustrative and not exhaustive and it clearly shows that Indian novels in English have got overwhelming response in India and abroad. Readers' responses have also been equally encouraging. For example, *The Idea of India*, a diasporic book by an India born Oxford Professor Sunit Khilnani has been listed by *The Guardian* among the best ten world books published in 1998. The novels of Shobha De and those of Khushwant Singh and Arundhati Rai; *The God of Small Things* have been sold like hot cakes. According to the report of *India Today* Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass House* is rated as one of the best seller novels of its time (2001). To top it all, Indian origin V.S. Naipaul is crowned with the Nobel Prize for 2001. This is an award in recognition of his life time achievement in fiction and non-fiction prose. No other genre of literature—Poetry, Drama and Criticism in English in India has got so



much ovation, money, so many awards and readers. Despite all this euphoria and successes if a top rank Indian critic Prof. Meenakshi Mukherjee calls Indian English novel 'A Perishable Empire', it merits serious attention and introspection on the part of the novelists who are riding on a wave and critics who have gone hysterical about them.

Again, novels coming from several of the Indian publishers with low budget fail to come to the notice of readers and critics. Novels coming from Writers Workshop, Prestige Books Moti Lal, Mittal Publications, Newman group of Publisher, Arnold Publisher have virtually failed to make any mark in the fiction market or in the literary world. P.V. Dhamija's novels—*Love and Lust*, *The Encounter*, *Beyond the Tunnel* from Prestige Books, Indi Rana's *The Roller Birds of Rampur* from Rupa, J.P. Singh's *Curfew*, Mittal Publications, *Release* from Writers Workshop, Calcutta, S.D. Singh's *The Rajah's Mistress* from Newman and *The Predicament* from Arnold and many other novels like them are still waiting for their due from discerning readers and critics. Indian novels in English published from England find a readymade reservoir of readers through the British libraries in India and abroad and thus have a remarkable edge over the novels published from India. It is the august responsibility of the Indian critics and media to throw some light on such novels. They certainly deserve a serious critical attention, analysis, classification and finally, definition as a distinct genre of fictional literature of our time.

It is this 'cultural dislocation', 'expatriate sensibility' that forms the core-content of Indian novel in English. Writing for Raja Rao has been a 'Sadhana', for today's novelist it is a passport to America or Europe. So they are guided more by the market than by their inner urge. It would be apt to remind such writers, who try to refute the reality of imperialism and neo-colonialism of Noam Chomsky who observed the role of leading American intellectuals in the construction of pro-imperialist ideologies and their justification of the use of force by the U.S.A. to impose its writ on the rest of the world, especially the Third World. Even a common man feels that the bottle is changed but the alcohol of colonialism persists in one form or another. And colonial hangover is also found in Indian fiction in English.

Despite Nobel's height Indian novels in English need to have a futuristic vision, develop concern for the people of India, be more representative of India with a sense of national pride and explore virgin areas in them and adopt Indian tradition of narrative. Our novelists are competent enough to do so and to make their empire imperishable.



PUNE RESEARCH

ISSN 2454-3454

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

VOL 4, ISSUE 3

UGC Approved Journal No 48520 (Arts & Humanities) ENGLISH

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UGC Approved Journal No 48520 (Arts & Humanities) ENGLISH

VOL 4, ISSUE 3

www.puneresearch.com/english

MAY – JUNE 2018

(IMPACT FACTOR 3.02) INDEXED, PEER-REVIEWED / REFEREED INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL