



HUMANISTIC CONCERNS IN POST INDEPENDENT INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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ABSTRACT

The patient historical research done by Prof K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the creative and critical output by V.N. Bhushan and evaluations of Indian English writers by Prof C. D. Narasimhaiah have compelled the attention of Indians as well as foreigners to the critical viability of studying Indian English literature with its own peculiar manifestation of imaginative power and significance. The present study deals with a survey of post-Independence fiction from the period 1950 to 1975, with an analysis of the humanistic concerns in the novels of the said period, of writers like Sudhindra Nath Ghosh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Kamala Markandaya. The study deals with the analysis of Indian and Western literary historians like K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, M.K. Naik, H.M. Williams and William Walsh, their approaches and views.

Keywords: *Humanity, Humanistic concerns, Pre-Independent Indian English Fiction, Post-Independent Indian English Fiction.*

I INTRODUCTION

Novel in the post-Independence period holds its prominent place and "retains the momentum"¹ it had gained during the Gandhian age. H.M. Williams views that the end of the Second World War brought in a "harvest of new talent in fiction which has altered the whole picture of Indo-Anglian literature as it existed before 1945."² Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao continued to contribute substantially. The tradition of social realism, established by Anand, is

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continued by novelists like Bhabani Bhattachary Manohar Maigonkar and Khushwant Singh. The experimental novel with Indian orientation and philosophical touch started by Raja Rao, with his Kathapura is also continued by Sudhin Ghose The G.V. Desani and M. Anantanarayan.

Under the modern social-realistic novelists, Bhabani Bhattacharya stands out prominently. Iyengar sees the five novels of Bhattacharya an impressive achievement. He analyses the novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya and Manohar Malgonkar quite in detail. Naik finds Bhabani Bhattacharya to be strongly influenced by Tagore and Gandhi but he feels that in fictional theory and practice, Bhattacharya shows affinity with Anand. Analysing Bhattacharya's first novel *So Many Hungers*, he calls it "one of his better efforts, though not totally free from his characteristic weaknesses."³ The novel where the background is war years and the Bengal famine, deals with the theme of exploitation-political, economic and social. Naik therefore, considers the title 'so may hungers' to be appropriate. Williams opines that the novel paints a vivid picture of the Bengal famine during the Second World War, and emphatically says that "Bhattacharya, however, is a novelist not a documentarist and propagandist."⁴

The humanistic concern in *Music for Mohini* is with the clash between 'Indian traditionalism and modernisation' as Mohini' the city-bred, village-wed girl, has to adjust to her new rural surroundings. The novel, which according to Naik is an attempt to wed the 'horoscope' with the 'microscope,' "suffers on two levels owing to a confused and superficial presentation of the issues involved."⁵ Williams, however, does not think so.

He *Who Rides a Tiger* (1952) is generally felt to be Bhattacharyas most successful novel. Naik calls it "easily Bhattacharya's finest novel - many serious questions are posed through an absorbing narrative of ironic reversal."⁶ Williams also finds the novel to have an ingenious and inventive plot and the hero of the novel - Kalo to be another version of the bogus holy-man, favourite of Narayan. Naik finds a thematic similarity with Narayan's *Guide*, though he says "in contrast to Narayan's unsullied realism. Bhattacharya allows himself a romantic touch in the final scene of the exposure."⁷ He comments Bhattacharya is "tempted to make Kalo his mouthpiece at times, but the narrative, moving at a tiger's pace, glosses over many such flaws."⁸ In *A Goddess Named Gold*, Naik feels that this is exactly what fails to happen. Even Shadow from Ladakh he says, fails but for a different reason. In *A Dream in Hawaii*, Bhattacharya takes up the theme of East-West encounter. But according to Naik, "the encounter is abortive, because while the East with all its spirituality has not yet completely mastered the flesh, the West continues to remain commercialized and confused."⁹

Manohar Malgonkar, a master story-teller, according to Naik, "is a realist who believes that art has no purpose to serve except pure entertainment."¹⁰ Iyengar too views that in plotting and narrating his stories Malgonkar displays an ability that compels recognition. Williams



thinks Malgonkar's novels remind of Khushwant Singh's but also have affinities with the stories of Kipling and the Indian novels of John Masters. Walsh sees Malgonkar's novels in the line of the pacy romantic novels of action stretching from its refined form in John Buchan, to a rougher sort in John Masters. However, Iyengar thinks that Malgonkar is not an indigenous John Masters and on the contrary, he says there is "an authentic quality about Malgonkar and his novels that can stand scrutiny without reference to the Master's recipe."¹¹ Comparing him with Raja Rao, G.S. Amur remarks that "He too is deeply rooted in the Indian tradition and loves to work on large canvases. But his approach to the novel is radically different from that of Raja Rao."¹² He adds that yet like R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, who also do not share Raja Rao's metaphysical concern or their ideas of form, he remains unmistakably Indian.

Naik considers *The Princes* to be Malgonkar's best novel compared to his other racy novels of military life as he feels Malgonkar goes beyond his limited role as a story-teller. Walsh also considers *The Princes* as 'a perceptive novel which tells with "a rare sympathy and some of the understanding of E.M. Forster, of the withering away of the Princely States."¹³ Williams, however, feels that "*The Princes* suffers from excessively romantic treatment."¹⁴ He analyses Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* in detail where Malgonkar turns from military life to the Indian freedom struggle, and considers it a more complex and ambitious story. He views the narrative itself and the well-drawn Indian scene to provide most of the interest as he remarks that Malgonkar is most successful in the narrative of adventure and violence. Walsh feels that the novel is much less effective than *Train to Pakistan*. Naik views that though Malgonkar works on a large canvas and the racy narrative is full of exciting action, the upshot is not an epic novel but melodrama.

Analysing the two novels of Khushwant Singh, Naik aptly opines that the realism of Khushwant Singh is of an 'earthier variety'. All the survey writers and critics consider *Train to Pakistan* to be a better novel compared to his *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Walsh comments that *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* has few of the qualities of the earlier book. "It is by turns sentimental and cynical and has little of the springy ongoing impulsion of *Train to Pakistan*."¹⁵ He calls *Train to Pakistan* a tense, economical novel, thoroughly true to the events and the people in the story. Analysing the style of Khushwant Singh, Naik calls it hard, vigorous, employing colourful Punjabi expletives and terms of abuse in Anand fashion and his irony sharp like a Sikh sword. He remarks that *Train to Pakistan* illustrates all these features of his art. To Vasant Shahane. *Train to Pakistan* is one of the finest realistic novels in the post Second World-War phase of Indian fiction. He remarks, "This realistic masterpiece contains, among other things, a well-thought-out structure, an artistically conceived plot, an absorbing narrative and imaginatively realized characters."¹⁶



To Williams, Khushwant Singh who started as an *enfant terrible*, is a writer who has avoided in his writings both propaganda of any sort and prudishness. He remarks that Khushwant Singh is an artist whose "forte runs to highly-coloured writing, sharply etched characters and violent, bloody action."¹⁷ But he feels there is little of the irony and restraint he admires so much in Jhabvala and Narayan. Compared to Anand, he views Anand's style is one of pity and anger but Khushwant Singh in contrast, is totally objective in his portrayal of man's inhumanity to man and if anything to blame, he says, it is individual activity or inactivity. Commenting on *Train to Pakistan*, he says that though the novel has considerable graphic power, narrative interest and even historical importance as a passionate comment on recent Indian history, it suffers from Singh's tendency towards over-coloured writing, violence and melodrama. He finds these tendencies also to be present in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Naik and Iyengar view that the only character that wins our respect is the old mother Sabhrai. Williams also feels that Sher Singh's mother plays a significant role parallel to that of the dacoit Juggut, though the two are very different type of characters, and sees the positive value in Sikh religious traditions magnificently portrayed in the character of Sabhrai.

B. Rajan's novels are seen by the literary historians to be a combination of realism and fantasy, unlike those of his contemporaries. Naik remarks that his realism is less social than psychological in his first novel *The Dark Dancer*. The story of a South Indian youth, which poses the problem of East-West confrontation, Naik views, the novel is not very effective due to Rajan's donnish style. But Walsh finds it a sensitive novel, "lit with quick, glinting insight and many kinds of explicit and muted literary reference,"¹⁸ while at the same time he too feels that the style is too bookish and too deliberate. Rajan's second novel *Too Long in the West* is thought by Naik as a comic extravaganza where Nalini returns from an American University to face the problem of choosing a suitable bridegroom for herself.

Analysing the women novelists of the post-Independence era, Iyengar views that it is only after the Second World War that women novelists substantially have begun enriching Indian English fiction and that Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Praver Jhabvala are unquestionably the most outstanding (*Indian Writing in English* 438); whereas to Walsh, women writers who have brought renewed life and an extended subject matter to the Indian novel in English are Attia Hosain, Santha Ram Rau, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande. (*Indian Literature in English*)

Among the women novelists, Ruth Praver Jhabvala is one of the earliest, who Williams finds to be 'an Indian except in blood' as he remarks, "Mrs. Jhabvala may be said to have crossed from the Anglo-Indian to the Indo-Anglian group of writers."¹⁹ Naik views that even though Jhabvala does not wish to be considered an 'Indian writer' but 'as one of those European writers who have written about India,'²⁰ Jhabvala is an 'Insider' as her best work reveals far greater involvement than prominent Western writers writing about India who at the same



time enjoys the privilege of being an 'Outsider. Married to an Indian and who has lived in India for twenty four years and now dividing her time between India and the United States, Walsh calls her a member of that peculiarly modern category - 'the International novelist G.S. Amur remarks:

For Jhabvala India is certainly not the 'jewel in the crown' it has been for other British writers but not surprisingly even after migrating to America she has been unwilling to give up her Indian experience earned at the cost of hatred and suffering.²¹

Amur cites as an example her recent American novel *Three Continents* where she has chosen to retrace her journey back to India.

Walsh remarks that Jhabvala does not see India as a case to be explained by history, politics or sociology and that she is as free as R.K. Narayan from any defensiveness about life in India. Naik puts her eight novels into two groups - viz, comedies of Urban middle class Indian life and the ironic studies of the East-West encounter. Jhabvala is at her best when she observes acutely oddities of behaviour and response and brings out with gentle irony and good-humoured satire the comedy of what she observes. Naik views that her novels suffer when she offers stock reactions and when her irony turns acid and when she occasionally plunges into the deeper waters of serious emotional complications, as in the Olivia story in *Heat and Dust*.

Walsh quotes the opening of *Get Ready for Battle* to show Jhabvala's mature style and her technique of accumulated touches. To Iyengar, in Jhabvala's later novels, the comic spirit is focused not on marriage-negotiations as such "but on the trapped married couple who either wriggle within the cage for better understanding (as in *The Householder* and in *A Backward Place*) or break loose to live their separate lives as in *Get Ready for Battle*."²² Williams comments, "Jhabvala's treatment of marriage and expatriation exemplifies her typical blend of sympathetic humour and satire."²³ But in her later novels as Naik observes, "Jhabvala's irony has increasingly been turning sour while her perceptions appear to be losing their fineness."²⁴

Another important woman novelist Kamala Markandaya is called an 'insider-outsider' (while Jhabvala is an 'outsider-insider') by M.K. Naik as she is an expatriate, living in England. Kamala Markandaya's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* has been compared to Pearl Buck's *Good Earth*, but Iyengar feels *Nectar in a Sieve* recalls Venkataramani's *Murugan the Tiller* and Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury* recalls his *Kandan the Patriot*.²⁵ But Naik points out that in *Nectar in a Sieve*. "Those who know their Indian village will, however, not fail to notice how contrived a picture of rustic life it offers."²⁶ To Walsh, her work has been notable for an unusual combination of range and intimacy. But he too comments that Kamala Markandaya has not the same intimacy and familiarity with the life of the Indian poor. Her particular

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strength, he remarks, "lies in the delicate analysis of the relationships of persons, especially when these have a more developed consciousness of their problems and are attempting to grope towards some more independent existence: a fact which relates her to Narayan."²⁷ To Williams, her first two novels illustrate the essential quality of her imagination.

Markandaya's novel *A Silence of Desire* is assessed to be generally her most successful novel. Naik remarks "It is only when Markandaya subjects her theme to a far deeper probing that she is able to create living characters in meaningful dilemmas. The first novel in which this is achieved is *A Silence of Desire* (1960)."²⁸ Walsh comments, "One of her most achieved and characteristic works is *A Silence of Desire*. It is a subtly precise study of a husband and wife, although the wife has less actuality than the husband."²⁹

In *A Handful of Rice*, she retreats to undemanding superficialities. *The Coffer Dams*, Naik calls a distinct watershed in the development of Markandaya's fiction, where he sees a serious attempt to consolidate the artistic gains made in *A Silence of Desire* and a new style which, he suggests, is a mixture of Faulkner and the later Henry James. *Two Virgins* is seen as a slight work but Naik finds *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) a historical fiction, 'her most ambitious novel' which Walsh also says has both range and intimacy.

While analyzing and assessing literary works, some questions become pertinent. Do literary values change with time or are these certain values that are valid for all times? And can it be said that time is the best judge? - as in the case of great classics or the epics which can be called time-tested. When we accept that there is a thing like timeless literary value, it is interesting to note that some books considered great once almost mean nothing to a future generation. It can be thus said, as Shashi Deshpande remarks "This means that the critical perspective depends a great deal on the spirit of the time, on what is 'in at moment.'"³⁰ But it can be further said that this too is a passing phase. Fashions and trends keep changing but underneath there is something which is more important than the 'outer' trend, something substantial which ultimately stands the test of 'time-less Time. However, human concerns always engage the mind of the creative artists.

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