

Article

A Critical Appraisal of the Origin and Development of Indian English Fiction

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Often the concept of Indianness is simpler for many people. To me Indianness is nothing but depiction of Indian culture, which as K.M. Panikkar has defined it, is “the complex of ideas, conceptions, developed qualities, organized relationships and courtesies that exist generally in a society... ‘and includes’ a community of thought, a similarity of conduct and behaviour, a common general approach to fundamental problems, which arise from shared traditions and ideals”(Panikkar).

Prof. V.K. Gokak defines it as “a composite awareness in the matter of race, milieu, language and religion—an awareness leading to tolerance and broad based understanding..... an integral awareness of the Indian heritage, not a fragmented approach to it..... a simultaneous cultivation of science and spirituality, a passionate involvement in the implications of the Time Spirit as well as of Eternity.”

If we apply Prof. Gokak’s ideas to Indian writing in English there are only very few writers and works that can be regarded as wholly Indian. Perhaps Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* and Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, in view of the writers’ proneness to spirituality and their “passionate involvement in the implications of the Time Spirit as well as of Eternity”, qualify. That is to say, he regards the novel as typifying the synthesis of spiritual concerns and philosophies and a world view which rises above ‘narrow domestic walls’.

Many critics have doubts about the statement. They agree with the view that the Indianness of *Kanthapura* consists in Raja Rao’s creative use of English and his portrayal of the village folk and the basic cultural patterns that have been so deeply ingrained in their minds and lives, and of the political and economic upheaval of village experiences in the days of India's struggle for freedom. The Indianness does not consist of any blending of the national ethos with the international.

What they mean by Indianness in Indian writing in English is the sum total of the cultural patterns of India and the deep-seated ideas and ideals-political, economic, secular and spiritual—that constitute the mind of India and are reflected in her writing. We have this kind of Indianness in our regional literatures, but we do not make much of it. This is because the Indianness here is taken for granted. There is no clash between the culture and the languages which express it. In Indian Writing in English, however, the language may seem to clash with a culture for which it is not a natural medium. It is this discord between culture and language that has so far compelled the critic of Indo-Anglian writing to make the authenticity of its Indianness the basis of his critical studies. It is the authenticity of the experience (whether Indian or individual) and the literary quality of its expression that a critic should look for in a work. To quote Helen Gardner “the primary critical act is a judgement, the decision that a

certain piece of writing has significance and value”.

It is this aspect of the writer’s experience and expression of it that distinguishes the work of one writer from another, say the work of Raja Rao from that of Mulk Raj Anand, and also between two works by the same author. For example, Raja Rao’s India is political and rural in *Kanthapura* and spiritual and metaphysical in *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare*. Mulk Raj Anand’s India is political, economic and proletarian in almost all his novels.

It may be pointed out here that in Indian fiction in English, the personality of the writer has come through more vividly than it does in Indian poetry in English; no one can mistake the authentic Indianness in R.K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khuswant Singh and Mulk Raj Anand. This cannot, however, be said of the later novels of Kamala Markandaya, namely *Possession* and *The Coffers Dams*. Her India in these two novels is a far cry from the India with which those of us living in India are familiar. Perhaps Kamala Markandaya’s failure in these novels is the result of her having been an expatriate writer with little or no touches with India for a long time.

The earliest specimens of Indian English fiction were tales rather than novels proper, but their use, of fantasy (though on a comparatively limited scale) shows their links with the ancient Indian tradition, in spite of the fact that their subject-matter is contemporary. Klyash Chunder Dutt’s *A Journey of 48 Hours of the year 1945* appeared in *The Calcutta Literary Gazette* on 6 June 1835. In this literary fantasy the author narrates the story of an imaginary unsuccessful revolt against the British rule a hundred years later. In the same vein is Shoshee Chunder Dutt’s *Republic of Orissa: Annals from the Pages of the Twentieth Century*

(published in *The Saturday Evening Hurkaru* on 25 May. 1845). Set in the second decade of the twentieth century, it depicts an imaginary British defeat leading to the establishment of a democratic republic in Orissa.

Neither of these two tales can strictly be called political fiction, because the motif of political independence in them is more in the nature of a peg to hang a novelistic fantasy on, than a strong nationalistic urge; but they do show a certain awareness – of howsoever rudimentary a kind of the pressures of the times. The first Indian English novel proper – viz., Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife (1864)* shows this awareness being applied to the contemporary social scene. The political theme is hardly to the fore in the fiction of this phase – and naturally so – for, the day of organised political activity on a large scale was yet far off. Nevertheless, Sarat Kumar Ghose’s *The Prince of Destiny: The New Krishna (1909)* is an interesting early attempt to deal with it. Couched, characteristically enough, in the form of a fantasy, the novel depicts an enlightened Rajput Prince of the later nineteenth century who symbolizes the union of the best in the East and the West. The novel ends with a fervent hope for “a stronger bond between Britain and India: a bond of mutual understanding, appreciation, goodwill and the assurance that before long “India will be the most ultra-British portion of the British Empire - in partnership”(Ghose).

Another type of fiction which made a fairly early appearance was historical romance. Prominent examples are Mirza Moorad Alee Beg’s *Lalun, the Beragun, or The Battle of Panipat [1884]*; T. Ramakrishna’s *Padmini [1903]* and *A Dive For Death [1911]*; R.C. Dutt’s *The Slave Girl of Agra [1909]*; Jogendra Singh’s *Nur Jahan: The Romance of an Indian Queen [1909]*, Svarna Kumari Ghosal’s *The Fatal*

Garland [1915]; and A. Madhaviah's *Clarinda* [1915]. The historical periods covered very greatly from Tamil times [*A Dive For Death*] to Maratha history [*Lalun, the Beragun*] while the locale ranges from the South [*Padmini*] to Agra and Delhi [*The Slave Girl of Agra and Nur Jahan*] and to fifteenth century Bengal [*The Fatal Garland*].

True to the saying that there is material for at least one novel in the life of every person, some of this early fiction is palpably autobiographical. As already noted, in both Madhaviah's *Thillai Govindan* and *Nikambe's Ratanbai*, the autobiographical element is extremely thinly disguised. Krupabai Saththianadhan's *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* [1895] and *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* [1895] are frankly autobiography in fictional form. Even in Toru Dutt's *Bianca* [1876], an unfinished love story set in nineteenth century England, the heroine who is of Spanish parentage, appears. to a large extent, to be a self-portrait, in view of her "dark colour," "dark brown eyes . . . large and full" and her "long black curls"(Das 317), John B. Alphonso-Karkala is also right in saying that "Toru's treatment of her heroine leaves one to wonder if the portrait of Bianca may not reflect, to some extent, Toru's own feelings and attitudes. Some of the attitudes are more likely to be Indian than European"(Alfonso 80).

The only possible evidence of experimentation in this early fiction is to be found in *Rajmohan's Wife*, which uses Indian words liberally in the descriptive passages. But it is pertinent to note that Chatterjee's use of Indianisms is generally limited to the employment of Indian words denoting objects [e.g. 'Sari,' 'dhoti,' 'pan,' 'anchal,' 'noth,' 'mahal,' 'supari, 'Kacheri'] alone, and unlike Mulk Raj Anand later, he makes no concerted attempt to impart a specifically Indian

colouring to his style by literally translating into English colourful expletives, proverbs and expressions etc., from an Indian language.

By 1930, Indian English literature was more than a century old; and yet, curiously enough, it had not yet produced a single novelist with a substantial output. And then came a sudden flowering when the Gandhian age [1920-1947] had perhaps reached its highest point of glory during the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 'thirties'. It is possible to see the connection here; if one remembers that by this decade the nationalist upsurge had stirred the whole country to the roots to a degree and on a scale unprecedented earlier, making it acutely conscious of its present and its past and filling it with new hopes for the future. A society compelled into self-awareness like this provides a fertile soil for fiction and it is no accident that the three major Indian English novelists – viz. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao began their career during this phase. It was, in fact, during this period that Indian English fiction discovered some of its most significant themes such as the ordeal of the freedom-struggle, East-West relationship, the communal problem and plight of the untouchables, the landless poor, the economically exploited etc.

The tradition of the novel of social portraiture set by *Rajmohan's Wife* was considerably diversified in the phase. Mulk Raj Anand's pre-Independence fiction deals with several aspects of social reform, including the plight of the untouchables in *Untouchable* [1935], the lot of the landless peasant in *Coolie* [1936], the exploitation of the Tea-garden workers in *Two Leaves and a Bud* [1937]; and the problems of industrial labour, which are already touched upon in parts of *Coolie* are dealt with in greater detail in *The Big Heart* [1945]. Anand's realism is unsparing, but his

humanistic faith and humanitarian compassion often colour his narratives so strongly as to cause varying degrees of damage to the prime artistic values in novel after novel. K.S. Venkataramani offers a more starry-eyed view of social reform in his *Murugan the Tiller* [1927] in which the hero, Ramu founds an ideal rural colony on Gandhian principles in the end. A.S.P. Ayyar, though primarily a historical novelist, punctuates his narrative in *Baladitya* [1930] with frequent homilies on the evils of the caste system, pseudo religiosity, etc.

A new dimension was added to the novel of social portraiture when R.K. Narayan began his series of Malgudi novels with *Swami and Friends* [1935]. A single-minded practitioner of the novel of local colour, he however produced his best work after independence, when the little small-town ironies of his microcosm developed into an awareness of the larger existential irony of human nature and life itself.

While Anand deals with both Gandhism and Communism with rather inferior irony in *The Sword and the Sickle* [1942], Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* [1938] is easily the finest evocation of the Gandhian age in Indian English fiction. This story of a small south Indian village caught in the maelstrom of the Gandhian movement successfully probes the depths to which the nationalistic urge penetrated, and getting fused with traditional religious faith helped rediscover the Indian soul. None of the other political novels of the period, however, attains the excellence of *Kanthapura* for one reason or another. In Aamir Ali's *Conflict* [1947], the story of a Hindu village boy who comes to Bombay for higher education and gets caught in the agitation of 1942, the narrative seldom rises above conventionality.

With Anand's *Untouchable*, the Indian English novel becomes truly experimental in

technique. In both, making the entire narrative a presentation of a single day's happenings and in his attempt to probe the thought-processes of his protagonist, Anand made highly meaningful experiments in this novel. Though in *The Big Heart*, he once again employed the Joycean device of presenting a single day's events, in his other novels Anand found the roomy form of the Dickensian and the Russian novel more convenient for the expression of his humanist and humanitarian convictions, while he consciously gave an Indian colouring to his style by his bold importation of Indianisms into his dialogue. After his episodic first novel, *Swami and Friends*, R.K. Narayan developed a seemingly artless but taut and economical form of narration, but his significant experiments with technique in *The Guide* [1958] and *The Man-Eater of Malgudi* [1962] came only after Independence. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao adopted the form of the Hindu *Sthala-Purana* and the *Harikatha* with their mixture of narration, description, religious discourse, folklore etc., while telling a story of the freedom struggle in a small south Indian village; and like Anand he also translated Indian words, expletives and idioms – in this case from his native Kannada – into English.

The first remarkable feature of post-Independence Indian English fiction is the consolidation of their reputations by the leading trio of Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao. The graph of Anand's achievement has never followed a steady course, exhibiting instead bewildering ups and downs; and it is possible to maintain that his first novel – viz., *Untouchable* still remains his finest work; but his long autobiographical saga of which three volumes have so far appeared [*Seven Summers* (1951); *Morning Face* (1970); and *Confession of a Lover* (1976)] promise to be an impressive fictional statement, when completed. In at least three

major novels, all published after the Independence [*The Financial Expert* (1952); *The Guide* (1958) and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1962)] R.K. Narayan was finally able to enlist this good-humoured irony as a firm ally of serious moral concern, thus creating thoughtful fiction which has its centre in Malgudi but has a circumference embracing the entire human condition. All the three novels treat the theme of nemesis impressively, while raising significant questions such as the role of the cash-nexus in modern society [*The Financial Expert*]; appearance and reality [*The Guide*] and the fate of evil in human life [*The Man-eater of Malgudi*]. Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* [1960] is one of the greatest of Indian English novels. As an enactment of East-West confrontation and as a philosophical novel it stands unchallenged yet in the annals of Indian English fiction.

Depiction of the social scene has always been the strong suit of women novelists. In a series of novels beginning with *To Whom She Will* [1955], Ruth Praver Jhabvala offers engaging comedies of north Indian urban middle class life. Kamala Markandaya's pictures of rustic life in *Nectar in a Sieve* [1954] and *Two Virgins* [1973] are as superficial as her attempt at low class urban realism in *A Handful of Rice* [1966] is unconvincing. The larger theme of East-West confrontation, of which Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* is probably the finest evocation, also continues to fascinate many novelists, with different results. In B. Rajan's *The Dark Dancer* [1959], the- author's Pseudo-Jamsian indirections blunt its edge; on the other hand, Manohar Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows* [1962] reduces it to sheer melodramatic proportions. The work of the numerous women novelists of the period, however, offers a more sensitive picture of this theme R.P. Jhabvala in her *Esmond in India*

[1958] and *Heat and Dust* [1975] is content to dwell elegantly on the surface – a charge also applicable to Anita Desai's *Bye-bye, Blackbird* [1971]; but the clash between western-oriented rationalism and traditional religious faith in Kamala Markandaya's *A Silence of Desire* [1960] is extremely powerfully realized, though this cannot be said about her other exercises in the manner, including *Possession* [1963], *The Coffin Dams* [1969], and *The Nowhere Man* [1972]. The most memorable record of the East-West encounter during this period is easily G.V. Desani's experimental novel, *All About H. Hatter* [1948] which will be discussed in detail soon.

It is in experimental fiction with a strong Indian orientation [of which Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is an early example and his own *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) are later instances] that the post-Independence novel scored some of its most characteristic successes. Sudhindra Nath Ghose's tetralogy comprising *And Gazelles Leaping* [1949], *Cradle of the Clouds* [1951], *The Vermilion Boat* [1953] and *The Flame of the Forest* [1955] is an exciting experiment in the expression of the Indian ethos in a form grounded firmly in the ancient native tradition of story-telling. A *bildungsroman*, which records the growth of the narrator's mind from boyhood to youth under the impact of the opposed forces of faith and awareness of evil, it adopts the form of the oriental tale, with its numerous digressions, its disinclination to distinguish between this world and the other; its archetypal characters and its mixture of verse and prose. Ghose's vision, unlike Raja Rao's, is naturally circumscribed by the manifest immaturity of his narrator, but within his self-imposed limits, he has produced fiction which has unmistakable authenticity, freshness and charm.

The Indian English novel was now slightly less than a century and a half old, though hardly fifty years had elapsed since it came of age. During this short span it had certainly given to the world at least some major novels which could only have been produced in modern India. David McCutcheon once asked "Whether a truly Indian novel [was] at all possible" . On more than one occasion, *Untouchable*, *All About H. Hotter*, *The Guide* and *The Serpent and the Rope* have provided a clear answer to this question, each time in an unambiguous affirmative.

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