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Foundation and Sociological Ethos of the Indian English Novel

Sambuddha Jash

The act of educating Indians in English is largely seen as a practice to extend hegemonical dominance on the part of the colonial rulers who wanted to spread their administrative and political imperatives through the language. But the irony of such a process lies in the fact that English literary education, in turn, gave birth to 'humanistic ideals of enlightenment to coexist' alongside language being used for socio-political control. The Britishers who thought that Indians needed to be 'taught' to appreciate literary traditions and for this tried to raise them up to 'their' intellectual levels had started it in the guise of a noble initiative but contradictions were there within their methods. Gauri Visvanathan observes in this connection 'The claim that literature can be read meaningfully only when a high degree of morality and understanding is present in the reader implied that certain controlled measures were necessary to bring the reader up to the desired level. But paradoxically, those measures took the form of instruction in that same literature for which preparation was deemed necessary. To raise the reader to a level of morality that would better prepare him to read literature effectively, the method that was struck on was instruction in western aesthetic principles; by giving young Indians a taste for the arts and literature of England'.¹ For this it was necessary to erase or at least lessen the influence of the indigenous traditions and supplanting it with the English ones. As a result of this tension of gaining control, vernacular Indian languages and their relationship with English became a contested ground in the colonial era. English was being shown as a language that created a convenient space between the heavily stylized diction of Sanskrit and any other regional language of India. Addressing these concerns, my paper looks into the development of the corpus of Indian English novel and by analyzing its productive factors would try to signal the changing contours as it has gradually unfolded over the past decades to the present time.

The English Education Act of 1835 introduced by William Bentinck, that was based on Macaulay's rather infamous minute, was the moment within the colonial education policy of the British Raj in India, which professed for making English the medium of instruction. It was, however most strategically planned at making the Indians realize the cultural impoverishment inherent within their native learning as against the superiority of western knowledge. Macaulay in trying to establish the English superiority had rather infamously remarked that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is indeed fully admitted by those members of the committee who support the oriental plan of education.' He had also observed that 'Benares is the great seat of Brahminical learning; Delhi of Arabic learning. If we retain the Sanscrit College at Bonares and the Mahometan College at Delhi we do enough and much more than enough in my opinion, for the Eastern languages. If the Benares and Delhi Colleges should be retained, I would at least recommend that no stipends shall be given to any students who may hereafter repair thither, but that the people shall be left to make their own choice between the rival systems of education without being bribed by us to learn what they have no desire to know. The funds which would thus be placed at our disposal would enable us to give larger encouragement to the Hindoo College at Calcutta, and establish in the principal cities throughout the

¹ Gauri Visvanathan . *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. Pg 3-4.

Presidencies of Fort William and Agra schools in which the English language might be well and thoroughly taught.’² The English Education Act not only was the formal announcement of English supremacy done through careful maneuvering like deduction of funds but it was also the moment of dismissal of the many other languages spoken in India.

Work of fiction that was written onwards the 1860s which later gained the recognition of novels, majorly emulated the western models in terms of their content and overall genesis. To extend their cultural hegemony the British started importing large amounts of English novels and other materials though at times the intended readers were not Indians. Macaulay’s proposal of creating a ‘class of individuals’ who would be ‘Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, and opinions and intellect’ seem to be evident within the Indian writers who made the very first attempts of writing in English. Even if the first printing press was established in 1556 by the Jesuits in the Portuguese colony of Goa for the sole purpose of printing Christian missionary materials, much larger quantity of printed material was required and hence imported. Between the year of 1850 and 1863-64, the export of books and other printed materials from England to India doubled in value from 148,563 pounds in 1850 to 3,13,772 pounds in 1863-64. We notice an influx of huge numbers of history books, grammar books, biographies, conduct fiction besides English novels. Priya Joshi comments ‘These figures amplify what we already know from other sources such as library records, memoirs, and the domestic press: that in the decades following the onset of formal English education, an increasing number of English publications such as histories, grammars, schoolbooks, poetry, novels, useful books, biographies became available in the Indian market. Macaulay had set the role in it as his position was consistent with the manner in which early Anglicists had themselves suggested “ruling” India’.³

A new narrative in form of the novel emerged after a few years of the English Act first in Bangla and Marathi later followed by Hindi, Urdu, Tamil and Malayalam. Meenakshi Mukherjee remarking on the cultural market of this time said ‘The proliferation of literary periodicals in which these books were sometimes reviewed and discussed caused a sense of language-based cultural identity in the upper-caste elite families in urban areas – of which most men (but not the women) happened to be English educated. Those who wrote novels in English also belonged to the same class’⁴

Bengal was the first region to come in close contact with the British and Calcutta being the capital, the first traces of novel writing was found there. The first attempts were mostly to depict the contemporary social life of Bengal, however there was a growing popularity of historical romances in various Indian languages around this time. The earliest instances of English narratives, though not novels, were those written by Kylas Chunder Dutt and Shoshee Chunder Dutt in 1835 and 1845 respectively. Kylas Chunder’s ‘*A Journal of Forty Eight Hours of the Year 1945*’ was published in the Calcutta Literary Gazette and Shoshee Chunder’s ‘*The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the 20th Century*’ was published in the Saturday Evening Harakuru. Both these narratives have been set in future

² Thomas Babington Macaulay. ‘Minute on Indian Education’, *Victorian Prose*, ed. S. Nagarajan et al. Poona: University of Poona Publication. 1968. Pg. 65-66. Besides promoting English supremacy, Macaulay had dismissed the living languages of India by denoting them as ‘dialects’ and calling them ‘poor and rude’ which needed to be ‘enriched’.

³ Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture and the English Novel in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 2002. Pg. 39-40.

⁴ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002. Pg. 8.

times and have depicted resistance against the colonial dominance. Indian novel writing in English, a body of literature that has gained international visibility today was virtually unnoticed in the nineteenth and even in the early decades of the twentieth century. Though vernacular literature in several Indian languages had gained popularity amongst a sizeable readership, Indian novels in English did not gain a considerable momentum in the initial years of its inception. Why did it suffer from an initial startup though in our contemporary times it is seen as a very popular field of literature? Was the body of writing qualitatively inferior or did it suffer from literary incompetence? The reasons could be many, one of them being that when these novels written in English came up the writers were not sure about their target readership, as by then writers of vernacular literature had occupied a space within their specific geographical boundaries. Though novels in English had the potential of transcending such region specific boundaries, initially it seemed no different from what the other writers were doing. Another reason could also be that as the English novels intended to cater to a larger readership, at times also the British in India, they had to create a rather 'shadowy addressee' which often turned away from authentic depictions. This could be a problem as the vernacular literatures were by then replete with either rhetoric of fiery nationalism or depictions of socio-political realism. It is a fact however that the vernacular and the English writers roughly belonged to the same social strata – mostly being upper caste Hindu males, with a very few exceptions.

The ambiguity of handling English as a means of writing can be well seen in the case of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay whose *Rajmohan's Wife* written in 1864 is seen as the first Indian English novel. Interesting enough is the fact that after writing this novel, Bankim went back to writing novels in Bengali and produced a series of successful novels. To establish the fact of authenticity, novelists like Bankim used to quote extensively from authors like Byron, Walter Scott, Shakespeare and tried to create a literary consciousness which made the readers believe that they were in the league of the western masters. This was not an easy task given the fact that by then British novels had set a firm foot with immensely popular novelists like Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray writing in the same time. The later years witnessed the emergence of writers who by employing some familiar tropes tried to contribute significantly towards the canon of Indian novels. Two popular tropes around which the narrative was constructed were – social realism and nationalism. Novelists like Premchand in Hindi and Saratchandra Chatterjee in Bengali were masters in depiction of social realism. Premchand's *Godaan* and *Sevasadan* were regarded as masterpieces. Saratchandra's *Palli Samaj* (1916) and *Arakshaniya* (1916) too dealt with the upheavals in the social lives of the common people. Hindi writers Bhagwati Charan Verma and Marathi writer N S Phadke too wrote on a similar vein. Nationalism, on the other hand was more popular as the country was under colonial rule and Bankim being one of the forerunners had achieved success by using it. During the 1920s and 30s we find a tendency amongst the writers to revive the past glory of India. Authors like K.S. Venkatramani in his *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan the Patriot* (1932) have successfully tried this.

Indo-Anglian novel was the final stage of development in the history of Indian novels. It made its presence felt during the 1920s and for the next few decades developed itself into a consolidated form. The decades of 1930s and 40s was a time when Indian nationalistic feelings had reached its peak and there was also an evident crisis because of the fast encroaching cosmopolitanism. Since the incipient Indian nation was majorly the theme of the contemporary novelists this played an important role in imagining and embodying the radical impulses of anti-colonial nationalism. During this time there was also the growth of a

cosmopolitan outlook among the authors. It was a time since when the factors behind literary production had completely changed. The first wave of change had come through the hands of the ‘famous three’ – Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R K Narayan. They were quite different from each other in matters of narration and themes yet they had touched the subtle aspects of Indian life in their own way. Mulk Raj Anand dealt with the fate of humans caught within worldly turmoil, Raja Rao dealt with diverse issues from religion to political upheavals to social realism and also the position of English within the Indian minds. The following decades saw the growth of the Indo Anglian novels through various trajectories with authors like Ahmed Ali, Khushwant Singh, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruskin Bond and a few others tried to develop the historical sense in their respective manners. The large moment for the Indian English novel came in 1982 with the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* which extended the platform for a broader international engagement. A host of authors came up after Rushdie’s success – each of them adding accolades in several ways. These included names like Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Kiran Desai while some of them also being awarded with Booker and Pulitzer awards.

The idea that Indian English novel was considered a derivative form of its European model, a rather borrowed genre for a long time, had by the decade of 1970s and 80s become a cliché. By far the novels had surpassed the authors’ limited intentions by absorbing the constraints of their historical moment and cultural memory. Instead they had now received a global recognition through awards like the Booker and Pulitzer. Two factors which I think has relevance behind the popularity of the novels of the 1980s are the authors’ relationship with the idea of Nation and the birth of the major publishing houses during this decade. The decades of 1960s and 70s were the times when the model of Nehruvian socialism was very popular. The socialist ideals along with the new dream of nation building are themes that have been discussed by the authors of that decade. The dynamics of Indian Economy and its understanding started changing in the 1980s and it had completed changed by the mid of the 90s decade. Along with this, attachment with Nation and the configurations of ‘Nationalism’ ‘Nation state’ started being questioned. The imagination of the Nation was very different now from what it was in the 1960s and 70s. The following decades would see further intensification of these debates. Beside this commercial development of English language publishing has encouraged a new bunch of writers to come forward. Ravi Dayal publishers, founded by a group of former Stephanians was the first platform to provide such an opportunity. The setting of Penguin India in 1985 and Rupa publications in the subsequent years has helped the aspiring Indian middle class to gain access to English titles at affordable rates. Indian English novels, 1980s onwards have increasingly become experimental at all levels.

The liberalization of the Indian economy was not only a momentous step towards free market transactions; it was also a phenomenon that had caused long term sociological turbulence. The liberalization, which is seen as a set of measures initiated in 1991 is the cornerstone that changed the nature of Indian readership and its relationship with books. This change was markedly felt within the ambit of Indian English writings where we see greater proliferation of genres and they being further divided into sub genres. This gave birth to fiction on the lines of their different ‘genres’ such as detective fiction, chicklit, science fiction, criclit, romances, graphic novels, campus novels and many more. The range of production was so huge that every category of readers had their preferable content available within these books. Besides the emergence of different genres, the status of the author also underwent a paradigmatic change, as he or she was no longer the producer sitting in one

corner of the world, instead was a face amongst the crowd of general readers. The readership and the way books were 'produced' had also seen significant upheavals. There was presently an evident line being drawn between what constituted of 'literary novels' which had gained considerable visibility through the works of Amitav Ghosh, Arvind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and some others. What took the centre stage was a category of 'commercial fiction' supported with good packaging and glitzy marketing. Suman Gupta observes in this connection 'Success in literary fiction is measured by texts which have circulated well in a wider Anglo-American market and have enjoyed concordant critical attention and cultural currency. What is produced and consumed as Indian commercial fiction in English is generally regarded as a matter of internal or domestic interest.'⁵

In a post liberal India what constitutes of Indian English writings are divided into broader categories of the 'literary' and the 'popular' with the former having received a considerable serious scrutiny caters to the tastes of the elite academia while the latter is more commercial in nature trying to bring out stories based on various genres and relating them to the lives of the middle class people. Even though the literary aspect is compromised at times, for which they have been widely criticised one cannot deny the currency that authors like Chetan Bhagat, Durjoy Datta, Anuja Chauhan, Amish Tripathi, Savi Sharma and others enjoy as they have been successful to bring the author closer to the readers.

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⁵ Suman, Gupta. *Consumable Texts in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pg. 19.

BIO-NOTE

Sambuddha Jash has completed his Masters and M.Phil in English from University of Delhi. Presently he is pursuing PhD from the Department of English, University of Delhi. He is working on the growth of genre fiction in English during the 90s decade and after. He has presented papers in national and international conferences. His areas of interest are African-American literature, Cultural Studies, Gender studies, Literature of the Progressive Writers Association. He has worked on minor print genres of nineteenth century Bengal for his M.Phil.

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