

CHAPTER – I

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I. i. CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL : A BRIEF REVIEW

Indian English literature has come out of shells of commonwealth literature and achieved the coveted success in the world literature. Earlier, Indian Writing in English Literature was the mere by-product of English literature, but today, after more than six decades of its introduction in India, it has created its own place in the galaxy of wide world literature. M.K.Naik, in this respect, defines the genre as:

Indian English Literature is defined as literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality. ¹

The impact of Western Literature makes Indian novelists to write in English. The two words, Indian and English are packed with diverse meanings. Amit Chaudhuri reflects:

The two words, 'Indian' and 'English' which sat next to each other so uneasily, their in juxtaposition looked upon with as much suspicion from every side as if they were the progeny of warring families (which, in a sense, they were) are now wedded in a marriage that not only seems inevitable but health-giving; what might have been a tragedy has been turned, apparently into a happy ending with numberless possibilities. ²

In modern era, the westernized Babu writers write in a fluent and refined English to express various complexities alongwith Indian sensibilities and peculiarities. Tabish Khair strengthens the point as:

After all, what passes for Indian English fiction (especially in its most successful versions) is written by the most privileged sections of the Babus. ³

In the late 19th and in the beginning of 20th century, the novels written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Fakir Mohan Senapati, Sirdar Jogender Singh, depict historical or aristocratic element in it. To the contrary, the novels written after the 1920s reveal nationalism at its best. To quote P.M. Nayak and R.S.P. Swain:

It is only when Gandhiji appeared that Indian English fiction took a different and distinct turn with Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya in 30s and 40s of this century. ⁴

Mulk Raj Anand is the pioneer of Indian English fiction while Raja Rao and R. K. Narayana have contributed greatly to the growth of Indian English novel, through their novels respectively, Kanthapura and The Guide.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is internationally recognized as a novelist of social conscience. His novels are didactic and charged with moral values. His novels named as Hunger and Tiger reflect his political consciousness, creativity and human passion.

The gifted writer, Manohar Malgaonkar's aim for writing is in contrast to that of Bhattacharya's. He, though distinguished for his novels, Combat and Distant Drum believes in 'art for art's sake' and depicts adventure tales not to preach but to entertain the reader.

Khushwant Singh, a distinguished writer is famous for his Train to Pakistan and The History of Sikhs. To some extent, Singh's literary style resembles that of Malgaonkar in picturing heroes who believe in action rather than mere words. His realistic writing has a reflection of his manifold career, as a journalist and as a historian.

The prominent novelist of the 60s and the 70s, Arun Joshi is keenly aware of the social problems on humanitarian ground. He appears to be a skilled narrator when he reveals the theme of alienation through his much discussed Foreigner. He makes clever use of narrative technique and long monologues while bringing out post-war problems.

Ruth P. Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai are the eminent women novelists who form the significant group in the post independence period.

Jhabvala, through her novels portrays modern Indian woman, impressed by the West. As she is too close to the East and the West, she can express her ideas and views about the contrast cultures.

Kamala Markandaya, who is wellknown for her, The Golden HoneyComb and Handful of Rice depicts the English and the Indians as the colonizer and colonized. She is a perfectionist in portraying the lifelike characters, troubled in poverty, hunger and ultimately resulting in human degradation.

Nayantara Sahgal is renowned for her interests in politics as well as social realities. Her Storm in Chandigarh and The Day in Shadow are remarkable for the positive stance she takes about Hinduism.

Anita Desai is the youngest of the major Indian English Women novelists who believes in 'Existentialism' and accepts it as a theme, in her In Custody and Cry the Peacock. Human mind is important for her rather than society. She makes ample use of imagery to portray the inner struggle of her characters who have to suffer due to the complexities in the 20th century.

V.S. Naipaul, one more genius is praised by all for his A House for Mr. Biswas and The Middle Passage. The former one is appreciated, for its colonial marginality and autobiographical element while the latter is praised for the protagonist's struggle for identity in the socio-cultural ground.

Literary giants like Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy have enjoyed name and fame on the continent due to their 'Midsummer Night's Dream' and 'The God of Small Things respectively. The recent novelists in the 1990s who contribute to the worldwide English Literature are Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Shashi Thoroor, Bhagwan Gidwani, Boman Desani, R.W. Desani, Amit Chaudhari, Arvindan Basu, Gita Mehta, Dina Mehta, Gita Hariharan, Meena Alexander, and others. Though, they handle various themes differently, the unique thread that is woven commonly throughout their novels is Indianness.

I. ii. A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDIAN HISTORICAL NOVEL

Though the historical novel has been popular in western countries, in India it arrived late in the 19th century. During the reigns of the British

government, published historical records were nothing but distortions of great Indian history. As a reaction to this scenario, Indian English novelists accepted the instruments of historical novels with the utmost motive of educating the people rather than entertaining them.

Three writers, who played the dominant role in the development of Indian historical novel are Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Romesh Chunder Dutt and Joginder Singh. Their contribution in the nationalistic perspective is stated as follows:

...in countries with long histories of invasion and rule by foreign powers, the artists, inevitably become teachers, helping the nation to an awareness of itself, its aspirations and its troubles.⁵

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee is considered as the pioneer of the historical novel in India for his two novels named as:

i) Raj Singha (1881)

ii) Durgesa Nandini ⁹

He considered Raj Singha as the historical novel while the second as the historical romance. These novels are originally written in Bengali, but are translated in English. Though the plot of Durgesa Nandini relates to the attempts of Rajputs, under the rule of Akbar, to conquer the last pathan rulers of Bengal, a love story is prominent aspect of it. The accurate description of the novel is:

In this novel, Bankim has thrown the veil of Romance over certain events which were historically true.⁶

Alongwith Bakim Chandra, Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909) is also regarded as the pioneer of Indian historical fiction. He was a historian as well as an ardent nationalist. Having greatly influenced by Bankim Chandra and Sir Walter Scott, he wrote the following historical novels :

- i) The Slave Girl of Agra (1909)
- ii) Shivaji ?
- iii) Pratap Singh, the Last of the Rajputs ?

The first one which is the historical romance is most important, for the author himself translated it into English. It is the enlargement of Bengali Madhavi-Kangam.

Shivaji and Pratap Singh, the last of the Rajputs are translated by Ajoy Dutt. Shivaji is described in few words as,

Shivaji is a masterpiece of character painting in which the author reveals himself not only as a powerful story teller but also as a historian of keen insight and sound judgment.⁷

The historical characters portrayed in Shivaji are genuine to their historical greatness and are penned with great care.

While pointing out the qualities of Romesh Chandra's three works of art, the critic writes:

If they are a little too romantic, they are never so at the expense of either realism or historical reality because they are only faithful pictures of times which were truly eventful, thrilling and soul-stirring, offering as they did

numerous opportunities for adventures, escapades and excursions into the world of love and romance.⁸

Sirdar Jogender Singh's Nur Jehan : The Romance of an Indian Queen (1909) is one more important contribution to Indian English historical fiction. Which ends with the marriage of Nur Jehan to Jahangir and depicts the life at Akbar's court. The appropriate critical opinion of Nur Jehan is:

It is not very correct to say that this novel lacks historical imagination, for one cannot expect in a novel of Nur Jehan's dimensions the sweep and magnificence of the novels of Scott or Thackeray.⁹

Kali Krishna Lahiri's Roshinara, (1912) which was first published in Bengali and later translated into English by Nobo Chandra Sen, is considered as a significant historical novel. It is remarkable for the historical as well as romantic element in it. It is described as:

It is a good historical romance which presents authentic historical facts in terms of the lives and fortunes of individual men and women, and in terms of the great personal qualities which make up their character.¹⁰

Though the novelists, discussed so far have the influence of Sir Scott, they have rooted deep in Indian nationalism. Their one more prominent successor is A.S.P. Ayyar who is thought as the father of historical novel. His Baladitya (1930) is most successful Indian English historical novel. The second historical novel, he penned is 'Three Men of Destiny' (1939). Later

on, the second book was split into two books named as 'The Legions Thunder Past' (1947) and 'Chanakya and Chandragupta' (1951).

Baladitya is set in the 6th century and reveals, how the tyrannical Hun conquerors of the Gupta empire were driven out of Aryavarta by a confederation of Indian princes led by Narasmha's Baladitya and Yasodharman. Ayyar's highest literary features are depicted as follows :

Ayyar displays commendable craftsmanship and artistic discipline in constructing his plots and in presenting the events. He enriches his novels by introducing dramatic conflict, dramatic scenes, romance and songs. ¹¹

Chanakya and Chandragupta also enjoyed fame it was worth to have. It dwells on the historical facts concerned with the intimate relationship between Chankya and Chanandragupta and the rise of Mauryan Empire Ayyar's vital role as a preacher as interpreted as follows :

Ayyar often preaches to his reader on morality on social and religious attitudes and on the need for social reform. ¹²

Vimala Raina's Ambapali (1962) , G. P. Khosla's The Last Moghal (1970) also add much more to the growth of the historical novel.

The modern historical novels which used the modern fictional techniques like psychological insight and interior monologue are named as:

- i) Manohar Malgaonkar's The Devil's Wind, Nana Saheb's story (1972)
- ii) Bhagwan S. Gidwani's The Sword of Tipu Sultan (1976)

Manohar Malgaonkar, is also wellknown to the modern reader for his Kanhoji Angrey: Maratha Admiral (1959), Puars of Dewas Senior (1963) and Chattrapatis of Kolhapur (1971). Khushwant Singh has also handled historical themes through his Ranjit Singh (1962) and A History of the Sikhs.

Thus, from Bankim Chandra's Raj Sinha to Gita Mehta's Raj the historical novel has crossed several twists and turns and has developed as the main branch of literature, written by Indian writers in English.

I. iii . GITA MEHTA : A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

Gita Mehta, who is one of the significant novelists in the current stream of Indian Writing in English, was born in Delhi in 1943. It is a matter of Pride for Gita Mehta that her family participated in the Indian Freedom struggle. Being the daughter of Biju Patnaik, the veteran political leader of the eastern state of Orissa, nationalism was inculcated into Gita's mind since her early childhood. She was named as Gita. "Gita means song, - as a song of Freedom."¹³ As she was just a child of three years, she was sent to a boarding school with her brother as their father was in jail.

Gita Mehta learnt in India and in the United Kingdoms. In Cambridge University, she met a fellow student Mr. Sonny Mehta with whom she got married soon. Both have a son and lead happy married life. As Mr. Mehta is the President of Alfred A. Knopf publishing house, the couple is the central figure in New York's Literary Publishing World. Subsequently, Gita Mehta resides in New York, London and Delhi.

The literary works penned by her are as follows:

(1) Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East (1979)

(2) Raj : (1989)

(3) A River Sutra (1993)

(4) Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India (1997)

The criticism on Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East (1979) is as follows :

This first book is a series of interconnected essays weaving Mehta's own impressions of India's mysticism with the impressions, she reads through other people. ... it is a satire on the major wave of foreigners swarming into India in the 1960s, in research of Indian's Karmic Powers. She blends humor with witty observations and constructs a book that presents her own impressions through the experiences of many.¹⁴

Raj (1989), Mehta's first novel is a colourful historical portrayal of the exploitation of young woman born in Indian nobility under the British Raj. In this novel, personal story is mingled with Indian freedom struggle. Princess Jayadevi is the symbol of the Indian woman, who is entangled in the chains of Rajputana tradition.

In 1993, Gita Mehta penned the masterpiece, named as A River Sutra which is described as :

The novel is a celebration of life and life-affirming impulses struggling against death and life-negating forces. The river is seen as an eternal principle of life.¹⁵

Her deep love about India becomes familiar to the readers through a series of essays entitled named, Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India (1997), Her intention for writing such a book is to make modern India accessible to westerners and to a whole generation of Indians who has no idea, what happened 25 years, before they were born. ¹⁶

Gita Mehta is a versatile writer, who has proved her mastery in the manifold spheres of writing. Having worked as a journalist, she directed several documentaries about India for BBC and NBC. As she is good at film-making, she has made four films on the Bangladesh war and for NBC. She covered the Indo-Pakistan war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. Her films, on elections in the former Indian princely states reveals her rare skill in the same field. Her journalistic career has deep impact on her books, resulting the latter imbued with deep political insight.

Being a woman of Indian descent, her books are keen investigations into the ideas, people, history and personalities of India. Though she doesn't consider herself as a professional writer, she is out and out Indian writer who has something to say about her varied experiences in her homeland.

By nature, Mehta is a witty, obdurate person, who is always ready to try new things. At the age of forty, she performed a parachute jump with a British military squadron. Her ideas about old age are revealed through her own words. She says:

I am an Asian Woman.... Possibly because one is Indian, it's not terrifying to grow up." As we grow older, we are given more authority and respect. ¹⁷

Her expressions show her matured thinking and pride in being the Indian. Though this articulate and charming writer lives mainly in New York, she longs for India. In this regard, she says :

"My heart is in India – its home—so when I'm there I don't write. I just let it all seep in through my pores."¹⁸

Lastly, one can say that her bright literary career has secured her reputation as a successful Indo-English novelist.

I. iv . GITA MEHTA'S VIEWS REGARDING THE NOVEL FORM

Gita Mehta is not a born writer. Instead we can say that writing is thrust upon her. In 1979, when she was in a Manhattan Publishing Party with her husband Sonny Mehta, someone grabbed her arm and asked to tell them what Karma was all about.

He thought that Mehta could explain that profound philosophical concept of Karma only because she was dressed in traditional sari. After hearing Mehta's reply :

Karma isn't what its cracked up to be ¹⁹

Mare Taffer who ran Bantam Books asked her to write on the same subject. Though she felt her words senseless, she took writing seriously and within three weeks, she wrote Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East (1979).

The next novel, she wrote was Raj (1989) which took ten years to complete. Raj was her first novel, which was much obscure for European readers. However, it achieved great success. While commenting on Raj, she

says that "she rushed the ending and oversimplified the complex material."²⁰ Nevertheless, her heart is filled with contentment with its final result.

Her strong faith in Indianness penetrates in her writing, especially in the novel, Raj. In regard, to this she says:

India is the place where worlds and times are colliding with huge velocity, we are putting satellites into space and we have bullock carts; there's that constant tension and contradiction of immense sophistication and an almost premedieval way of life. I thought the only way I could describe that collision was anecdotally, by taking snapshots, as it were²¹

After reading 'Raj' the reader also finds the same series of snapshots scattered everywhere in the novel. Its purpose is to make the reader feel India with its past.

Her mastery over English and Hindi literature prepares her to handle Indian themes in impressive manner. One of Mehta's old friend and the artistic director of London's Royal National thought of the couple as:

The couple were preternaturally well-read, politically, culturally, musically literate in the widest sense.²²

For her, to write means to be alone only in the company of books. So she prefers to stay in England while writing a book. To convey her point she says:

London's great virtue is that, as the capital of empire, its libraries have staggering material on India. And because of the British reticence, its easy to be alone and write.²³

One of the aims for writing the history based books is to express her deep regret for the unnoticed freedom fighters. She writes :

"Indians may glorify their 1947 liberation from the imprisonment of British colonialism. But in the 50 years that India has been a free nation, the names of these who genuinely fought for freedom have been progressively excised from our history."²⁴

Mehta is the modest novelist who is keenly aware of her limitations. She doesn't wish to be superior to her readers. She tries her best to reveal her personal history as she surveyed her native land. In this regard she says:

" I thought that readers had to know where I was coming from, so that they could judge whether they felt my position was valid. Just because I am an Indian doesn't mean I know India. I did not want this to be a book where I play the expert and the readers plays the student, in every book I 've written. I've been very much against that"²⁵

Such a view assures her child-like innocence & modesty.

Gita Mehta is eager to offer a wide literary canvas to the reader with her Indian sensibility and perception. To convince her view to the reader, she says:

I am a camera and the reader can see through my eyes.²⁶

Her story-telling skill adds much to her writing of a novel. Though she is recognized as a promising writer of the 1990's, she has said that she doesn't really consider herself as a writer. To justify her self criticism, she quotes Chekov:

One must write at least seven books before deserving the title of a writer.²⁷

So she thinks she has to write many more than seven books for getting a grip on the literary craft.

She is a visionary writer and feels that the writer must study and search every possible detail of his book with proper care. To convey her point, she says:

You stand on Geography as a writer. Even if you're writing about superman, you have to invent a planet for him to come from; you can't write in a void.²⁸

Such plain and candid but literary views make Mehta outstandingly different from others.

I. v . A REVIEW OF CRITICISM ON GITA MEHTA

Noted critics have studied the historical 'Raj' and have published the commendable criticism on the same. Usha Bande, Naresh K.Jain, Shubhshree, Baral and Bhowmick, Dass and Dhawan, K.C.Baral and Dhira, Mohit Roy and Rama Kundu are the renowned scholars whose criticism on 'Raj' need to be discussed.

While highlighting exploitation of women and historicity in 'Raj' Usha Bande writes:

It is intricately interwoven with the political events but it has all the tears and romance of a woman's existence in India which saves the work from being a mere record of the all too well-known history at our freedom struggle, or a racy account of the grandeur and frivolity of the exorbitant life style of the Princess.²⁹

Having studied the novel from the feminist point of view, Bande criticizes Jaya as the mute observer of the events she cannot control and be an active participant in life when time demands her decisiveness and tests the strength of her character. Jaya is expert in various fields which contrast each other like horse-riding and sola shringer. So Bande thinks that understandably Jaya tosses between tradition and modernity all through the book.

She also points out that being a prey to Roy, Jaya compromises her values not for pleasure but for the protection of her kingdom from the nationalists. But this evaluation is improper for Jaya herself wishes to gain bodily pleasures, though momentarily. Previously, there are glimpses that show that she thinks positively of Arun Roy since her maidenhood. When Jaya is in tent with Arun Roy and Tiny Dunga after killing the shikar in the Balmer jungle.

Arun Roy threw his arm across the back of Jaya's canvas chair laughing with her and Jaya suddenly felt she had known the lawyer all her life.³⁰

Nevertheless, Bande is markedly successful in bringing forth the comprehensive yet concrete thematic study of Raj.

Naresh K. Jain, the wellknown critic considers exploitation as well as change as the core of the novel and writes,

But though grounded in the traditional values and pieties and partly because of it, Jaya responds to change in her personal and political life with surprising openness and resilience and manages to hold her own in the male-dominated world.³¹

His view of criticizing the novel is not negative and conventional but it is positive as well as progressive. Similarly, he presents Jaya not as a surrendered lady but one who is always struggling to be empowered.

He criticizes Raj on every possible ground, either be the political or the social one. The only weakness of his part is that, he has ignored the tender feeling of love towards James Osborne in the mind of Jaya throughout the essay.

Shubhshree writes about Raj:

"Her next book 'Raj' encircled the 50 years preceding Indian Independence. The era is looked at through the fictitious Jaya Singh the daughter and then the wife of Maharaja who ruled two of Indian's nominally independent kingdoms.³²

Though, the first part of this quotation is true, Second part is truly misleading for Jaya is the Princess of the Balmer Kingdom but not the ruler though she works as the regent Maharani of Sirpur later.

This opinion seems to be one sided, it is unique. The brief but suggestive criticism of Raj by Dass and Dhawan is worth taking into account :

Raj is the combined history and fiction to present a richly decorated brocade over-sewn with sex, landscape, polo, politics and tragedy ³³

K.C. Baral and Dhira dwell on socio-political view to say much more on Raj.

They point out:

Mehta's Raj is about colonization. By structure and designing Raj may be appropriately called historical novel. However, in a subtle manner, the work attends to various other aspects of Indian social practices, Raj is sprawling extravagant saga of the British Raj in India. The novel covers nearly half a century of British Indian history using an immense mass of factual data. Mehta has been successful in integrating the factual with the fictional, the ordinary with the dramatic and private with the public. The portrayal of Raj has been a fictional project for understanding the complex colonial discourse, in that the novelist's own subject position as a Post Colonial writer becomes the tour de force. ³⁴

Moreover they stress the individual freedom that Jaya obtains in the end.

Though they ignore the exploitation of the protagonist, their criticism is noteworthy.

One more criticism on Raj by Mohit Ray and Rama Kundu is:

Raj (1989) by Gita Mehta delineates life in Indian royal family, but too much of untransmuted history find its way into this autobiography of a young girl whose marriage is arranged with a prince. The novel deals with the coming of Indian Independence as well as the emancipation of the heroine. The novel describes princely splendour very vividly.³⁵

In a nutshell, 'Raj' as the historical novel has enjoyed much fame on a large scale. However my study of the Raj strictly adheres to the historical element in the novel which is worked out in the context of some theoretical aspects of the genre.

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