

Indo - English Novels Amalgamation of Indian Tradition and World Tradition

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Abstract

In India the novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of our time. The duality of Indo-English fiction has been attracting worldwide attention. One wonders whether the Indo-English novel is a part of the Indian tradition or the European tradition or of the abstract world tradition. The Indo-English fiction in Post-independent India assumed over the preceding thirty years all kinds of colorful traditions. It is now free from the social yard political overtones of a rabidly nationalistic variety. As regards the theme of the novel, in the late Twentieth Century alienation has significantly affected the Indo-English novel. It has served as a recurrent motif in quite a few works produced by Indian novelists in English. It is also the dominant trait of several characters created by the novelists.

Keywords: Novel, Indianness, Alienation, Traditions

The novel as a distinct literary form is of recent birth. In the late 19th century only it became popular. In the 20th century it evolved and became the most dominant literary form. In India the novel is the readiest and most acceptable way of embodying experiences and ideas in the context of our time.

“It corresponds in our civilization to the epic in the primitive stages of some races, to drama in the Athens of Pericles, to the essay in the Age of Queen Annie. Indian creative writers in English too adapted this form generously and skillfully. A critical response to the Indo-English fiction thus will be truly representative of a total response to the Indo-English literature.” (Narasimhaiah, 1992)

The duality of Indo-English fiction has been attracting worldwide attention. One wonders whether the Indo-English novel is a part of the Indian tradition or the European tradition or of the abstract world tradition.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who curiously left his English novel incomplete and preferred to switch over to Bengali, his mother tongue for the celebrated novels he wrote later, wrote the first era Indo-English novel.

India’s first ever political novel came in 1884 with the publication of *Kapal Kundala*. It was in this novel that Bankim Chandra Chatterjee

gave the compatriots Vande Mataram – our national song. Until the thirties, all the novelists were writing with a nationalist spirit and the social and radical movements came in for creative attention in Indian fiction and Indo-English fiction in particular.

The Indo-English novel, soon became a primary instrument of art to unfold the ‘self’s emergence’ as a historical entity and demonstrate art’s dual connection with self and society. First, it was self defined and unfolded its existence in the form of fiction and then related its multiple relationships with the autonomy of art and fragmentation of social order especially after the Second World War and India’s Independence.

The Indo-English fiction in Post-independent India assumed over the preceding thirty years all kinds of colorful traditions. It is now free from the social yard political overtones of a rabidly nationalistic variety.

The modern Indo-English novelist thus has become a mediator or reflector on history of modern India as transforming a historical accident – the emergence of British Raj in India, its rise and fall into a creative process aimed at creating art forms such as the novel. It can be observed that Indian fiction that has been evolving from time to time has liberated itself from the constraints of nationalism and Pan-Indian.

“A novelist, as an artist always aims at creating a new order in his / her fiction which emerges from an aesthetically designed conjunction between self and history, promoting and projecting his personal vision of the world. However, this cannot be isolated from his historical consciousness, which is implicit in this aesthetic conjunction between self and contemporary history.” (Naik, 127)

As regards the theme of the novel, in the late Twentieth Century alienation has significantly affected the Indo-English novel. It has served as a recurrent motif in quite a few works produced by Indian novelists in English. It is also the dominant trait of several characters created by the novelists.

Alienation or root-less-ness also became a very common theme in the English novel. At the same time because of its lack of belongingness, it is considered as rootless literature, totally alienated from the people unconcerned with realities.

The problem of alienation relates to the loss of a quest for one’s identity. It is this, which leads to alienation. A sense of loss of identity is perennial sustaining creative force in a writer.

A feel of loss of identity is a dreadful feeling that cuts one off from all kind. One begins doubting one’s identity. The dispossessed personality’s search for identity is in fact, a commonplace theme in modern fiction. It is true in Indian fiction too, but with a difference. The difference lies in the novelists’ quest that has peculiarly Indian immediacy.

Many have discussed the issue of Indo-English novelists’ search for identity. Notable among them is Late Prof. C.D. Narasimhaiah who discusses it with reference to inwardness.

“One does not, surely mean one ought to deal with literature from the national stand point what one has in mind is a shared tradition a community of interests and a set of values that a people live by all of which give a sense of identity to individual and nations. The individual artist has to discover as well create his own identity. He does not find it ready-made. Of course, in the process he discovers and creates his national identity too. Indeed ... the two are connected and not mutually exclusive.” (Narasimhaiah, 102)

Elsewhere he attaches considerable significance to the expression of Indian-ness in the Indo-English novel and speaks highly of those writers who have promoted the awareness of the finer values and generally of the possibilities of life.

A distinctive Indian quality is the reason-de-re of Indian novels in English. According to this viewpoint a truly Indian work, would be the arc which is about India or Indians, presents an Indian point of view and has a style, which fits, well into the matrix of the Indian culture and way of life.

To create an identity is part of the essential business of an artist, to arrive at, or even to contribute towards, a declaration of literary national. It is not essentially relevant to his concerns and may even infringe on the honesty of those concerned.

“A writer’s quest for his identity, however in a meaningful pursuit and is fraught with serious implications unless he has a clear sense of his identity, both individual and national and his work is noted in the soil, the literary offshoot is bound to be superficial and arbitrary.” (Sachidanand, 73)

It is very hard to establish the sense of identity of any people chiefly or centrally from its literature since most of the media, which form the culture of the mass of the people by-pass literature. The quest for identity in a country like India is socially oriented and less personal.

Indo-English fiction has become a major source for a systematic study of cultural change with Indian worldview as the focus, which can increase the western reader’s knowledge of accumulation processes.

The Indo-English novelist would be truly Indian if he drew his artistic sustenance from his heritage if only as a point of reference. An awareness of this fact would enable him to have his roots deeply ingrained in his cultural matrix without which all art would be artificial. The most elementary form that his awareness can bake is the use of an Indian setting or the choice of a specifically Indian subject matter. The Indian-ness of the Indo-English novelist may also find expression through appropriate language and imagery. One can see the quality of Indian novel above all in the ethos of the novels themselves, the decisive test of which one can formulate in the form of the question, Can only an Indian write this?

Observing that literature cannot be divorced from society, Rodney Hall adds that “national identity is inescapable to anyone using the native tongue”.

The search for ones’ identity, which is a common and recurrent theme in Indo-English fiction, has taken two main directions: Philosophical and Sociological. The philosophical quest involves a web of dualisms from which the protagonist must disentangle his complex identity. For instance, search for identity through knowledge of self is the basis of R.K. Narayan’s fiction. The sense of Indian-ness finds an expression in Indo-English novels in certain other important ways. The regard for the past is the cornerstone of Indian culture. Among other feature associated with the unswerving devotion to the past, the most important is being faithful to one’s cultural heritage and traditions and the reverence for age, which is in one’s bones. Although modernity and tradition come into clash in many Indo-English novels, one can note the repeated affirmation and the value of the past in its re-discovery.

Indo-English fiction tends to take as its subject the East West encounter in its many variant forms like a strong form of the Indian resistance against the British that led to the Indian independence.

Although we in India owe a good deal to the European or rather English novel from the 18th century, we have by and large evolved a new kind of form shaped by our various habits of thought, our conscious and such conscious inheritances, speech symbols and images test by our present day living realities, as against the kalta recital or sermon fictions of the past. Our modern writing cannot integrate the ancient Dharmic lessons, because we are into the world of human sympathy, though the emphasis on human relations between individuals under conditions of the many struggles for freedom in the transition from the age of one-man rule to participating democracy. Our realities extend by and the formal Dharma of the past. That the past has changed the mystery of life is more baffling. Evil has overbalanced the good. Discord has dissolved harmony. However, the past prohibitions and impositions of new inhibitions affect the very freedom of conscience, which men and women long for. The life of the individual has been undergoing various processes of change. The zigzag of evolution always sparks off action in stagnant societies. This urgency sets off various transformations and metamorphoses, followed by conservation, and then again,

we have the struggles against slavery of mind and body, accepted by those who cannot bear the responsibility of freedom and willingly accepted slavery. Underneath these processes the renewal of the individual, through confrontation of realities on various planes compels human beings to renew themselves. However, evolution has to be conscious of it, if we are not to become the highest ideal of the awakening individual. The renewal is not an obvious or predetermined Dharmic process. It is a kind of dialectic of conflicts, oppositions and labyrinthine rhythmic interplay of ethos and immediate feelings and may possibly result in some kind of fusion through experience of life at different levels, in different situations.

Sometimes, those who are in the process of awakening, put down their remembrances and achieve a beauty of expression, so that we may contemplate the mingling of inner and outer currents. This kind of narrative assumes the forms of creative literature. The novel is one form of recreation of the flow of time, the refreshing river, with its many waves, eddies, onrushes and whirlpools. In this sense, the flow of a novel assumes a form, through which several lives may be crystallized into characters, revealing fundamental lures, obscure, imperceptible feelings, whirling images and intensely impassioned thoughts, which may give discreet pleasure, or yield some meaning, or define a mood, or several moods and from unreasoned belief to ignorance, delusion and fantasy.

Always the past works prepare the way for the present and the future. The new novels, by the virtue of the word, ‘Novel’ which means new, are fresh upturning of the soil, in which new flowers may grow. There are no symbols, which are inherently poetical and permanent. There are no forms, which can last forever. Only perhaps, the fundamentals of human life are eternal – life itself recurs. Moreover, love, pain, hatred, jealousy, desire and the longing for light against darkness ever urge us on to live.

In the struggle for the novel of the various new kinds of consciousness, of new heroes, new situations and new passions, everything changes. There is no doubt that any single human life on our planet, which is part of many galaxies, is a flower which will grow and then fall away, after it has felt the sun. The God of the endless process faces every human being.

In the refulgence of desire, in the love play, in smiles and tears, in the recurrence of good and bad, in beauty marred by ugliness, in the conflicts of the elements, we are thus part of the flow of time the refreshing river. In our culture, the dance of Shiva symbolizes the forces of creation, preservation and dissolution, and the daily release of the circean rhythm to achieve pose.

It is likely, then, that in the miscellany of existence, in all its deadliness, in its exaltations and despair, we are tied to life. In the here and the now, in the flesh and the blood, in all its human implications, provided we can be constantly aware of the here-now, for every breath we breathe is the urge for a fresh breath.

The new talent turned out to be Salman Rushdie, who with his *Midnight’s Children* (1981) won the Booker McConnell Prize and it made a tremendous impact on a whole generation of writers both new and established.

Suddenly, since the 1980’s there has a bursting forth of Indian novels like myriad flowers on a laburnum tree, in this significant decade, a gorgeous post-modernist novel era, which governed by a subjective, relativist, scientific worldview and it represents ‘skewed perceptions’ of socially alienated writers. It is, in fact bound up with the mainstream of twentieth-century thought.

Many Indian English novels of the 1980’s seem to have the impress of *Midnight’s Children* – that is, they combine the post-modernist vision the Indian oral narrative style.

In these novels, one can note a lack of the staidness, solemnity and self-consciousness that once characterized the Indian novel. They are uninhibited and cosmopolitan in their reach. Unlike the earlier novels, they are neither idealistic (in the sense of offering perfection as an ideal) nor are they sentimental. There is a great determination to break with shibboleths and to experiment with

new forms and themes. Politics – national and international – is their most important theme, and the displaced, marginal modern men their favorite protagonists. The writing is brisk, vigorous, racy impressive. The novels express deep urge of the protagonist to speak out, unfretted by restraints who virtually screams to be heard. The characters are at once more cosmopolitan, de-regionalized citizens of the world (consider for example, *Rich Like Us*, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Golden Gate*, *The Circle of Reason*, *Yatra*, *Sunrise in Fiji*, *Days of the Turban*, *The Bubble*, etc.) than in the earlier Indian novel. There is awareness of a larger world. The new Indian novel is not the novel of exhaustion (as is post-modernist European novel) but is one of tremendous creativity, dynamism, hope and confidence. These novels are, not surprisingly, quite funny, comic and humorous for instance, in *Custody*, *The Circle of Reason*, *Plans for Departure*, *Yatra*, *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Golden Gate*. There is ample ease in the use of English – the earlier apologia and flabbiness is gone. The language now is energetic, rich, trim and puckish. The 1980's novels have a vast emotional, political, cultural, geographical and historical sweep. They seem to have the ability to face life in the harsh, to confront it unflinchingly and yet to laugh at the lighter side. They are different from the earlier novels of idealism. Here fantasy, magical realism, parody, humor takeover and subvert unseemly reality. The individual is at the centre now, his sensibility modern, and the provisional quality of life known to him. As against that, the protagonists of the novels say of Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan had belonged to a securer world where eternal reality stood ultimately dominating the temporary vicissitudes of life. By contrast, the protagonists of the 1980's Indian novel are insecure, anxious, tense, skeptical people sitting on the edge of the world, waiting to be catapulted into plumb-less depths and declivities because of the tremendous power that reposes in twentieth century governments. The parallels between the life of the individual and history of nation are dovetailed in those novels. For example, the novels such as *Clear Light of Day*, *The Circle of Reason*, *Plans for Departure*, *Yatra*, *Rich Like Us*, *English August*, *Shame*, *Midnight's Children* and *Sunrise in Fiji* we can note such things. The sense of the drift that characterizes modern or postmodern novels is not seen in the New Indian novel.

As Frank Kermode in his *Novel and Narrative* observes, the death of the novel is announced ever so often in the West because provisional and local characteristics are mistaken for universal requirements. The mark of the New Novel then becomes the completeness with which it studiously breaks away from all that has gone before. He sees the Oedipal parallel in the observation that the New Novel has caused the death of the old but adds that if we have the patience to look at the difficulty more closely. We may find that a family resemblance persists, as between Louis and Oedipus, who were both lame, both deceived by Oracles, and both married to the same woman.

Kermode concedes that differences exist but believes that they are exaggerated. Narrative potentially remains what it has always been known to be. It is only a question of the emphasis, which varies from age to age. Therefore, according to him, it is unlikely that a great divide really develops between the old and the New Novel. What occurs is perhaps some 're-arrangements of emphasis and interest'.

Irving H. Buchan in *The Aesthetics of the Supra-novel* notes that the essential pressure for experimentation, comes from the novelist's conviction that the demands of his vision are so new and urgent and the forms available so inadequate or tired, that a new form or hybrid must be created.

He also adds that all experiment entails the violation of known orders of sequence, syntax, punctuation, language. All the same, when a novelist innovates with form, he does not aim at obscurity. What he aims at is 'controlled surprise' and 'tyrannical limitation'. However, the novelist plumbs for new forms only when he is driven up against a wall and nothing else works.

All Indian novels beginning with Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, Mulkraj Anand down to Rushdie and other novelists, have employed the techniques and constructive principles of traditional Indian narrative (for example, periodicity, plotlessness, the story-within-a-story). While the Old Masters and the novelists of the middle generation did so in a subtle, staid manner, the new novelists are doing it in a way that suggests anarchy disarray, dizzy dislocation. The aim is to create a condition of a moratorium in which history is halted, time is stilled and space is posed; and all await a new direction of movement, which will emerge as the essential yield of the experiment. That makes these novels very attractive. They try to release modes of communication from predictability and convention. They try to de-familiarize. In that, they are the New Indian Novels. All the same, it is possible to see that their links with the earlier Indian novel have remained whole.

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