
Research Papers



SHIFTING OF SETTING FROM RURAL TO METRO INDIA IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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Abstract

The early pioneers of Modern Indian English Fiction were in favour of to project rural Indian sensibility and problems of rural masses. But after Independence and second Green Revolution, the giant wheels of industrialization led vast growth of Metropolitan cities. Such fast growing modern metropolitan India became the laboratory of experience for the Indian English novelists. The Metros like Mumbai, Calcutta, Delhi, and Madras became the heroes of Indian English Fiction. The problem of urbanization and the problems of the people of Metro India find a powerful expression in the post independence Indian English fiction.

Indian English Fiction has attained both richness and fineness of craftsmanship in its tenor, theme and style. Right from its birth, it represents various phases of development of our multitudinous national life. The early pioneers like R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao Manohar Malgaonkar, Bhabani Bhattacharya and many other contemporaries were in favour of to project rural Indian sensibility and problems of rural masses. Their work is a genuine recordation of the primary rural emotions and local realities. Most of the Indian English Fiction after independence was devoted to the depression and travails of poor rural people, who were the victims of the defective economic policies and planning of the government. The novels of Manohar Malgaonkar, Bhabani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandya deal with the poverty of rural people, their horrendous standard of living, their exploitation and their struggle for food shelter and cloth. The setting of Raja Rao's world famous

novel 'Kanthapura' purely devoted to the Gandhian model of village life. The setting of R.K.Narayan's 'Guide' mainly dwells in a village temple on the bank of a river. Manohar Malgaonkar's novel 'Bend in the Ganges' also has complete rural setting. This same trend of rural setting continued with eminent novelists like Bhabani Bhattacharya Kamala Markandya and others. But the dawn of independence and specially the second Green revolution opened a new path of urbanization. The post- Independence Indian society experienced many changes, transitions and transformations in various fields of life. The industrialization and facilities of science have been restrained only to metro cities. Such urbanization increased the size of the cities, but simultaneously gave birth to the new problems which are still unsolved. This fast growing modern metropolitan India became the laboratory of experience for the Indian English novelists. "The rainbow colors and chameleon like alterations of the modern urbanized society have

gravitated the thoughtful attention of these novelists.”(B.R.A. 2003:70) Most of the novelist shifted gradually their focal point from rural to metro India.

Ruth Prawar Jhabvala though born in Germany and married to an Indian architect has very keen observation and knowledge of Indian urban life -style. Her most of the novels project the problems of cities and its natives with close observation. Jhabvala's novel 'To Whom She Will' presents a detailed presentation of jam-packed, absurd, incredible and cosmopolitan city of Delhi. Jhabvala presents Delhi as an empire of clerks and civil servants because of repletion of central government services and the fast expansion of suburbs and colonies. Her novel 'To Whom She Will' gives us very keen observation about quarters of old Delhi in the following description:

“It was evening and very noisy. The three children were bouncing a ball and quarreling as to whose turn it was next, while their mother was milking a cow in the shed. The people who live on the upper floor were having their usual fight on the stairs. On the street, a man with huge coloured balloons bobbing on a stick was blowing a little horn to advertise himself. A car trying to pass hooted incessantly, while three women stood in the middle of the road and loudly abused the paan-wala who sold beetle leaves and coco-cola in a little three sided hut with a straw roof. A few houses away, the inevitable wedding was being celebrated, familiar and sentimental film songs came wailing unendingly through loud speakers”. (174)

Here Jhabvala portrays picture of Delhi as a city of ill-manners of traffic sense, shouting and quarreling of people, boredom selling style of vendors, and mushrooms like beetle sellers, which is a very common sight of any big cities of India. Jhabvala's another novel 'The Nature of Passion' deals with selfish, mechanized, miserable ever-fluctuating life style of neo- modern urban society of India. The novel basically deals with the behavior of the rich club-going sophisticated ultra modern society of Delhi. Now a day membership of modern clubs including night clubs is a symbol of high status in affluent society of metro India. The female character of Nimmi, the daughter of rich contractor is very much proud of her college education at Delhi University. She has very much fond of western life style and liked the proposal of her betrothal with Coocho, because the man is modern who often goes to club and drinks whisky. “He lit his own cigarette, flicking his silver lighter with a practised gesture which she

admired. He had such elegant worldly ways”. (175) Thus Jhabvala shows an urban society which has their own world. The bitter realities of dirt in the cities, the frustrations and agonies of the Metro India find very neatly in Jhabvala's fiction. Her most of the other novels like 'Get Ready for Battle', Heat and Dust etc are having setting of Delhi and its surroundings.

Kamala Markanday's 'A Handful of rice' is an account of a horror seeds of urbanization tasted by the common man like Ravi, who comes to Madras to fulfill his life dreams, but very soon disillusioned by the life style of Metro India. Though Ravi has very ideal back-ground, but at Madras he easily get associated with rogue and pushed to continue with ugly shade of city life. He becomes addict to drink even smuggling and theft. The novel also gives a vivid description of insensibility of rich, their hardness of heart, the exploitation of small by big, the black- marketer etc. These are the true images of new Metro India. Anita Desai's novel 'Voices in the City' has received adequate critical response. The title of the novel has made critics to debate on the point whether Nirode or city of Calcutta may be called the hero of the novel. Anita Desai's skilful handling invests the city with a character. Nirode's sketch on the other hand is rather insipid. A.V.Krishna rightly remarks that it is Calcutta which is the hero of the novel and not Nirode:

“Thus although one may be tempted to consider Nirode as the hero of the novel, the city of Calcutta is indeed the invisible protagonist of the novel. Calcutta conceived as a force of creation, preservation and destruction is ultimately identified as a symbol for the Goddess Kali” (K.R.A. 1981:175)

It is true that the city of Calcutta is the locale for most of the actions of the novel, and serves as a background, and it influences and affects all the major characters in the novel. The city of Calcutta is portrayed as an area of smoke and darkness, of noise and squalor, and of disease and death. The novel exposes the soulless life of this city. Calcutta “beastly, bloody-thirsty Calcutta”(64) It is a city of “frenzied sounds”(184) echoing horribly with the hoot-toot tooting whistles of superb trains.(B.R.A.1981:75) Everywhere we hear only the hopeless wailing of the people, the moan of the dying, or the mute stares of the dead. “The central insight is that Calcutta, the city of noises and muffled voices, the city teeming with the meaningless riot of life, is really the city of death”.(B.R.A.1981:75) Desai's

another novel 'Cry the Peacock' is located in Delhi. The novelist gives us very close observation of live and colorful pictures of Delhi. The royal Birla Mandir, Red fort's red walls, Jama masjid's streets are full with bicycles and pedestrians, clamorous Bazaar (180) etc is portrayed very lively by Desai. As the novel 'Clear light of a day begins', we will notice that the house of the Das family does not change except decays. Like Anita Desai's other novels, the setting is Old Delhi. The interesting thing we will notice is she skillfully synthesizes the image of house with the lives of the Das family. The house is associated with sickness, dust, and disorder. And for that reason, the "grey" color is described again and again. In this novel Desai beautifully describes the state of the Delhi city. Sometimes, the whole city seems to be dead and the houses are referred to in the novel as the "tombs". The house of the Das family seems to be deserted and therefore, Bimla does not prevent Baba playing his gramophone loudly because she thinks that the silence of the house is more dreadful. For her, the noise produced by Baba's gramophone gives peace to her. Even when Mr. Das and his wife were alive, they were just like the outsiders as Mr. Das was known for his entrance. The mother was either engrossed in the cards or confined to the bed. That is why Tara sometimes feels that even the ghost of her father could create the noise of papers and nothing else! H. M. Williams very aptly remarks about Desai as:

"Anita Desai is a poet of metro horrors, skillfully evoking a picture of streets and lanes scarred by bottomless poverty, the haunt of stinking syphilitic beggars, lepers and rickshaw-men. The trams and over loaded buses, stinking and creaking at the rush hours blaring taxi-hours, start vividly from the filth, refuse, blood and squalid litters of the side-walks and verminous alleys. The characters move in the various circles and suburbs of the doomed metropolis. Smoke becomes a symbol of darkness and despair for Monisha, for Amla, Nirode the smoke that hangs thickly over the city." (Williams 1976:90)

Shashi Deshpande very renowned name in post- Independence Indian English fiction also portrays a bitter and realistic portrayal of the city of Bombay.(Mumbai) in her 'That Long Silence'. The city of Mumbai is depicted as the embodiments of all that is foul, corrupt, degraded and degenerate, both materially and morally. The streets of Mumbai are "garbage-strewn, shit-pocketed," (B.R.A. 1970:77) and foul-smelling. The flat Mohan and Jaya come to occupy in Dadar

is a typically Bombay flat with, "A trail of garbage on the soil cement stairs, cigarette butts, scraps of paper, hits of vegetable peel. And red stains of paan –stained spit on the wall, macabrely brightening up the dinginess." (192)

Rohinton Mistry's 'Family Matters' is set in the city of Mumbai, where Mistry was born and grew up. It is a story of Middle class ;parsi family. This novel is novel is domestic drama and an intently observed portrayal of present-day Bombay in all its vitality and corruption. (wikipedia.org) Vikram Chandra" Sacred Games as sprawling as the heat-drenched city, richly portrays, emotionally charged worlds of contemporary India, in particular the spidery links between organized crime, local politics and Indian espionage that lie below the shimmering surfaces of its economic renaissance.(wikipedia.org) Patricia Lay Brown in The New York Times writes that "the Dickensian sweep of Bombay, as Vikram Chandra prefers to call the city the cops on the take, the slums patrolled by mobsters, the whores turned Bollywood starlets, the headboards in million-dollar co-ops that slide away at the touch of a button to reveal hundreds of thousands in hidden rupees is itself a protagonist in Sacred Games." (Brown.P 'Newyork Times' 2007) The Calcutta Chromosome is a 1996 novel by Indian author Amitav Ghosh. Has setting of Calcutta. The title itself has a clear sign of metro setting. The book is loosely based on the life and times of Sir Ronald Ross, the Nobel Prize winning scientist who achieved a breakthrough in malaria research in 1898. Suketu Mehta's famous Non-fiction "Maximum, city: Bombay Lost and Found" is about the Indian city of Mumbai ("Bombay"). The book is a fine amalgamation of memoir, travel writing as well as socio-political analysis of the history and people of Mumbai.

Hence, it is apt to argue that the problem of urbanization and the problems of the people of Metro India find a powerful expression in the post independence Indian English fiction. However we cannot vindicate that the rural masses have no place in it, yet it is true that the main focus is in contemporary Indian English fiction has shifted to Metro India rather to rural India. The dilemma of the modern man in the industrialized and urbanized modern Metro Indian society has lured the post independence Indian English novelists. It is therefore very apt to remark that we will have more Metro gallery in upcoming Indian English fiction. Thus to conclude it is very safe to remark that the Indian novelist has shifted very rightly

from rural to Metro India, which is a living soul of the country; and this track will lead the Indian English fiction to a new height of classic world literature as the whole world is going to be a one.

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