
Research Papers



A Portrayal of Caste, Gender and Society in Indian English Novel

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ABSTRACT

Indian Novel in English began after the 1800s and after a long journey has almost reached a level of perfection. Some of the famous novelists are R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh and among the most recent writers are Salman Rushdie (a controversial figure), Rohinton Mistry, Upamanya Chatterjee and Vikram Seth.

The women novelists lag nowhere behind and have earned a place of respect for themselves – Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Arundhati Roy.

The Indian novels deal with everything that is typically Indian. It touches all the aspects being-social, economical, political, cultural, religious etc. There is absolutely no field which has not been touched so far.

Today, even the approach of some new novelist is different as they make use of new literary devices and techniques.

All said and done, it would not be however wrong to say that among the most common themes or issues touched by these writers are caste distinction and gender exploitation. Caste system is so very common in India that a person is known, not by his name or his virtues / values, but by the caste or into the family that he is born.

The basic religion of India being the Hinduism – and from here we have the different braches i.e. castes. A person is known here by the religion he practices and by his caste. This caste system divides people into 2 groups – the superiors and the inferiors. The most important aspect worth mentioning here is that of 'untouchability'. To cite an example here is none better than Mulk Raj Anand. A prolific writer, his very first novel is the 'Untouchable' (1933). A sense of humanism can be seen in this novel. Bakha, the protagonist of this novel suffers great insults and swallows insults for no fault of his, but only because he is an untouchable. His charming sister Sohini, faces physical harassment, again only because of her inferior status. The novelist very beautifully tells us how to enter a temple, draw water from the well or any other public place by an untouchable was tantamount to a crime.. Even food was thrown at them. Similarly 'The Road' by the same novelist also deals with untouchability. Casteism or caste distinction destroys all cordial human relations. The other themes that he writes about are tradition versus modernity, exploitation of the poor and most important the status of women in our society. He is greatly concerned about the past and rich glory and heritage of our country and how it is being destroyed by man and his self-made rules. The novelist goes deep into the minds and the conscience of the characters that he is presenting. He explores the psyche of his characters.

Actually Mulk Raj Anand drew the character of Bakha from M.K. Gandhi's autobiography in which there is Uka, a sweeper, an untouchable. This young boy was treated like dirt and Gandhiji as a child was never allowed to play with him. Although he knew it was wrong, there was little that he could do.

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There were many other writers who presented the evils of casteism, discrimination on the basis of class, corruption, inequalities – social, economic, moral, cultural and religious. To mention a few of the novelists are – K.A. Abbas, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Malgaonkar Nayantara Sehgal etc.

Kamala Markandaya in her novels 'Nectar in a Sieve', 'A Handful of Rice' presents human sufferings. How a number of children are born to the central characters and how it becomes difficult to feed the increasing mouths, how prostitution is taken up to earn a little money etc is all very beautifully portrayed.

Khushwant Singh portrays 'communal disturbance' in his 'Train to Pakistan'. On the whole the various aspects of Indian society are – class / caste – distinction, illiteracy, unemployment, overpopulation, untouchability and superstitions. The conditions of the untouchables were really a sorry state of affairs during the British reign. Slowly their condition improved, but it would be wrong to say that all the evils have been done away with.

Next coming to the gender problem, society characterizes women as ideally warm, gentle, dependent and submissive. Family life and work patterns convey the idea that woman should be subordinate and dependent on man. She is the mother of man who subsequently rules over her and wants to protect her and keep her under his control.

According to the Hindu philosophy, women had no right to study the Vedas and so literacy became a rare quality in women. However in the pre-Aryan age, women were free and considered equal to man. It was only in the Middle Ages down to the present, that the male ordained moralist society raised four walls for her, to prohibit her from the rights equal to man.

Shantha Krishnaswamy explains – “She is a creature who as a child is sold off to strangers for a bridal price, or when she grows up, serves as a supplier of dowry for her husband's family, or who as a widow, in a final act of obliteration immolates herself on her dead husband's funeral pyre to be acclaimed as 'Sati-Savitri' as an immortal”.

It was only in the early decades of the 20th century that social reformers like R.R.Mohan Roy and Jotiba Phule started new movements to reform the society, esp the condition of women. When Gandhi directed the nation's spiritual and moral strength to the non-violent struggle for freedom, there was a far reaching change in women and her position in the family as well as in the society. Besides the western influence coming through literal education, forced new values and norms for the upliftment of women came into vogue. It was a time of political, cultural and social change and though woman, most of the time remained in the family, she became a part of the stirring movement. Though in India, legally speaking she is given more rights than anywhere else, the dominance of male and the submissive nature of woman has been embedded so deeply into the Indian psyche that the opportunities and rights given to woman remain only in word. The male mentality is shaped in such a way that they can't believe in woman being equal to them.

Going back to the history of the emergence of women writers in Indian writings in English, we see that it was of great significance during the last quarter of the 19th century. K.S. Ramamurthi in his book 'Rise of the Indian Novel in English' supports the point by saying that though the “output was scanty, it was qualitatively superior to those of many others who wrote before and after them”. It was the same period when the well-known reputed writers like Toru Dutt, Mrs Ghosal, Sorabji Cornella, Krupabal Sathianathan were on the scene.

The emergence of women writers writing in English brings a new age of brightness for Indian women. Social reforms by great personalities and foreign figures like William Bentinck had its great impact on the status of women and brought them out of the tyranny of the social evils.

Talking about the women novelist, Professor Alphonso Karkala observes – “They tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world. These women writers struggled to give form and shape to their autobiographical accounts, which attracted publishers both in India and abroad”.

The earlier writers presented the traditional Sita image as an object of pity, but later on as times changed, the realistic image of woman, her sense of frustration and alienation began to appear. They began to portray women as facing the conflicts and problems of fusing tradition and modernity. The transition from the old to the new, the crisis of value adaptation strikes deeper into the lives of our women than our men folk. The conflict created by the opposing forces of modernity and tradition was between romantic aspirations and the reality of life, personal fulfillment of desires and duty towards family. The

writer's attention to the problem is found in the novels where they are ultimately shown adjusting themselves to the reality. The conflict between emotion and reason becomes a very complex one. The girls are educated with a complete knowledge of their future but still they are tossed between the desire and submission to the parental authority. The problems of women regarding the adjustment have been the pre-occupation of most of the women novelists.

Kamala Markandaya is her novel “Two Virgins” explores the problems of the growth of a girl's awareness, the change in her as she gets caught up in the events around her and returns to the family fold and the code of conduct but without her childhood innocence.

As Hunter College Women's studies collective points out:

In fact, most women's literature is personal to such a degree that the confessional style of writing has been labeled 'feminine' even when men employ it. Owing to the circumstances of our lives women writers have often turned inward to explore the private rather than the public sphere.

Promilla Kapur, a sociologist analyses the change. 'With a change in Women's personal status and social status has come a change in her way of thinking and feelings and the past half century has witnessed great changes in attitudes towards sex, love and marriage'.

Dr. Radhakrishnan gives the reason for woman being submissive. “Centuries of tradition have made the Indian woman the most patient woman in the world, whose pride is suffering”.

Shashi Deshpande, an author in Indian writing in English, wanted to write about the changed society, but she was so fascinated by her women characters that she laid more emphasis on them. She herself says that she knows how the women feel and she knows the mood of India. She traces out the tensions in which the Indian women are caught which arise in such a transitional world.

Feminism is a protest movement which was launched by the women of the West, striving for equal rights with men.

Anita Desai's 'Voices in the City', Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'Music for Mohini', Nayantara's Sahgal's 'This Time of Morning' etc deals with the oppression of women. Some of the women characters are very strong, breaking themselves from the chains of bondage and moving on towards freedom and strength.

Thus feminism came into being with the feminine psyche trying to redefine woman's role in society. The women writers are out not to portray the outward lives but go deep within and explore the inner lives and conscience of their female characters.

Thus we can conclude that caste and gender ideologies are reflected in the Indian English novels very successfully.

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