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Postmodern Tendencies in Indian English Fiction

Prof. (Dr.) Jagdish Batra

Professor Emeritus of English, SRM University Haryana, Sonipat, Haryana, India

Email: drjagdishbatra@gmail.com

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Prof. (Dr.) Jagdish Batra

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Abstract

Despite the fact that many scholars have read its requiem, postmodernism continues to hold sway over much of the academic world. As a result, not only literary and cultural theories but also creative writing in many cases has undergone transformation, adding to its richness as also confusion. My paper studies the impact of postmodernism on Indian English Fiction which has expanded exponentially since 1981 when Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* appeared. Thousands of novels belonging to this genre have appeared since then in English penned by writers of Indian origin, whether staying in India or abroad. Many of these novels reflect postmodern tendencies in the use of language, narratology and even themes. In this paper, after discussing briefly the evolution and main features of postmodernism as evidenced by theorists like Lyotard, Baudrillard, Frederic Jameson et al, in the working of society and its consequent impact on literature, I explore its impact on Indian English fiction in both serious and light fiction categories and conclude that it has added as much to its richness as to the confusion. The paper ends with musings on phenomenology of writing, future of theory and practice of postmodernism. The writers whose texts have been quoted to buttress the assertions include Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Ashwin Sanghi, Kiran Desai, Chetan Bhagat, Aravind Adiga, Ashok Banker..

Keywords: Praxis, Literary Typology, Style, Narratology, Postmodern Thematics.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of postmodernism has possessed the imagination of the academic world in our times in a big way. Even though many scholars have pronounced the near-death of postmodernism, still it continues to inspire

writers and critics. What exactly is postmodernism – a theory, an approach, an ideology, an intellectual position or simply the abstract noun of a condition? The term itself is attributed to Charles Jencks, an architect, who initiated a new trend in architecture and wrote

an essay elucidating this term in 1947. There are references to John Watkins Chapman also, who, in 1870, is said to have referred to the 'postmodern' style in painting. In literature, it got reflected after the poststructuralist trend set in, during late 1970s and the following decade. (Bertens 55)

Language is vital to literature like breath is to human body. An epoch-making event happened at the beginning of the last century at the instance of the Swiss linguist and Sanskrit scholar, Ferdinand de Saussure. His ideas about the linguistic sign flowered in the form of Structuralism. The debate about the ontology of language intensified around 1950s and this phenomenon came to be known as the 'linguistic turn'. Next came the poststructuralist movement that put paid to structuralism and here a reference to the Algerian-French philosopher Jacques Derrida becomes necessary. The genesis of postmodern approach lies in deconstruction which he propounded. His criticism of the metaphysical bias of western philosophy is too well known to require repetition here. In a nutshell, deconstruction meant a kind of reverse engineering to lay bare the weaknesses of the structure of a narrative, discounting thus the stability of any logos and sign; in the process, obliterating all hierarchies between the centre and the periphery, and as a corollary, taking the wind out of all values too – something serious -- because, while interrogation of Christian values had started in the aftermath of the Second World War, it lacked a theoretical basis which was now supplied by poststructuralism.

When the French Government commissioned philosopher Jean Lyotard to prepare a report on the domain of knowledge, he tried to subsume many ideas, tendencies and disciplines current in his time and pronounced the death of all grand narratives, as for example, Marxism and Freudism. In this, he was inspired by Derridean deconstruction. (Malik & Batra 47-54). Further on, philosopher Michel Foucault's theory of discourse laying down that multiple

and conflicting texts constitute the anonymous discourse was applied to self to underline its confused and fragmented nature. Foucault, however, showed that the social discourse was created by the powers-that-be! The same logic applied to the world as a critic puts it:

From the 1960s onwards critical thought, accompanied by artistic productions that concurred with these premises, began to see the world as constructed not just out of 'language' but out of narratives and discourses. [...] and these narratives and discourses are deemed to be politically motivated by any, or all of such things as race, gender, class, nationality, religion and sexual orientation: there is no narrative or discourse which is independent of some vested interest, and this includes such disciplines as science and philosophy... (Earnshaw 188).

These vested interests include, most of all, the government that supports a particular discourse through law, education and other domains controlled by it. In our times, media and internet too need to be included in this category. The postmodern condition is not fully described without reference to French sociologist Jean Baudrillard who found mankind, i.e., the western world, more and more slipping into a virtual world and savouring what was called virtual reality, thanks to the incessant exposure to screen which has increased manifold after the Corona phase, not only in the West but in other parts of the world too. The positive use of the internet for education and business during Corona times is something which Baudrillard did not live to see. Still, virtual reality working through popular media is today the great opium of the masses that informs their taste, values and the prevailing discourses. It defines a post-truth world where the sanctity of news is gone; media – particularly social media – gives varied, confusing versions of truth. Web content, though democratized, could be reliable or unreliable depending on the gullibility or the luck of the surfer.

The term postmodernity refers to the spirit of the postmodern condition – essentially a socio-cultural and economic formation. The economic condition is described by American literary critic Frederic Jameson as “the world-wide victory of an aggressive, entrepreneurial capitalism and [...] the collapse of the Marxist distinction between base (the mode of production) and superstructure (culture in its widest sense)” (Bertens and Natoli xiii). So, economy and culture are not differentiated. Another way to summarize the developments is that while the right has won the economic order of the world, what with the MNCs holding sway over governments; the left has won in the field of culture by reifying all ideals of past and subsuming under mainstream what was hitherto considered low culture. It can be said that what started as the distrust of language went on to question constructs and hitting hierarchies, finally leading to a state of indeterminacy all around. This is what we find most pronounced in three important discourses -- our aesthetic discourse, social discourse and political discourse.

Indian situation: The discussion so far begs the question if the symptoms of postmodernity are confined only to the West. The fact is that these could very well apply to India as to any other society, if only the difference of scale is overlooked. India presents a glaring example of postmodern situation of the co-existence of contraries belonging to far ends of the spectrum – the super-rich and the pauper, the metropolis and the hamlet, the glitter and the gloom, the elite and the underdog, the learned and the ignorant and so on. There is another way to look at the Indian situation as Arundhati Roy comments, “India lives in several centuries at the same time. Somehow, we manage to progress and regress simultaneously” (Roy 187). It is also a society in which the colonial tendencies have not yet died, and the postcolonial and even the post-postcolonial exist side by side – all in a welter which the term ‘postmodern’ can aptly denote. Renowned

public intellectual Rajiv Malhotra refers to the presence of tradition, modernity and postmodernity – all in the same timeframe in India: “The three categories of Tradition, Modernity, Postmodernity in our case are not sequential. It is not one destroyed by the other, then destroyed by the other. In their case, they [in the West] believe that one thing exists; it has to destroy the previous one. There is always a fight going on. We are simultaneously traditional, modern and postmodern” (“Modernity”).

Coming to literature, one notices the preponderance of long fiction in this age. Surprisingly, poetry became prosaic with the dawn of modernism, and now fiction is turning poetic. A large number of novels following postmodern style have been published in the West as also in India. A study shows that during the first two decades of the 21st century, more than 1400 novels written originally in English by Indian authors, living in India or abroad, were published. This does not take into account short fiction. (Batra: 2021). The major Indian authors whose works display postmodern tendencies include Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Desai, Irwin Allan Sealy, Boman Desai, Vikram Chandra, Chetan Bhagat, Ashwin Sanghi, Rukun Advani, Andleeb Waji, and many others.

We take up major points of postmodernism and examine their impact on the works by some of these authors, as dealing with all would mean more than a book-length study. For this reason, at times, only a brief reference to a particular work may be found here, while in other cases, a textual reference is analyzed with the intent to categorize it in terms of postmodern linguistic style, narratology or theme. The ones taken up here are representative figures of Indian English literature. The intent is to study the impact of experimentation that has gone on in the name of postmodernism. Existing scholarship on the subject is woefully inadequate and leaves a large

corpus that can be scrutinized on the anvil of postmodernism.

Postmodern Language

Taking up the element of language in postmodern fiction, it is not merely the inability of language to denote reality, and therefore demand Derridean 'supplement' and 'excess', but also in keeping with the demands of a globalized world that the language of a postmodern novel is a *mélange* of so many languages and dialects. In this, the trend advances the theoretical paradigms of Mikhail Bakhtin which he termed as 'heteroglossia', i.e., the varieties of a language used by different classes of characters as also registers used by people professing different vocations; and 'polyglossia', which is interaction between different languages. (Habib 21-25).

Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* transliterates Laskari language spoken on the ship that carried people from different lands and which is "an anarchic medley of Portuguese calaluzes and Kerela pattimars, Arab booms and Bengal paunch-ways. Malay proas and Tamil Catamarans..." (Ghosh 108). On the other hand, Salman Rushdie in *Enchantress of Florence* uses Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, Persian, Turkish, Urdu and even Chaghatai – language of the Genghis Khan clan. Most of his novels have *mélange* of languages that faithfully depict the heteroglossia as also polyglossia, hoping the reader will find the meaning beneath the surface, even as it presents a chaotic space for some. In this connection, the observation by the critic Ron Shapiro will not be out of place when he remarks: "At a time when scientists are bending over backward to communicate difficult scientific concepts to the lay reader, often successfully, the devotees of the new theory [Postmodernism] have been bending over forward to use as much obfuscation as possible" (Shapiro 118).

The use of different registers is another popular feature of postmodern fiction. So, while in Shashi Tharoor's novel *Riot*, we find different

registers like letters, diary pages, scrapbook, news clippings, interview transcripts, copies of police FIRs, etc., in Arundhati Roy's latest novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, we find all these formats along with Urdu poetry transliterated in English. Apart from the registers, there is ample use of the ludic or the playful as also literary embellishments like irony and parody in postmodern literature. In this, language becomes an accomplice in shocking the reader. Irony interrogates all constructs of language. After all, we are all manipulating and playing language games according to Wittgenstein. However, quite a few of such markers have been valued adjuncts of literature through the ages; only the element of irreverence riding piggyback on sarcasm has made it different in postmodern writing as in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) where the protagonist Balram refers to the idols of deities in a temple as "divine arses" (187)!

Another feature of postmodern narrative that has assumed importance is Intertextuality. Direct allusions and indirect takes on other conventions/styles is a positive feature that is admittedly in sync with the globalized scenario of our times. Take for example, Rushdie's novel *The Golden House* wherein he refers to so many cultures in a paragraph. A reader from a South American country could as well relate to it as a South Asian:

As I stared at Vasilisa Golden silhouetted against a window beyond which lay the winter waters of the Hudson she looked to me like one of the goddesses of the screen [...] like Jeff Daniels in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*. I thought of Ornella Mutti bewitching Swan in Schlöndorff's film of Proust; of Faye Dunaway as Bonnie Parker with her sensually twisting mouth captivating Warren Beatty's Clyde Barrow; of Monica Vitti in Antonioni shrinking erotically against a corner and murmuring *No lo so*; of Emmanuelle Béart clothed in nothing but beauty in *La Belle Noiseuse*. I thought of the

Godardettes Seberg in *Breathless* and Karina in *Peirrot le Fou* and Bardot in *Le Mepris*, and then I tried to rebuke myself, reminding myself of the powerful feminist critiques of new wave cinema, Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' theory ..." (Rushdie 177).

At times, such allusions become too heavy for the reader to bear. Rushdie's flamboyant use of language is akin to the 29-letter word "floccinaucinihilipilification" used by novelist Shashi Tharoor to specify the act of considering something worthless, but doesn't such language-use show writer's hubris of vocabulary at the cost of the reader? (Udaykumar).

Postmodern Narratology

All narratives, according to the postmodernists, are mere 'constructs' because language is incapable of representing reality. We find fragmented and mixed narratives, magic realism, self-reflexivity, metafiction, circularity of narration, etc. in the works of writers like Shashi Tharoor, Irwin Allan Sealy, Boman Desai, Vikram Chandra, Rukun Advani, et al. The element of self-reflexivity can be noticed in Rushdie's Best of Booker winning novel *Midnight's Children* in which the narrative constantly reminds the reader of the narrator's place in the imaginary world of the novel. Saleem Sinai, the protagonist, refers to the timeframe and misquotes the year of first elections in free India which mistake is noticed by him later and corrected; the novelist won't edit the first mistake for him!

An important feature of modern literature that has been carried over into postmodern literature is the deviation from the set linear mode to circular or fragmentary mode. But whereas in modern literature, the narrative tried to copy the thought patterns in the mind, in the postmodern, it is simple playfulness and celebration of inadequacies of such strategies. Kiran Desai's award-winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is a beautiful example of

fragmented narrative which appears like a collage of snapshots but it is the beauty of language as also her quality of syntactical circumambulation that keeps the reader riveted to the lengthy novel. To Rushdie goes the credit for giving renewed lease of life to the Indian colloquial style starting with his *Midnight's Children*. This style has been well received in postmodern literature.

Rushdie is also credited for pioneering the use of magic realism. He has the status of a postmodern icon in Indian English literature by virtue of his use of magic realism in almost all of his novels. The narrative in his latest eponymous novel *Quichotte* is a sequence of absurd events when tested on the touchstone of conventional reality. Mr. Quichotte is travelling across America with his son Sancho who, we learn later, is not real but only imaginary! In Chapter XII, they land at Jenco Motor Inn in Fourth Valley where the innkeeper checks their ears, nose, etc. for signs of transformation into "mastodons" (pre-historic elephant type animal), since many from locality have changed partially or fully into that creature! They also happen to see a war between humans and mastodons. Clearly, postmodern disbelief of the world, treating it as fiction -- it being separate from representation conforming to the concept of *maya* (illusion) in Indian philosophy -- is evident here.

Following Rushdie's lead, a number of writers like Vikram Chandra, Ahswini Sanghi, Chetan Bhagat, Andleeb Wajid, et al embarked on this style. In Chetan Bhagat's *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, a young boy is bestowed the supernatural power of being able to hit the cricket ball that is not seen by other players due to its speed. In Bhagat's other novel *One Night @ the Call Centre*, a group of young call centre employees -- stuck up in a vehicle that is perched dangerously on the iron bars protruding from a construction site -- are perplexed when they hear God's voice. The entire story is related to the narrator by a mysterious damsel, a co-passenger in a train,

who is later believed to be Lord Krishna! So, the supernatural too jostles with the natural in postmodern fiction, thus upsetting the basic line of distinction between a romance and a novel.

The portrayal of character is a valued element in literature, but this is deconstructed in postmodern theory to show its fragmented and evasive nature because human beings think in language. So, the traditional character is no more dependable in a novel and we find it amply reflected in the protagonist in Jhumpa Lahiri's latest novel *Whereabouts*. The first-person narrator comes out as a postmodern character through snapshots that constitute the book. A ruminative character, her ideas and opinions conform at times to her DNA; at other times these come out as quite new. Her unfulfilled desires, her narcissism, her dislike of self at times, discovery of her parent in self, her decisions and re-decisions, etc. reveal not a unitary, but fragmented self and she tries to discover without success her true identity through musings, readings, casual interactions with others and so on, but her failure does not lead to any tragedy; life moves on as before. After all, postmodernism celebrates the failure to capture reality!

Thematic Influence

Before the postmodern phase set in, the postcolonial movement had brought focus on to the diaspora. Since a large number of writers of Indian English Fiction belong to the diasporic community that is dispersed globally, diasporic themes inform a number of novels. The postmodern philosophy has ushered in a change with regard to the diaspora in that whereas the postcolonialists had defined diaspora in terms of the cultural hybridity talking about problems of acculturation and integration, etc., the postmodernists approve universalism brought about by economic globalization and the consequent human migration and cultural transformation, even though theoretically they too stand for diversity and difference. Contradictions, after all, are acceptable and

adjustable as in the term 'glocal', mixing global and local.

The diasporic writers like V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, M.G. Vassanji, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, et al have dealt with the diasporic situation and the cultural problem in a commendable manner. The postmodern ethos has urged them to move away from the nostalgic portrayal of homeland to living with the ambiguities of cultural difference in adopted lands. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* beautifully brings out the generational difference along these lines. While Ashima's children are now settled in the US as "American desis", she looks forward to dividing time between India and America.

Globalization is indeed the hallmark of postmodern world. Ironically, this feature is devoid of essence of globalism, which should mean the spirit to co-exist with the 'other' people. The present state of the world with wars happening in several regions is a stark reminder of the failure of this spirit. There are many writers whose novels do not accept the postmodern valorization of globalization or of a society totally committed to material values or to the idea of fragmentation of nation. Take, for instance, Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. It highlights the failure of the notion of globalized world for Bijoo who has gone to the US with the dream of getting a good job and be able to send money back home in India, but whose pursuit of green card proves to be a chimera and he returns home a broken man. Thus, the marginalized, supposedly dear to postmodernism, actually suffers in the globalized world wherein national boundaries are still considered sacrosanct. Corona times only deepened this divide. On way back, Bijoo is held up in India by the Gorkha insurgents agitating for an independent Gorkhaland and is robbed of all his belongings. The story, thus, has an ironic take on the identity politics and the "struggle" by peripheral forces against the centre. At the same time, Bijoo and his old father are happy to be united even in a situation of loss

which upholds the traditional stress on family ties in India.

Within India, globalization at the material level has been happening at a fast pace as can be seen with the multiplication of MNCs, and the consequent imposition of the so-called universal culture, what with the western food, clothing, customs, etc. percolating down to the lower strata of Indian society; the 'universal' merchandize vended by the corporates and through the workforce acculturated in postmodern culture by them. Many novelists like Chetan Bhagat, Anita Nair, P.G. Bhaskar, Ravi Subramanian et al. have taken up themes related to work at the MNCs, such as office ambience, unconventional work schedule, European/American culture, young tech-savvy staff, scope for foreign travel, etc. Gender relations are sought to be tied to European standards but it is doubtful if the mental attitude is completely transformed. A case study of the status of women in this postmodern scenario shows that not much has changed and they are still objectified. A researcher of corporate fiction points out that "...the growth of the corporate has also broadened the scope for women's commoditization. There has been a rise in the direct investment by foreign companies who have targeted women, their bodies and minds as viable spaces for economic and cultural colonization" (Chattaraj 103). Whether or not such commodification is totally absent in postmodern western societies is rather debatable.

Postmodernism feigns concern for the marginalized, for the native, for the local. A puzzling clubbing of global and local in 'glocal' is held up as the model, which reverts again to the commercial enterprises. The concern for the socially peripheral and the marginalized was always there in Indian society, whether it was the colonial period or the postcolonial. However, the rural society has been given a raw deal in contemporary fiction. This is attributable to the postmodern focus on the industrialized societies. Bypassing problems like poverty,

ignorance, casteism, illiteracy, etc., postmodern fiction zeroes in on the LGBTQ community, hitherto shunned by the mainstream culture and literature. We find focus on transgenders, transsexuals, transvestitism, bisexuals, etc. in the works of writers like Khushwant Singh, Shobha De, Manju Kapur et al. Transgender Laxmi Tripathi has written their autobiography titled *Red Lipstick*, with co-writer Pooja Pande – a first of its type published in 2016. Also, Dalit literature has seen a surge in postmodern times but mostly, it is found in Bhasha literature of India, i.e., regional languages, hence is not covered here. Apart from it, ethnic minorities have spoken about themselves. Thus, Rohinton Mistry and Keki Daruwalla write about Parsi community; Jael Silliman and Esther David about Indian Jews. Life in different regions like north-east India and Kashmir which were neglected so far, have been thematized in a number of novels by writers like Anjum Hassan, Easterine Kire, Mamang Dai, Shahnaz Bashir, Madhuri Vijay, et al.

The postmodern philosophy has impacted the content part in literature in more than one way. In every age, writers have felt inspired by new philosophies and discoveries. Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels* inspired by the craze of sailors to discover new worlds. Swift appended a make-believe map at the end of the book to assure the reader that he had been there himself. We have in our times, writers who have felt freer because of the postmodern assertion that all disciplines are mere "narratives" which are constructed at some stage and are dished out to consumers as "truths". Facts have become suspect in this post-truth age, primarily due to the information overload, media blitzkrieg, social media intervention and the prevalent discourse created by centres of power.

Ashwin Sanghi, for example, in his novel *Keepers of the Kalachakra* (2018) creates graphics touting them as real discoveries to win over the gullible reader, and at the end of the book, also supplies a detailed bibliography of resources

that he claims to have used, even as he mentions that the “sources may even express views that run contrary to the story” (402). This is one up on magic realism, for in a magic realist narrative, one is aware of the prank being played, but here the reader is expected to dabble in the “suspension of disbelief” and cope with the fictional stuff served as real.

Postmodern disregard of history emanated from this notion that all history is a narrative or fictional story in the sense that historiography allows historians to fill in the gaps between solid facts based on certain evidences, with imagined connectives, and are therefore, prone to deconstruction. Hayden White rightly emphasizes that “the techniques and strategies that they [historians and novelists] use in the composition of their discourse can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface or dictional level of their texts’ (White 121). Postcolonialism uses the postmodern tools of deconstruction to interrogate the validity of colonial structures. It is concerned with the real-time manipulation of history books and facts by the erstwhile colonizers. The methodology followed by court historians and the discourse created by the powers-that-be has come under scrutiny. There are several examples of the New Historicist mode applied to re-write histories but the postmodern lack of faith, *per se* in facts and truth, has further accentuated the decline of history so much so that some scholars have pronounced the death of history in these postmodern times!

History is now allowed to be intermixed with myth, magic, and what not. There is no regard for the timeline or chronology. The field has been thrown open to novelists who have felt emboldened to act as historians and given their own version of history. The postmodern grandiloquent rubric of Historiographical Metafiction – a term popularized by Linda Hutcheon in her book *Historiographic Metafiction* (1988) – mixes with a measure of legitimacy, the

historical fact with fiction. The postmodern temporal dislocation is seen in postmodern fiction, as for example Akbar’s reign put alongside Machiavelli’s in Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. Sanghi’s *Keepers of the Kalachakra* brings together similarly, incidents like the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 and the destruction of Nalanda University that happened way back in 1193 CE. The book has diagrams, pictures, etc. to make the narration appealing, or to “turn fiction into fact,” as he proposes to do in the Introduction.

Obfuscation of categories is a favorite plank in postmodernism as it is “marked by a complex combination of techniques, genres and discourses” (Malik & Batra 52). As such, Sanghi takes up a historical icon as the starting point and then goes off at a tangent, fabricating narratives with an unbelievably large number of ingredients like science, myths, history, politics, human psychology, anthropology and what not. In his novel *Chanakya’s Chant*, the writer mixes cultural beliefs in supposedly historical work and shows historical Chanakya re-born as a wily pundit who grooms a woman to attain power. Chanakya was the Brahmin teacher, who groomed Chandragupta to challenge and replace the notorious Magadh king Nand, and so he is shown performing his Brahmanic duty in the next life too! Not only does Sanghi devote substantial portion to the description of development of religion and science, he also incorporates many mystical concepts along with scientific theorems, historical incidents and conspiracy theories. What shall we call this format except “Postmodern mélange” in which different domains and disciplines of knowledge constitute a mish-mash.

While re-writing an epical tale is nothing new, what has changed in postmodern times is the outlook. In India, numerous re-tellings of the revered epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have been done by poets and writers who believed in the cultural values and re-wrote with due reverence. But what is uppermost in the mind of the writers in these postmodern times is the

effacement of value system – deconstructed as it is – the only value actually revered in postmodern times is that of money. Therefore, the endeavour now is to churn out re-tellings which titillate the reader and bring in profits from huge sales of books rather than present the cultural ethos enshrined in the epics. Thus, Lord Rama's brother Lakshman can talk to his would-be sister-in-law Sita about the nude beauties of Ayodhya in Ashoka Banker's *Siege of Mithila!* (274). This is outlandish as per cultural norms but irreverence to hallowed icons is encouraged by the postmodern ethos.

For novels with linkages to postmodern ideology, we can mention authors like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan et al – and this tribe is ever on the increase. While Banker with 60+ works to his credit tops the list, others are also not far behind. There are writers like Anand Neelakantan who have upturned the character profiles to make the villains like Ravan and Duryodhana the heroes of their re-tellings. There are also authors who have sold well but have not deviated majorly from the original texts, like Devdutt Patnaik and Sundari Venkataraman who too have around 50+ works each to their credit. Again, some writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have re-worked female protagonists like Sita and Draupadi with the intent to give them agency in keeping with the ethos of our times.

A direct impact of postmodern effacement of hierarchy has led to demolition of the privileged status of the canonical works of yore. The elitist outlook is sought to be replaced by the commoner's outlook. The award of Man Booker prize to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* in 2008 put a seal on this sea-change. With the obfuscation of the concept of canon and the placement of popular or light fiction in the same category, the distinction has become blurred. In the novel *The White Tiger*, the writer projects a village bumpkin Balram who rises to be a boastful businessman through chicanery and murder, and has the cheek to brag about the entrepreneurial skills of Indians in his emails to

a Chinese prime minister! The portrayal of the anti-hero with his below-ordinary language becomes the façade for the author to dish out his half-baked and reductive ideas for the solution of India's problems.

Under the rubric of light fiction (also called popular fiction), we have had a deluge of novels belonging to categories like chick-lit, crick-lit, career-lit, etc. After 'women's writing', we have had 'gay writing', 'adolescent fiction' and what not...all getting honours as popular literature. The trend of ever-new categories can be attributed to the publishing industry. As for the ratio of light fiction is concerned, a sample of 327 novels selected randomly from among 433 novels published during 2011-2015 for the purpose of identifying trends showed that the light fiction hogs an impressive 47%, leaving the remaining 53% for the other 12 categories dealing with family, individual psyche, history, women, socio-political issues, mythology, marginalized spaces, multiculturalism, etc. (Batra 2017: 26).

It stands to reason that the description of the postmodern world is twin-forked; it evinces on the one hand, the glitz and glamour of shopping malls, globe-trotting businessmen and tourists, etc., on the other, it displays despondency borne out of fear of the unknown and alien worlds. The growing use of artificial intelligence, though considered a big breakthrough in our times also brings along anxieties of machine going out of control *a la* Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The progress in deep space travel has been accompanied by the rise of horror films based on imagined interaction with aliens gone haywire! Therefore, we have a growing corpus of speculative science fiction that is mostly dystopic in orientation. While in Andaleeb Wajid's *Tamanna* trilogy, we read about the time travel of the young girl Tamanna who watches the times when her mother was a teenager, Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2005) tells the story of an Indian software expert Arjun who gets laid off in America and in a revengeful mood releases a

deadly virus that shakes the entire world, reaching finally the protagonist's favourite Bollywood star. Surely, reminds one of the Corona pandemics that visited the world fourteen years later!

Manjula Padmanabhan's twin novels *Escape* and *The Island of Lost Girls* (both 2015 publications) depict a New Dark Age in which the entire female population, excepting one – Meiji – is savaged and exterminated. One also notices a renewed interest in trauma literature based on the Partition of India when millions of people died or suffered while moving from one part of divided India to the other. The interest in memoir-based fiction in our times has been encouraged by foreign scholars also. But most of such fiction penned by authors like Shauna Singh Baldwin, Gita Hariharan, Keki Daruwalla, et al hardly provides the postmodern comfort to the survivors, which is contrary to what a critic notices about postmodern trauma novels in the West.¹

CONCLUSION

Having discussed the variety of fiction under the sway of postmodernism or countering it, we are faced with the vision that postmodernism creates for us and ask ourselves: Can we expect to live with the void that postmodernism seems intent upon bringing to us? It has taken away the support system of language, values, truth, etc. As a result, a state of paranoia has overtaken mankind. This is best reflected in the dystopian fiction and horror movies, and lately in the spread of the Corona pandemic. The looming scenario, as Tony Tanner puts it is "a dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous" (Lewis 176). Indeed, postmodernism accentuates uncertainty of life and world by negating any solid foundation on the basis of deconstruction. But can man exist in such a "liquid" state -- using Zygmunt Bauman's phrase. Mankind in a

precarious situation is often the theme at intellectual fora.

Lyotard's thesis was aptly titled *The Postmodern Condition* as it was descriptive of the world taking shape at that time. As the debate intensified in the days to come about the stipulations and assumptions of his work, the concepts regarding postmodernism got crystallized and postulates pertaining to various aspects evolved. Times keep changing and so does the society. Already, new terms seeking to replace 'postmodernism' have taken roots, such as 'Post-postmodernism', "Meta-Modernism' (Turner), 'Post-Millennialism' (Gans), etc. Even though these trends indicate movement from purely deconstructive view of things and concepts to a rather positive and practical engagement with them, deconstruction as a reading strategy influenced by a kind of skepticism towards all grand assertions will continue to haunt critical mind. That would be a leftover of the historical phase of postmodernism, just as the value addition to workers' jobs was due to the Marxist phase.

So far as the creative mind is concerned, to take the postmodern theory as the divine guideline to be followed scrupulously by the writers would impinge on their liberty to choose and deal with the material the way they choose, nor is it the intent of this write-up to suggest that writers have in mind such theoretical concepts when they go about their job. A writer does have a blueprint before he or she sets out to write and has the freedom to deviate from it as the work progresses. The blueprint may be inspired by a theory, a real or imaginary person/s or event/s. A theory like postmodernism suggests a trend, and a sales-struck writer (the publishers do motivate writers in this regard) may get stuck, thinking of capitalizing on it, but a writer true to his salt – though the number of such writers be infinitesimal – will most probably go about his work inspired by own muse only.

Notes

1. Christa Schonfelder concludes in her study comparing trauma literatures of Romantic and Postmodern fiction: "Postmodern trauma novels display more optimism about the possibility of recovery and healing than Romantic trauma texts. [...]. Post-modern trauma fiction also emphasizes the complexity of recovery processes, but it refrains from depicting trauma and the pathologies of the mind as radically uncontained in the way that Godwin, for example, does in *Mandeville*. (317-18).

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Bio-note

Dr. Jagdish Batra, Professor Emeritus of English, SRM University, Delhi-NCR, is an author, literary critic and political commentator. Positions held earlier by him include: Professor and Dean English & Foreign Languages, O.P. Jindal Global University; Principal; and HoD in different colleges. He has around four decades of teaching experience and has guided 50 research scholars. His areas of specialization are Indian English literature and Culture Studies. on which he has presented papers at and chaired many international conferences in India, Europe and South-East Asia. Prof. Batra has received many awards including JGU Research Excellence awards and the coveted Lifetime Achievement Awards by the International Society for Educational Leadership, Australia. A former Rotary Study Exchange Scholar to USA, Prof. Batra has published eleven books, 70+ research papers in international journals, and a large number of general articles in *The Times of India* and other newspapers. He is on the editorial boards of three literary journals and research panels of several universities.