

RESEARCH ARTICLE



PANORAMA OF INDO-ANGLIAN FICTION, AND R.K.NARAYAN

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ABSTRACT

R.K.Narayan, (Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan) the doyen of Indo-Anglian novelists, is one of the most admired writers in English today. In nearly half a century of creative writing, he unobtrusively built up an edifice of fiction which will endure the worst ravages of ephemeral trends and flashy vogues in literature. This simple and unpretentious writer enriched life and letters with his charming and warm- hearted novels and stories of Malgudi. Reputed as the most artistic of Indian writers, Narayan's sole aim was to give aesthetic satisfaction and not to use his art as a medium of propaganda or to serve some social purpose.

Keywords- edifice, unobtrusively, emhemeral, ravages

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The term "Indo-Anglian" is used to denote originally literary creation in the English language by Indians. Indo-Anglian literature is not essentially different in kind from Indian literature. It is the part of it. The advantage with Indo-Anglian is that it can be used both as adjective and as substantive. Indo-Anglian is reasonable handy and descriptive, and serves one's purpose well enough. Indo-Anglian fiction has come a long way since the first Indian novel in English, Raj Mohan's Wife by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, was published in 1864. Ever since the appearance of the first significant Indo-Anglian novel in 1927, Murugan the Tiller by K.S.Venkataramani, the number of novels published every year has constantly been on the increase. Even if the creative experiments in this form had not taken the varied directions they have, the sheer numerical abundance would

by now have been enough to demand investigation as a cultural phenomenon."¹

In regard to the modern Indo-Anglian fiction, 1935 may be regarded as the year of Nativity. Both R.K.Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand appeared on the scene with their first creations Swami and Friends and Untouchable in that year. The great pioneer, Raja Rao, joined three years later, with his Kanthapura since then it has been a saga of sustained creativity with "stamina and stern consistency of purpose."² In case of Anand, Narayan, Raja Rao and an ever-growing number of new voices building up a continued and varied crescendo.

The growth of Indo-Anglian fiction has not been without problems. These problems have

¹ Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "The Twice Born Fiction". Heinemann, New Delhi, 1971. p.32.print

² Iyenger, Srinivas. op.cit., p.331.print

been a mixed nature- those which are common to every literature struggling to come into its own, and those which are peculiar to a genre of writing which has double parentage," a product of two parent tradition." The distinctive character of Indo-Anglian fiction comes out in Meenakshi Mukherjee's perceptive observation :

"Of course, an important difference remains. American literature –like, say Australian or English- Canadian literature- is the natural expression of English people. This condition does not obtain in India because much of Indo-Anglian fiction is written in a language that in most cases is not the first language of the writer nor is it the language of daily life of people about whom the novels are written. Thereby a double complication is involved, making Indo-Anglian literature a phenomenon of world literature without a parallel in the world."³

The efforts of different Indo-Anglian novelists to solve the problem of adapting English as a suitable medium produced diverse results. Mulk Raj Anand, with his vigor and realism tried to evolve the medium suitable for his kind of writing. The power and brilliance of his language cannot be denied but one can also ignore its oddities, mannerism and Indianisms. Raja Rao overcame the difficulty by evolving a "kind of Indian idiom, with its distinct echo of regional speech and reflection of local colour, without slipping into unintentional 'Indianisms.' His achievement is much more satisfying than Mulk Raj Anand's."⁴ Narayan's success is even more remarkable. He achieved complete success in evolving the medium which is both graceful and functional. It is simple, lucid and effective without being deliberate or labored.

R.K. Narayan, with his equally renowned brother, R.K.Laxman, the great cartoonist, explored new areas. Their joint work, *The Emerald Route*, sponsored by the Government of Karnataka was a travelogue with a difference. Besides, he also contributed a lot in the field of stories and novelettes such as "Second Opinion" to popular

journals. Indo-Anglian fiction, during its span of nearly half a century covered quite a vast and variegated pattern of themes. From *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) to *the Painter of Sings* (1976) . It was a colourful story of great people with endless variety. It has been a constant and concentered endeavour of Indo-Anglian fiction to reflect a national sensibility and to create a national consciousness. India, in spite of her bewildering complexity and variety, has the basic cultural unity.

This cultural identity finds a multi-faceted projection in Indo-Anglian fiction. The Indo-Anglian novelist had a special responsibility in this regard. "Perhaps it is true that a sincere Indian writer in English chooses English as a medium of his creative expression because of the national and international public it reaches and long tradition English literary forms enjoy"⁵

It is a two-fold base of conformity which keeps writers of divergent cultural milieus and literary styles, together. "First and foremost, their writing is an expression of a distinct, identifiable sensibility which is Indian, and the language, foreign in the sense that it is not picked up on the mother's lap but learnt assiduously by the most sensitive exposure to its practitioners in the wide-ranging variety of speech and writing in India and abroad."¹

A brief glance at the panorama of Indo-Anglian fiction through the decades of growth gives a view of certain prominent and recurrent themes. The Indian social theme has always an inexhaustible plenitude of themes to offer. Its inequalities and iniquities, problems and privations have produced some of the best writing in Indo-Anglian fiction. Among the most notable examples, in this respect are *Untouchable* and *Coolie* (M.R. Anand), *Kanthapura* (Raja Rao), *So many Hungers* (B.Bhattacharya), and *Nectar in a Sieve* (Kamala Markandaya).

The family as the basic unity of the social structure comes in for a multi- sided and elaborate treatment in the works of almost prominent Indo-Anglian novelists. The joint- family system and its disintegration on account of social changes

³ Mukherjee, Meenakshi, op. cit., p.24.print

⁴ Verghese, Paul C. " *Problems of The Indian Creative Writing In English*" Somaiya, Bombay, 1971. p 104.print.

⁵ibid.,pp.109-110

provide an important theme of Indo-Anglian fiction. An allied theme is one of juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. Some of Narayan's novels are concerned with it.

A significant theme which has been treated in depth is what Meenakshi Mukherjee calls "East-west Encounter." The conflicts and intersections between the two cultures and the ways of life- oriented and Occidental have never ceased to interest the Indian mind since the days of Foster, Kipling and John Masters. The *Serpent and the Rope* (Raja Rao), *Remember the House* (Santha Ram Rao), *A time to be Happy* (Nayantara Sehgal), *Some Inner Fury* (Kamla Markandaya), *The Dark Dancer* and *Too Long in the West* (B.Rajan), and *Heat and Dust* (Ruth P. Jhabvala) are among the more notable works in this regard.

The national struggle for freedom has been a theme with tremendous appeal for the very beginning. From Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* to Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, it has been one of the passions of the Indo-Anglian novelist to reconstruct those stirring times of a great people's fight against a mighty and ruthless power. Bhagwan S. Gidwani's runaway best-seller, *The Sword of Tipu Sultan*, shows that interest in this perennial theme has been exhausted. The Indo-Anglian novelist's concern with it has produced a long list of distinguished writing: *Kandan The Patriot* (K.S.Venkataramani), *Kanthapura* (Raja Rao), *The Sword And The Sickle* (Mulk Raj Anand),

So Many Hungers (B. Bhattacharya), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (R.K.Narayan), *Some inner Furry* (Kamla Markanday), *Train to Pakistan* (Khuswant Singh), *Distant Drum and A bend in the Ganges* (Manohar Malgonkar), *Inqilab* (K.A.Abbas) and *Azadi* (Chaman Nahal). The Gandhi motif forms one of the recurring refrains of this particular theme.

A characteristic aspect of Indian life is reflected in the novels which deal in the theme of faith and spirituality with its cult of Gurudom. Anand, a rationalist and sceptic, made sharp digs at it in his early novels like *The Village*. But its most elaborate and searching treatment is to be found in the novels of R.K.Narayan (*The Guide*), G.V.Desani (*All about Mr. Hatter*) and B.

Bhattacharya (*He who Rides a Tiger*). They bring out the power of faith as well as its fraud.

The above panoramic view, which is not intended to be exhaustive, gives evidence of fairly considerable output in a distinctive genre of fiction. It has its own genius and its own characteristic idioms. The roots are in the culture with a hoary past which constitutes its frame of reference.

Now it becomes necessary that the achievement of R.K.Narayan is to be assessed. It is surprising how this simple and unpretentious writer, rooted in the fictional town of Malgudi, created, in over four decades of ceaseless writing, a veritable world of fiction, loved, enjoyed and admired universally. He enjoyed admiration of men of letters like Foster, Graham Green, Pearl S. Buck, Henry Miller, John Updike, V.S. Naipaul, Mulk Raj Anand, Khuswant Singh and Ved Mehta and innumerable critics, reviewers and readers throughout the world. He also got honour from Indian and foreign universities like Leeds, Delhi and Mysore. A Padma Bhushan and a Sahitya Academy Award and a literary prize for the best Asian writer are a measure of his universal recognition of his excellence and achievement. Two of his novels *Mr. Sampath* and *The Guide* have been made into immensely popular films and the latter also is an English version, jointly produced by the Indian matinee idol, Dev Anand and Pearl S. Buck. His novels have been translated into leading languages of the world, and are among the best selling works by Indo-Anglian writers. The uniformly consistent excellence of his writing has merited his inclusion in the *Writers and their work series of monographs* by the British Council.

Narayan "has few among equal among modern novelists"⁶ and is "the best novelists that India has produced, and probably among the most entertaining and distinguished of contemporary writers anywhere."⁷ He is a writer, pure and simple, with no ambitions or pretensions to be a crusader, idealist, missionary or scholar. The one touchstone of good writing he has kept constantly in mind is readability, and he has invariably lived

⁶ Times Literary Supplement

⁷ Rau, Santha Rama.

upon it. "A new novel by R.K.Narayan is always an occasion of rejoicing. It always contains some of his most delightful writing"⁸

His achievement is all the more remarkable in view of the thematic and technical equipment he has kept imposed upon himself throughout. "Meagre means, scanty resource, thinness of tones couldn't surely put on such manifest power! It is true, all the same, that we come to weigh Indian writing of fiction in English to date, Narayan with his penny whistle seems to have wrought more than others with their more pretentious, more obstreperous brass!"⁹

The chief strength of his work lies in his comic vision which retains a perennial and universal appeal without losing its essential Indianness. He is the most basically and most comprehensively Indian of the Indo-Anglian novelists. His portrayal of life is realistic in physical detail and, at the same time, it is suggestive of the depths beneath. Without being didactic, he presents a profound moral vision in his novels. This vision has its roots in an ageless heritage of culture and tradition.

This simple, urban and warm- hearted "man from Malgudi" has preserved his comic detachment and compassionate humanity through the course of a turbulent half- century. His novel, *The Painter of Signs* is evident enough of a reception as keen a sensibility as warm a vision as unclouded as they were when his first novel, *Swami and His Friends* was published.

His creative output in fiction comprises 11 novels and a large number of short stories. Besides, he has written a large number of essays, a travel-journal (*My dateless dairy*), an autobiography (*My Days*), retold versions of mythological legends (*Gods, Demons and Others*), "a shortened modern prose version of the Indian epic", *The Ramayan*, and a travelogue *The Emerald Route*, in collaboration with his famous cartoonist brother, R.K.Laxman.

Taken together, it builds up a formidable image of a giant of a writer. But there can hardly be a man more unassuming and naively simple than Narayan. Settled on a beautiful city of Mysore, though a Tamilian by birth, he loves to go for long walks and meet common people who get transformed into his Malgudians. Like most South Indian Brahmins, he loved good coffee, and did not take meat or alcohol. He says, "You know, I find my pen moves only when I have a betel-nut in my mouth."¹⁰ He was fond of Karnataka music, especially, Veena, and "he has been heard to say that one of his nicest sound in the world is that of curds being dropped on the plate of rice."

⁸ Archer, Rosanne. "New York Herald Tribute"

⁹ Kantak, V.Y. "The Achievement of R.K.Narayan" *Indian Literature of the Past fifty years 1917-1967*, ed. by C.D.Narasimhan (Uni. of Mysore, 1970), p. 133.print

¹⁰ Mehta, Ved. "John is easy to please" *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, 23 January, 1972.print