



LITERATURE NARRATING REALITY: PERSPECTIVES ON SELECTED INDIAN WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

The paper tries to focus some realities that Indian society faces and feels with different socio-historical phases through the lens of Indian English novel. In Indian context realism is structured round various cries in the history of India and Indian Writings in English endorses the socio-economic-psychic realities under the segmental banner of Partition literature, Dalit literature, Pre-and Post- Independence literature. This study is based upon the exhaustive reading and analysis of some major texts of selected novelists of the post- Independent Indian Writings in English. The prime issue hovers round the study is of the depiction of realism.

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With tremendous transformation in the society, the ideas of the writers have been affected from time to time. There has been a far reaching change in all the walks of life and we find the impressions in the literary realism very well. Realism sharply focused on a distinctive social section, bound by ties other than those of ethnicity, creates its own world which is real. In Indian literature the political, economic as well as the social conditions of the environment surrounding an individual forms the basis of the literary realism. Through different ages, writers have used a milieu of subjects for the realist novel. Various crises in the history of India especially

Partition, Bengal Famine, condition of women in the context of partition, dalits, violence, popular uprisings, etc. are the subjects dealt with in these writings.

The mid-twentieth century Indian literature saw the emergence of Indian English novel with the works of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao. Anand's *Untouchables* (1935) and *Coolie*, Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935) and *Bachelor of Arts* (1936) and Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) are known as the pioneers of realistic fiction. This study is based upon the exhaustive reading and analysis of some major texts of selected literary artists of the post-



independent Indian literature. The most committed writers have been selected like Bapsi Sidhwa, Mulk Raj Anand, Khushwant Singh, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, and Bhabani Bhattacharya. These writers have given insights into the most realistic social issues prevalent in the Indian society after the post-independence India and have remained unquestioned for decades.

A style of writing which gives an impression of an actual way of life is termed as realism. Modern criticism frequently insists that realism is not a direct or simple reproduction of reality (a 'slice of life') but a system of conventions producing a lifelike illusion of some 'real' world outside the text, by processes of selection, exclusion, description, and manners of addressing the reader. Basically social realism is characterized by a belief in the power of words and in the writers' ability to recreate the social reality in an effective manner. Important factors affecting realism are an independent life, strong characters, realistic and truthful description of the settings, and knowledge of the human relationships. It depicts emotions of the characters, taking through the reader also, in the context of the issue being portrayed.

Writers have very less scope for imaginary creation, the reason being that it may divert the text from realism. The practice is to accurately observe the life before its depiction in literature. It involves observation, interpretation, organization and finally recreation in the rich and subtle manner. It is sometimes very tedious for the writer to achieve the charm of realism. Those who have achieved this charm can truly express the spirit of the contemporary time.

According to Earnshaw, "the realist work of literature' has the appearance of truth or reality', it is not in itself 'true' or 'real'". Furthermore, he adds that realist literature, be it poem, play or novel, 'represents' the real, gives the impression of conveying what is real or drawing directly upon real life We are immersed in the real world as depicted- the characters are 'brought to life', it is as though we are really 'there' (*Beginning Realism* 4). How much we 'lose' ourselves in the world of the

text is an indication of how well the writer has convinced us of the reality of the pleasure a reader takes from the literature. In this kind of literature, the writer tends to reproduce a faithful copy of the world, though the events are not necessarily just to be found in the history. The events portrayed may have taken place in the present or recent past, which are organized in a linear chronological sequence, located in the places the writer is familiar with in a plausible and casual manner.

Abrams states in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 'Realistic novel can be described as the fictional attempt to give the effect of realism, by representing complex characters with mixed motives who are rooted in a social class, operate in a developed social structure, interact with many other characters, and undergo plausible, everyday modes of experience' (254).

Mulk Raj Anand considered that the only real literature is the expression of the historically developing national spirit. In his writings, *Coolie*, *The Big Heart*, and *Untouchables*, he represents the complexity of personal and family relationships. These are reflections of life and his experiences. Life has been represented as it is in his writings. *Untouchables* (1935) was inspired by his aunt's experience when she had a meal with a Muslim woman and was treated as an outcast by his family. It is a portrayal of a day in the life of Bakha, a young "sweeper", who is "untouchable" as his job is to clean latrines. It is a vivid and realistic depiction of inhumanity in the form of caste system and its effects on the individuals as well as society. E. M. Foster in the preface of *Untouchables* observes that:

Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometime weak, and thoroughly Indian. Even his physique is distinctive; we can recognize broad intelligent face, graceful torso ... as he does this nasty job or stumps out in artillery boots, in the hope of a pleasant walk through the city with a paper of cheap sweets in his hands. (vii)



Anand recreates through Bakha a sweeper's daily duties which include cleaning three rows of latrines single handed and several times too; bringing cleanliness in the place of filth and possible disease. He shows that Bakha does his essential service with efficiency and also portrays the callousness with which the beneficiaries treat it. He effectively depicts the bitter reality of the life of untouchables who are not accepted in society and ill-treated by the people of other castes.

In *Coolie*, Anand depicts the life of a boy Munoo, who has suffered and had been exploited throughout his life. His sufferings are in the form of a poster boy, a circus boy, a labourer, and a servant. Anand deals here with the problems of the suppressed and oppressed, with an emotional consciousness of social reality and sense of social reformation. The book is highly critical of British rule in India and India's caste system.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a Pakistani Parsee writer. She has written *The Bride*, *The Crow Eaters*, *Ice Candy Man*, *An American Brat* and *Water*. Sidhwa in *Ice Candy Man* shows that before the Partition, the different communities and religions lived in peace and harmony socially, culturally and religiously. She shows that the Muslims and the Hindus could even fall in love with each other across religious distinctions. Shanta, a Hindu girl and Ayah by profession, is desired by a group of her admirers consisting of the Muslim protagonist of the novel, Ice Candy Man, Sher Singh, the Sikh zoo attendant, a Hindu masseur, Hari, the gardener, the Muslim butcher, the restaurant owner and Sharbat Khan, a Pathan and many others. Sidhwa shows that all these people belonging to different communities interact with each other on a normal, human level and live like friends. She describes through Lenny, the child narrator, the harmony between Ayah and her admirers and also amongst themselves, in *Ice Candy Man* (Sidhwa 19). They share each other's joys and concerns. They regard the children of their friends from other religions as their own. Love and affection permeates the atmosphere.

She further shows in *Ice Candy Man* that the Muslims and Sikhs participated in each other's

religious, social and cultural events before Partition (105). Sidhwa conveys the message of the cruelty, inhumanity and the futility associated. Sidhwa projects yet another price of Partition in the form of train massacres. She presents the train massacres as the most horrible association of the Partition of India for dwellers in Punjab. The Muslim protagonist of *Ice Candy Man* is expecting relatives from Gurdaspur, instead he meets with mutilated bodies and the bags full of breasts cut off from Muslim women (149). The themes are somewhat similar in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*.

Khushwant Singh, receiver of Padma Vibhushan Award, was a novelist, journalist, lawyer and a politician known for his witty, humourous and realistic works of literature. His most important writings include, *Train to Pakistan* (1956), *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), *The Company of Women* (1999), *Burial at the Sea*, and *A History of Sikhs*, apart from other numerous works.

Train to Pakistan is a historical novel portraying the political aspect of the Partition in 1947, through the lives affected in the village of Mano Majra, a fictional village near the Indo-Pak border. It is basically about the love story of a Sikh boy Juggat Singh and a Muslim girl, Nooran. Their love story surpasses the partition environment of the time. It also depicts the mutual trust and love among the Sikhs and Muslims residing in the village for each other. The depiction is realistic although not real, which is the most interesting element of the text. It also has a moral purpose which is communicated through the characters like Juggat Singh, Iqbal Singh and Hukum Singh.

Khushwant Singh claims to have written *Delhi* in about twenty years: 'I covered it with flesh and injected blood and a lot of seminal fluid into it' (Wikipedia). This novel is also historical in nature revolving around the life of a journalist who has had bad times and it's about his relationship with a *hijra* (eunuch) named Bhagmati. He starts his novel with 'I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati when I have had my fill of whoring in foreign lands. Delhi and Bhagmati have a lot in common, (*Delhi* 1). It is believed that to some extent it has an



autobiographical touch in it. Singh with his great art of controlled narration moves chapter by chapter, giving an insight into the history of Delhi, a great city. Major historical events represented are Partition of Indo-Pakistan and the assassination of Gandhiji. In this novel also we see through the narrator a terrorizing scene of Sikhs being burnt alive mercilessly, after the killing of Indira Gandhi. It's a magnum opus, which is vast and erotic. It's a travel through time, space and history. He takes the readers through the myriad of people, poets, princes, saints, sultans, temptresses and traitors, emperors and eunuchs who have been a part of the historical saga of Delhi.

Bhabani Bhattacharya is an outstanding Indo-Anglican novelist, a receiver of coveted Sahitya Academy Award in 1967. All his writings are a true picture of India. He has a social purpose behind his writings. With his vast experience in and outside India, he is able to depict strong and realistic characters and backgrounds. The reader has a feeling of living with the characters and a part of the scenario of the then India. His works include *So Many Hungers* (1947), *Music for Mohini* (1952), *He who Rides a Tiger* (1954), *A Goddess Named Gold* (1960), and *Shadows from Ladakh* (1967). He has written many other collections of historical sketches and Tagore's Translations. *So Many Hungers*, his first novel, is a realistic portrayal of man-made famine which took million innocents as its toll. It's a picture of man's inhumanity to man. According to *Times Literary Supplement*, it is "a factual and vivid account of one of the most shocking disasters in history" (quoted in *The Novels of Bhabani Bhattacharya* edited by Monika Gupta 11).

It's a story about the family of SamarendraBasu, Kajoli's peasant family in Baruni, the grandfather of Rahoul (called 'Devata' by the villagers). It narrates how some rich men themselves planned for the famine in Bengal, how rich became more rich and poor more poor. The description is bold and realistic. This narration involves sighs and cries, pain and suffering, humiliation, hunger, poverty and sacrifice, due to the famine in Bengal in 1943. It is the most horrible and narrowing journey through

the history of Bengal with everlasting effects. Characterization in the novel is effective. Kajoli being in the pregnant state, one soldier attempts to rape her, surviving which she has to lose her unborn baby. Later, Kajoli has to sell herself for little money she needs for her ill mother. Sir Abalabandhu and the betel-woman are the examples of inhumanity and dying spirit. The novel has an element of timelessness with a universal theme of effects of war leading to man-made famine.

His next novel *Music for Mohini* deals with the caste distinction and poverty. It narrates the story of a seventeen year old girl getting married after taking care of signs and horoscopes. This marriage is a coming together of a village scholar Jayadev, and a city bred girl, who adjusts easily to the new surroundings of an ancestral village. The character development is very effective. The ending shows a change in the beliefs of the villagers and a movement towards modernization.

His next novel *He Who Rides a Tiger* comprises of themes of hunger during famine, caste system and exploitation. Basically, the novels of Bhattacharya are perfect examples of vivid characterization, and untainted realism. Staphen Hemenway states about Bhattacharya, "Bhattacharya inherits Forster's sharp eye for East-West dichotomies, Anand's concern with social, economic, and political problems and Narayan's playfulness and exaggeration" (89).

Kunjo Singh in his critical book *Fiction of Bhabani Bhattacharya* writes, "He has depicted contemporary social, political, economic and religious realities of India before and after her independence. By delineating imaginative scenes as real and actual happenings, by using the themes of hunger and of political freedom, and by reflecting the rustic world he wrote *So Many Hungers!*" (182)

It is indispensable here to name Vikram Seth, an award winning novelist and poet, who has written about social realism. His *A Suitable Boy* (1993) is an enormous novel concentrating on the search for a suitable bridegroom by a middle-aged lady, Mrs Rupa Mehra for her nineteen year old daughter, Lata Mehra. The setting is in Behrampur. It is about four



large families, their lives and loves, over a period of eighteen months. The novel revolves around the choices Lata makes between Kabir, Haresh and Amit. It is set in post-independent and post-colonial India. We revisit the historical and social events of the society of that time. It's a richly detailed and exotically vivid narrative involving religious processions, courts, riots, etc. Seth adds a short cameo of Jawaharlal Nehru in the narrative. Its drawback lies in its length, a marathon of 1349 pages, lots of characters, lots of issues, language and religion. It is important to note that its sequel *A Suitable Girl* is expected in 2016 set in the present scenario.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) is set in Burma. It narrates the story of the deposition of the King the Baw in 1885 by the British, who then intervenes him in Ratnagiri, in Maharashtra, where he dies. It's a long narrative with some subplots also, a thoroughly researched work of art. The subplots are about Raj Lumar, an Indian Coolie and Uma. The first plot concerns Rajkumar, a Hindu orphan who comes to Burma at the age of eleven, and rises to become a big businessman. He marries Dolly, one of the waiting maids of the Baw's queen. In the second plot, we meet Uma, wife of the Collector of Ratnagiri. She later becomes an active member of the Indian League in London.

Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* are the lines that divide people and nations and they are often insubstantial like shadows; but they can create a lot of misery and even death, as in the case of Tridib, the protagonist, who is killed in a communal riot in East Pakistan. The motif of the lines that divide begins with the partitioning of the family house in Bengal and is repeated with variations as the narrative ranges over four countries including India, East Pakistan, Sri Lanka and England. Perhaps the picture of family life in Bengal, seen through the eyes of the narrator when he was a child is far more evocative than the larger concerns to which he sets an example of social realism.

Arundhati Roy an Indian author is best known for her 1998 Man Booker Prize for fiction winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997). She is

also a human rights activist and environmentalist. It took her four years to write this semi-autobiographical works which is also a fantastic novel of social realism. She employs her past real life experiences and observations in this work. This work received a lot of appreciation all over the world. It is a narrative about the childhood experiences of fraternal twins Rahel and Esthappen living with their mother Ammu after her divorce. The story is set in the town named Aymanam in Kerala, India. It describes how small things in life affect people's behaviour and their lives. It deals with the theme of Indian history, class relations, cultural tensions, forbidden love, social discrimination and betrayal.

She makes use of real places and people whom she has altered for the use in her novel. It's a novel about pathetic and childhood, full of sufferings and want. It reveals some of the cruelest ways of taking revenge on the ill-fated children. It highlights the deep-rooted caste discrimination and prejudice nurtured by people. Roy being Syrian-Christian, the popularity of English language among people of Kerala, the Kottayam Cochin coast, her mother's estranged marriage, ancestral homeland, politics, and caste system have been important elements to give it a realistic form. It's a gripping novel shifting in place and time as per the need of the plot, with characters so real that they touch the soul and making it cathartic also at times.

Thus in the end it can be said that these writers have given attention to the fate of an individual in a particular human situation. These texts particularly, *Train to Pakistan* and *So many Hungers* comprise of a series of gruesome details of men, women, children and animals, which bring a shiver through the spine. Their fictional world indicates the richness and depth of social reality. All of them had a moral and social purpose behind writing these works of literature. They take us back to the history, to the scenes of the event, be it historical in nature like Bengal famine of 1943, Quit India Movement or Partition of India-Pakistan. The characters are types drawn from the observable social world becoming immortals. These writers have found literature as a medium to express their disgust towards the cruelty



and inhumanity of society in which we live. With the changing scenario of the culture and society, authors have tried to represent the important issues which attract attention.

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