



## CHANGING CONTOURS IN INDIAN WRITING: A CURRENT PERSPECTIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*The strife towards the creation of a 'new nation' went hand and hand with the construction of a 'new self'. The main motif was to put an end to the British Raj and the formation of a modern nation-state. Many biographies and autobiographies that were published during the colonial period are testaments of the fact that the creation of a 'new nation' should be seen as the manifestation of the creation of a 'new individual'. The present time has brought many avenues before human race, and a human being is almost baffled in making a choice. In the same tone, in the twenty-first century India the creative tension of Indian novelists in English leads them to accept a 'glocalised' situation where they get allured to the international charm but feel tortured by many a transcultural and commercial forces in the smooth sail of their vision. This juxtaposition results in creating an alternative sub-cultural landscape which gets cemented in a neo-Indianness which on the one hand claims certain association with the icons like Che Guevara, Pentagon, and Hollywood, and on the other keeps a root intact in re-making a 'Malgudi' of their own.*

**Keywords:** motif, glocalised, transcultural, Indianness.

### INTRODUCTION

Many a times the literary aesthetics slips into a tone of social document. Literature, in the contemporary times, is rather a product of market forces and socio-economic pushes. In the case of new literatures in English, and specially that of the Indian writing in English, this trend has an old root which can be understood in the words of L. W. Pye :

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*From the 1950s, the US designated modernity as a complex imbrications of industrial, economic, social, cultural and political development, towards which all peoples of the world were progressively headed. The founders and husbands of this discourse were political scientists and economists, mostly associated with US universities, research institutes, foundations, corporations, and international organizations. Among the premises of this modernity were nationalist fellow feeling and individual/state sovereignty as habits of thought.... Development necessitated displacement of 'the particularistic norms' of tradition by 'more individualistic' blends of the modern to help create 'achievement-oriented' societies. (Pye, 19)*

The traces of Post-colonialism are still surviving, in the 21st century, on the mindset of the writers and readers both but the focus has been shifted from political to economic, and from social to personal and emotional. The unidentified and liquid anxiety of helplessness, the depressive restlessness, claustrophobia, and rivalry for the apex are setting the core of Indian novel in English in the twenty first century, which tries to manifest its fresh directions under gradually strengthening trend of globalisation and its influence on Indian literature in English. The present phase of cultural confluence, across the globe, has claimed major shifts in the patterns of human behavior and its socio-cultural manifestation. Be it the representation through literatures or other performative arts, the changing geo-political contours of the world are clearly visible. In the movement of skilled human resources and resulting cultural configuration never has there been such shuffling of people and shifting of boundaries, intertwining of histories and overlapping of cultures as observed during the transition of the twentieth and the twenty first century. The causes are, for this, too many to be enumerated ranging from the emergence of a cyber world, emergence of India as a strong global force and a big market, increasing trends in power equation and sinister forms of economic colonialism to the satellite networking, and super expanding of world trade. Consequently the trajectories of the 'culture' has broken down and a panorama of hybridity, heterogeneity and unmonolithic vision comes a board. If any culture retains something of its own identity, its own flavour, its distinctness, it's seen only in sub-cultural practices. It is within this context that a remapping of cultural cartography has been at work for quite recent time to reproduce something worthy to be called glocalization. Nowhere in Indian literature is this phenomenon better articulated than in the novels written in English in twenty first century. As far as the thematic pattern is concerned, these novels show a fine warp and woof of subaltern cosmopolitanism, modernity and development, science, reason, colonization/decolonization see-saw, narration and nation, roots and routes, submerged and subaltern histories, alternative modernity, move from third world narration to first world narrative zest.

Popular culture and literature is exceedingly significant for a milieu like this or for that matter for any society where cultural plurality is the real determinant of a healthy existence of



citizens. If the search for national identity or the quest for the self or unity in diversity is to be an accomplished fact and not merely a ritualistic slogan, we have to take cognizance of the voices coming from the national culture, subculture, and co culture, altogether. To appease the demands and flairs of the masses, and to serve something palpable and authentic to the busy and perturbed brain, there emerges a need of something light and easily fascinating. Here comes surrealism and fantasy. Literary fantasy is no longer a lightweight thing. It may be considered as an overlapping discourse. For a longer time in cultural history, it was associated only with the marginal; but in the postmodernist plurality by virtue of its de-doxifying nature, it is looming large over the set patterns of 'grand', 'authoritative' and 'canonical'. One of the significant features of these discourses is that, it is not only counter-hegemonic, anti-establishment, anti-foundationist, anti-authoritarian, but it also provides us with an alternate mode of looking at things.

This new trend starts with the vigour of Salman Rushdie when his *Midnight Children* proved a faction on Indian History. Vikram Seth visualized a new India of aristocratic values and Amitav Ghosh presents a postcolonial kaleidoscope. Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shobha De, V.S. Naipaul, Shashi Tharoor etc. have given Indian English novel a rainbow colour bringing into its scope different patterns of fact and fiction, and bringing it to the next door events and day-to-day problems. Women writers have pointed out many a feminist patterns and different forms of exploitations, at large.

In the first decade of the twenty first century, Chetan Bhagat with his novels like *One Night @ the Call Center*, *Five Point Someone*, *2 States* and *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, has just reshaped the tenor of Indian English novels. Although he is still struggling in academia for acceptance as a serious writer, and his literature falls more under the category of popular literature, his mass appeal cannot be ignored. In the postmodernist pattern he has really written a new chapter in the history of Indian English novel. Some less known novelists are also doing well. Among these Amish Tripathi's *The Immortals of Meluha*, is based on the origin of Lord Shiva, and reflects a relook at mythology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He is preparing a trilogy, with *Secret of the Nagas* as the second premiere. *Secret of the Nagas* deals with the origin of the Nagas and their encounter with Lord Shiva. *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, the third novel of this trilogy, is still to be published. His use of myth is quite fascinating, and finds itself agreeing with the statement of Michael Bell that "by the end of the twentieth century, whether in literature or in anthropology, myth had become a less numinous and more workaday category. The metaphysical and universalistic claims were replaced by cultural historical specificity, in which it is both an object and a means of investigation." (Bell, 128)

Rashmi Bansal's *I Have A Dream* and D.D. Bruno's *Bollywood Extras* are the other important literary products. Sharath Komarraju's *Murder In Amaravati* (2012) and *Banquet on the Dead* (2012) Rukmani Anandani's *A Mysterious Death at Sainik Farms* (2012) have created a shift paradigm by introducing many a subcultural, postmodernist, and uncanny



devices into fore. When we look at the total oeuvre of Indian writing in English, specially under the genre of novel, we find the trends like more than average sensibility, enchanting visual appeal, literature as social document, and polyphony of the texts and narrations coming to front.

The complexity of life in the modern phase has settled down in its *sui generis* form in the atmosphere or lot which has come to face, and the continuous practicing in that complex human environment has smothered the exigency, in a way as the continuous flow smoothens the rough edges of an uncut stone. But the urge for the ideal never extinguishes, it may be cornered into background. The same happens over here. Many a young writers seem to be struggling with the 'Bazaar' and their own ideals and call of the locale. While reading the excerpts from the best novels of the year in every December from the last 12 years, I have got myself reminded of the opening lines of Canadian poet Earle Birney's "Bushed" to apprehend this situation in Indian writing in English. The poem brings the imagery of the narrator. Let's see the lines, "He invented a rainbow but lightning struck it/shattered it into the lake-lap of a mountain/ so big his mind slowed when he looked at it/Yet he built a shack on the shore/ learned to roast porcupine belly and/ wore the quills on his hatband"( Bushed, *Madness and Exorcism of Poetry*, 1974)

In this situation, the Indian novelist, many a times, finds himself in the boots of a cultural hero, and wants to add something to the perennial endeavour of humanity for making this planet a better place to live in. It works as chalking out a circle where more than average sensibilities take a leap. We can say Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* to be such an attempt to magnify the "good" and the "bad" features of Indian social construct, and various trajectories of culture as well. Market has propelled the creativity of most of the Indian novelists, who have undertaken a project to excavate the uncovered, the unseen, the taboo, and the things having the prefixes 'un' and 'non', for it can make them 'especial in the alien landscape of behaviour. Deconstruction of almost everything in human sensibility and perception has sometimes negated even the good. Good cannot be good for everybody. One's right can be wrong for the other, and weakness, in the same way, can be the strength. Reader, today, has become a consumer, and more so (please mind the sovereignty of consumer) in the developed economies like India where the nation has shrugged out the tag of the third world. Although ironically some academicians and critics hesitate to accept the fact. Their training in, and related allegiance with the so called "foreign- heaven" does not allow them to shed out this branding. Once they would stand in the common Indian academic lot, which most of the times exposes greater perception and exposure. So this cocooning and shielding also levies different 'should be done'/'must do' type mental set-up and pre-conceived notions for the nation and culture. The other side of the picture which relates themselves to the root that an ordinary reader like me better explains to himself in a phrase "Ezekiel's Tribe" narrate with an agenda of conformity to the local and national. Naipaulian School of writers,

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sometimes who do not hesitate to sketch poverty porn ,always engage their sensibility to show the hole in the landscape.

As postmodernist artistic representation, the novelists in the twenty first century India are more inclined to bring enchanting visual appeal for readers .Literature under such spectacle has attracted the attention of cinema and television also .There are many a cinematic reappropriation and presentations of literary texts .Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a good specimen for this .The following description from the novel is remarkable :

*At the end of the market is a tall whitewashed conelike tower, with black interwinning snakes painted on all its sides – the temple. Inside you will find an image of a saffron – coloured creative half man, half monkey : this is Hanuman, everyone's favourite god in the Darkness. Do you know about Hanuman Sir? He was the faithful servant of the God Rama, and we worship him in on temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion. These are the kinds of gods they have foisted on us. (WT, 19)*

*The White Tiger* has become a realistic faction .The following detail is quite moving:

*There is one street in the village; a bright strip of sewage splits it into two. On either side of the ooze, a market : three more or less identically adulterated and stale items of rice, cooking oil, kerosene, biscuits, cigarettes and jaggery. ... I am proud to inform you ... that the children ... when examined with tape measure and scales, to match up to the minimum height and weight standards set by the United Nations and other organisations whose treaties our prime minister has signed and whose forums he so regularly and pompously attends. (WT, 19)*

The description presented by Aravind Adiga is not simply an imagination but the reality in the most parts of the rural India even today. It may be proved by the statement of Hon'ble Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer and O Chinnappa Reddy JJ. in the case of Municipal Council Ratlam vs. Shri Vardichan and others; where the Hon'ble judges have commented on the issue :

*The circumstances of the case are typical and overflow the particular municipality and the solutions to the questions emerging from the matrix of facts are capable of universal application, especially in the Third world human space of silent subjection of groups of people to squalor and of callous public bodies habituated to deleterious inaction. The Ratlam Municipal town,*

*like many Indian urban centres is populous with human and sub-human species, is punctuated with affluence and indigence in contrasting co-existence, and keeps public sanitation a low priority item, what with cesspools and filth menacing public health. Ratlam town in an area where prosperity and poverty live as strange bedfellows. The rich have bungalows and toilets, the poor live on pavements and litter the streets with human excreta because they use roadsides as latrines in the absence of public facilities. (164 (1980) 4 SCC)*

We find, thus, a literature showing the hardcore social reality. Jeet Thayil's novel *Narcopolis* has been nominated for the Man Booker Prize. Speaking with Srijana Mitra Das, Thayil has discussed drugs, poetry, criticism. He has also questioned whether India has a literary culture. On being asked, 'In *Narcopolis*, why do you choose a series of drugs to depict political history?' He says,

*By choosing to tell an opiated socio-political history, i was able to look at a city over three decades and track its unraveling, from the open-minded cosmopolitan Bombay of the 1960s, 70s and 80s to the divided right-wing McMumbai of today. The period coincided with a change in the drugs that roiled the city's underclasses. The slow poetic world of opium was replaced by the quick brutal degradation of heroin. (The Times of India, 28 Sep 2012)*

Further as the answer to the question, "Writing badly will make you ill", one of your poems says. Yet, we see the Indian scene flooded with best-selling bad writing, better books often ignored. What does this indicate about literary culture here? he says, "Because of court patronage which is insidious and widespread, the lack of a critical tradition and a market economy that controls the book trade, Indian writers are not encouraged to take risks or be experimental. They are encouraged to stay with the tried and tested, the commercial and cliched. Excellent novelists and poets toil in obscurity." (*The Times of India*, 28 Sep 2012)

This statement is not completely valid but such a situation clearly evinces the encroachment of market into the thinking lines of the novelists. Vikram Kapur in his essay "Escapist Fantasy" sums up a new trend of Indian novel in English today:

*We inhabit times where we are constantly bombarded by reality. It comes at us in the form of 24x7 news channels, websites that are updated by the minute, mobile update that are more persistent than a pest ...All that on the top of the crummy lives that most of us lead. In such an age, would anyone want to pick up a novel for how faithfully it depicts real life? Some would, I am sure. But for most people losing themselves in a novel is tantamount to escaping the*



*daily ordinariness of their lives. They wish to immerse themselves in new worlds, to be dazzled by the force of imagination, to experience breathtaking adventures.(The Hindu, October 6,2012)*

Amitav Ghosh has set a new tone of Indianization. His *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* have brought many indigenous trends into the main course. In *Sea of Poppies*, he has freely used the non-English expressions like “*thug, pukka, sahib, serang, mali, lathi, dekko and punkah-wallah shanbaff dhoti, alliballie kurta, jooties and nayansukh, dasturi, sirdar, maharir, serishtas, burkundaz*”, and many more freely and frequently. The *Kirkus' Review* finds the *Sea of Poppies* to be a true historical document.

*A historical novel crammed almost to the bursting point with incidents and characters, but Ghosh (The Hungry Tide, 2005, etc.) deftly keeps everything under control. It's 1838, and Britain is set on maintaining the opium trade between India and China as a buttress of its economic, political and cultural power. Ghosh orchestrates his polyphonic saga with a composer's fine touch. He lays out multiple narrative lines, initially separate, that eventually conjoin on the Ibis, a schooner bound from Calcutta to China across the much-feared "Black Water." Neel, the sophisticated raja of Raskhali, is convicted of a trumped-up forgery charge. Kalua, a prodigiously strong member of the lower caste, rescues the higher-caste Deeti from ritual burning on the death of her egregious husband. Paulette, a feisty French orphan, stows away on the Ibis to escape the restricted life of a white woman in India. It also might have something to do with the attractions of Zachary Reid, the ship's mixed-race second mate from Baltimore. He's commanded by brutal first mate Jack Crowle, who has no sympathy for anyone of any color, and by Captain Chillingworth, who warns passengers and crew, "at sea there is another law, and...on this vessel I am its sole maker." (reviewed on September 1, 2008)*

Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* presents the historical account of the plight of farmers in the colonial India through Deeti, a subaltern voice:

*...the factory's appetite for pium seemed never to be sated. Come the cold weather, the English sahibs would allow little else to be planted; their agents would go from home to home, forcing cash advances on the farmers, making them sign asami contracts. It was impossible to say no to them: if you refused they would leave their silver hidden in your house, or throw it through a window. It was no use telling the white magistrate that you hadn't accepted the money and your thumbprint was forged: he earned commissions on the opium and would never let you off. And, at the end of it, your earnings would*



*come to no more than three-and-a-half sicca rupees, just enough to pay off your advance.(Sea of Poppies,30)*

Amitav Ghosh has created social documents .In an interview with Michelle Caswell (Asia Source September 6,2004) he has accepted, “For me ,the value of the novel,as a form ,is that it is able to incorporate elements of every aspect of life –history, natural history, rhetoric, politics, beliefs ,religion, family, love, sexuality .As I see it the novel is a meta –form that transcends the boundaries that circumscribe other kinds of writings ,rendering meaningless the usual work a day distinction between historian, journalist, anthropologist, etc.”

With the advances of India towards being a developed nation, flattening divide between Metro India and rural India ,seepage of liquid nationality and many more factors, we find that Indian novel in English is set out find new terrains to settle down a fresh.

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