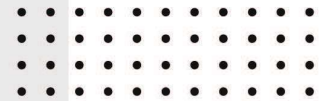


Fiction and Indian Writing in English

Parul Mishra



Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Pt.L.M.S Campus Rishikesh.

In India the history of fiction is as old as its existence. It has been an essential part of human nature to listen to stories and narratives provided by parents, grandparents and teachers.

The origin of fictional narratives, dates back to the days of epics (Mahakavyas) like – The Ramayana and Mahabharata by Valmiki and Vedvyasa and can be traced as the real ancestors of it.

One can never deny that India was one of the earliest homes of fiction. Sanskrit is not only the oldest language of India but also the repository of one of the most ancient literary records in the

world, namely the Vedas (2000 B.C.). Instead of having the present form of novel, we find a number of literary genres such as art epic in several cantos (mahakavya), prose chronicles (akhyayika), romantic tale (katha), an episodic story in a larger works (upakhyana), an episodic story sung and encated by a bard (abhinay), didactic bird and beast fable (nidarsana); a story in dialogue form (pravalhika); a story satirizing society (matallika); a tale narrating several adventures (parikatha); a partially narrated well-known story (khandkatha); a complete story of a hero's life (sakalkatha); a vast repository of tales (brihadkatha) etc. The mentioned forms in variety, could be designated as pre-novel narratives in Indian culture. The works like Kathasaritsagar, Panchtantra, Jatahkathayan, Hitopadesha, Kadambari etc. are also mentionable in furthering this tradition of fictional narratives in India.

With the arrival of British on Indian soil, since seventeenth century, India came into contact with western, culture and got exposure to English language, literature and culture, and this could be credited to Lord Macauley, who proposed to encourage English language in India as official language and mode of higher education in the early nineteenth century. English opened a new world of thought and imagination and brought new consciousness to the Indians which paved

a way to the arrival of the trend of novel writing, which further acquainted Indian writers with it.

As been pointed out that this trend of novel writing in India basically derived its inspiration from the western world, but fiction writing was already present in our culture. In other Indian languages, such as Urdu and Persian, the languages used before English, have works like Sabras (1635-36) by Mullah Vajhi in Urdu and Nastar by Hassan Shah in Persian, are equal to the category of novel. Inshah Allah Khan's Rani Ketaki ki Kahani (1801) in Hindi, Ramram Basu's Pratapaditya Charita (1801) in Bengali could be called the earliest novels in India. The genre flourished in other regional languages of India as in Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil etc.

English language came late in India. Though Dean Mahomad's Travels of Dean Mahomet (1794) was the first book written in English in India by an Indian (Mehrotra 2). Meenakshi Mukherjee in her eminent book The Perishable Empire mentioned, A Journal of First Eight Hours of the Year 1945 (1835) by Kailash Chandra Dutta as the first fiction written in English by an Indian. But the first novel written in English language by an Indian was Rajmohan's Wife (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, which deals with the theme of marriage, property, and courage of female protagonist Mattaongini, with contemporary social and familial situations.

Woman had remained oppressed and

subdued under the yokes of institutionalized traditional orthodoxies and patriarchal ideologies but the air of emancipation of woman trickling in from the West and British colonialist influences and socio-religious reform movements initiated by great men like Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar etc, and the nationalist movement gave woman freedom out of her cloistered existence in the middle nineteenth century.

The new awareness opened her doors towards freedom and the New-women in India emerged on the literary scenario who began to express her thoughts in the form of diaries, letters, articles, autobiographies, tracts, stories, novels either in English or in other regional languages breaking the long silence. Historically and sociologically observed report says that the evolution of the status of woman in India has been a continuous process of ups and downs. But in Indian culture and tradition she has always been the centre of any family. Her position as early as Vedic period has been equal to man and with the passage of time there came a change in her status.

With the Moghul invasion seclusion, degradation and denial of education made her condition pathetic. Later the efforts of a number of social reformers of the nineteenth century, call of Gandhiji and legislations passed after independence in 1947, brought woman out of the various kinds of social confinement. Consequently this led to their active participation independence movement along with their male counterparts.

Women emerged to be the major concern of the nineteenth century literary and social

discourses. Their education, availability of intellectual resources, and the malpractices against them such as enforced widowhood, sati-pratha, child-marriage, pardah-pratha, unequal-marriage etc. became main issues of that hour. Many male novelists in the mid-nineteenth century and later nineteenth century concentrated their subject on woman basically, & they figured as central characters in it, even the novels were entitled on their female protagonist, such as Durgeshnandini (1863), Indira (1873). In Bengali by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya; Indulekha (1889) by O.C. Menon and Joseph Muliyil's Sukumari (1897) in Malayalam; Indirabai (1899) by Gulvadi Venbata Rao; Umarao Jan Ada (1899) by Mirza Ruswa in Urdu, Vagdevi (1905) by Balarao Babu Rao in Kannada, are significant to be mentioned in this context.

The society as well as the family was changing radically and simultaneously the condition of woman in that transforming society, they have been seen as the emblem of Mother India, ranging from the view that woman was allegorically the nation which needed to be freed – and this idea forced many leading social reformers to take their conditions and actual position seriously.

Some significant women writers of 19th century we come across are – Hannah Catherine Muller (Phulonami O' Karuna Bibara, 1852); Ras Sundari Devi (Amar Jeevan, 1876) in Bangla; Rajlakshmi Devi (The Hindu Wife, 1878); Toru Dutta (Bianca : The Young Spanish Maiden, 1878) in English, Savitribai Phule (letter to Jyotiba Phule, 1873); Tarabai Shinde (Stri-Purush Tulana, 1882) in Marathi; Mokshadayani (Safal Swapna, 1884); Swarna Kumari Devi (Kahake, 1898) in Bangla, Pandita Ramabai Sarswati (High Caste Hindu Women, 1887) and Karupabai Satthinadehn (Kamala & Saguna, 1895) in English are remarkable. These women writer aim at communicating their experiences as women as well as their views on social reforms. To quote John B. Alphonso-Karakala:

"They tried to tell the world the obstacles women faced and the disadvantages they suffered in an orthodox Hindu world. These women struggled to give form and shape to their autobiographical accounts, which attracted publishes both in India and abroad."

One can find in their writings some streaks of feminism, though in a suppressed manner. Family and familial relationships did not become much vocal in these works as they were mainly concerned with the contemporary social problems, under which they were filtered. In their writings they were just aspiring for freedom, although some references to their husbands and family members, and their subjugated life have find same expression. Early writers of the 20th century were also writing about women in bulb, such as Rabindranath Tagore's Chokherbali (1903), Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya's Parinita (19) in Bengali, K.K. Sinha's Sanjagita or The Princess of Aryavrata (1903) in English, Premchandra's Nirmala (1927) in Hindi.

Here the important thing to mention is that the literature of the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century did not focus much on family & familial relationships, domestic matters and interpersonal relationship between man-woman, because it was the time when nationalistic trend was on hype and social problems were shattering the strength of the nation. The social reform

movements brought some improvement to the condition of women, accessibility of education and availability of increasing opportunity for acquiring education improved their status in society.

So there were many women writers writing fictional as well as non-fictional works too in the early twentieth century, such as Cornelia Sorabji (Behind the Twilight, 1908), Maharanee Sunita Devi (The Autobiography of an Indian Princess, 1921), Sarojini Naidu, Sakinatul Fatima Wazir Hasan (Indian Muslim Women – A Perspective, 1938), Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya (Imperialism and Caste Struggle, The Awakening of Indian Women, 1939), Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain (Sultana's Dream, 1905), Sucheta Kriplani, C.T. Ramabai (Victory of Faith and other stories, 1935), Snehlata Sen, Shovana Devi etc. are important to be mentioned.

Literature written at the time of forties and fifties presented new image of the Indian women, who were both conventional and unconventional. The writers famous as Big Three (Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao) not only dominated the literary scenario of the pre-independent era but post-independent as well.

Mulk Raj Anand, with his literary works such as Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), Two Leaves and a Bud (1937) basically focused on the downtrodden and the social ill-treated class but in the works such as Private Life of an Indian Prince (1955) and The Old Woman and The Cow (1960) he presented the conventional and the unconventional women characters as well. His novels are social rather than familial. Whereas, R.K. Narayan is the

writer of average and common man but also painted wide range of feminine characters from conventional to rebellious. He came into literary scenario with his novel Swami and Friends (1935). But the conventional women dominate and are shown as supporters of the institution of family. His works like The Dark Room (1938), The Guide (1958), The Painter of Signs (1976) are significant in this context. In these novels he presented bold women characters who revolt against their husband, as Savitri, Rosie and Daisy and they have their own genuine cause, are full of new consciousness. Raja Rao, also along with Anand and Narayan put India firmly on the map of the world in fiction.

Kanthapura (1938), The Serpent and the Rope (1960) The Cat and the Shakespear (1965) women characters are both modern and traditional. These novels show remarkable variety of themes and issues of contemporary India such as the Gandhian whirlwind, deep interest in past India, the social injustice, the East-West encounter, the metaphysical questions of life, women status in society and many more. These celebrated trio brought tradition of social realism and the post-independent writers retained it.

Post-independent writers present east-west encounter and women's new image in their writings. Bhabani Bhattacharya, who who appeared in the galaxy of fiction in late forties and cover the decade of fifties, sixties and seventies. In his novels women are full of exuberance and vitality but once the woman tries to come out into the world, she is victimized and only the strongest survives. In his novels So Many Hungers (1947), Music for Mohini (1952), He Who Rides a Tiger (1954), A Goddess named Gold (1960), Shadow from Laddakh (1966), A Dream in Hawaii (1978), he presented typical Indian struggling woman, who fight against

poverty, injustice and social ills and evils, such as Kajoli, Mohini, Lekha, Lakshmi, Meera and Sunita etc. East-West encounter has been important. Manohar Malgaonkar's fictional world is dominated by male, where woman se woman se Post-independent writers present east-west encounter and women's new image in their writings. Bhabani Bhattacharya, who appeared in the galaxy of fiction in late forties and cover the decade of fifties, sixties and seventies.

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His novels *Distant Dreams* (1960), *Combat of Shadows* (1962), *The Prince* (1963), *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), *The Devils Wind* (1972) are remarkable. In the novels of Balchandra Rajan realism and fantasy is remarkable. His novels like *The Dark Dancer* (1959), paints the character of Kamala, who faces the problem of east-west encounter in terms of her quest for identity and Nalini in *Too Long in the West* (1961), who returns from an American University and faces the problems of choosing a suitable husband.

Eminent Indo-English writer Arun Joshi who appeared world of creative writing in 1960's, his recurrent theme has been alienation in its different aspects. His novels are also centre around male figures and their quest, his protagonists are genuine seekers of life, as in *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strong Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981), *The City and the River* (1990). But his women characters like Mrs. Billy Biswas and Bilasia are also important.

Women have lately emerged from the hard shells of their domestic responsibilities and have initiated writing creatively in a perceptive way. Post-independent era

enriched the quality of Indian fiction writing in English by women writers. The portrayal became realistic with a thrust on female's sense of frustration and alienation.

The characters created by them like their creators were torn apart by the confiding forces of tradition and modernity. Their crisis of value adaptation and attachment with family and home pulled them asunder. The plight of the working woman was still worse, aggravated by her problems of marital adjustment and quest for and assertion of her identity. The predicament of new Indian woman has been taken up for fuller treatment by novelists like Anita Desai and Nayantara Sehgal. These novelists, however, have generally concentrated on the plights and problems of educated women mostly with an urban base. (Pathak 12)

Shantha Rama Rau, she has scarcely spend two years in India, is famous for her autobiographical novel *Home to India* (1945) which is an account of her coming to consciousness, politically and culturally against the backdrop of nationalistic struggles against the British Raj, and that results

in the gradual weakening of her Anglophilia, her feelings of bourgeois privilege, and a growing identification with subaltern India. But she is most famous as a travelogue writer.

Kamala Markandeya's in her outstanding works such as *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), *A Silence of Desire* (1961), *Possession* (1963) and *A Handful of Rice* (1966) presented all emotions of human life successfully in her novels with focus on social circumstances that mould life in a good or bad way and also the never dying spirit of mankind.

Ruth Praver Jhabwala, writer who possess mixed origin and mixed culture, wrote about India and Indians effectively. Her novels are good example of east-west encounter. But it is to her credit that Jhabwala with her complex alien background, trains a keen, observant eye on the conflicting human relationships in Indian society. Her best works are *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), *The Householder* (1960), *Esmund in India* (1958) and *Heat and Dust* (1975) for this she received the prestigious Booker Prize. Familial bond and relationships are not much focused.

Nayantara Sehgal's novels reveal a close acquaintance with the political life and they also present the life of the upper class sections of Indian society, the hypocrisy and shallow values, but she is also concerned with the Indian heritage and its value for the educated India. Her important novels are *A Time to be Happy* (1958), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *Rich Like Us* (1985), *Mistaken Identity* (1988) etc. Anita Desai concentrated on their psychology, and deals with the educated upper-middle-class life. Her

protagonists are women most of the time, and they tend to confront with their inner psyche and intellectual upbringing. Her works which received innumerable awards & applauds are *Bye, Bye Blackbird* (1969), *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Where Shall we go this Summer?* (1975), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) etc.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981), a quintessential post-colonial text "brought about a renaissance in Indian Writing in English which has outdone that of the 1930's." (Mehrotra 318). The appearance of *Midnight's Children* (1981), seemed like a break in the tradition of Indian Writing in English (Kortenaar 231). After *Midnight's Children* the succeeding works in the same decade such as *Shame* (1983), and *Satanic Verses* (1988) are celebrated as other works giving a new direction to the trend of fiction writing. His work inspired many writers like Shashi Tharoor, Allen Sealy, Amitav Ghosh, Upmanya Chatterjee, etc whose writings appeared in the same decade.

Many male writers who appeared and made their presence felt boldly on the literary scene in 1990s are Vikram Seth (*A Suitable Boy*, 1993), Vikram Chandra, Mukul Kesvan, Anurag Mathur, etc. They emerged with new ideas and progressive outlook and strengthened the Indo-English-fiction

The decade of 1980s also saw the emergence of many women writers. The one who comes foremost is Shashi Deshpande, who takes the leading role in depicting the new women, belonging to the middle class educated families and how they were trying to adjust or mal-adjust themselves between family and career. The image of new women and her struggle for an identity finds an outlet in other writers of this decade through Namita Gokhle's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984), a story of woman's agonizing search for her true self,

whereas Nina Sibal's *Yatra* (1987) is a work of imagination and complexity about the protagonist Krishna's story of self-discovery. Shoba De with her debut *Socialite Evening* (1989) took a daring step by focusing sex in her novels and portrayed the aristocratic section of society where the women are daring, bold and ambitious. She illumines the real human condition, feminine desire, gender awareness, self-definition, existence and destiny.

Her women refuse to be subordinated or dominated by their male counterparts. A number of Indian women novelists started their literary journey in 1990s and they produced novels revealing the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. Their works are marked by an impressive feel for the language and authentic presentation of contemporary Indian women. Their focus is usually on the urban middleclass. The remarkable women novelists of the 90s are Gita Hariharan (*Thousand Faces of the Night*, 1992), Meena Alexander (*Nampally House*, 1991), Rani Dharkar (*The Virgin Syndrome*, 1997), Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*, 1997), Manju Kapur (*Difficult Daughters*, 1998), etc..

The expatriate and the migrant Indian women writers who had already been writing about their situation in cross cultural context- the status of 'in-betweenness'. Bharti Mukherjee is the first in the list whose novels had started appearing since 1970s. She wrote women oriented novels and dealt with the cultural conflicts and expatriate experiences. Her *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), and *Jasmine* (1989) are remarkable in this regard. Some important novelists in this context are Meera Syal (*Anita and Me*), Anita Rao Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Uma Parameswaran, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*Mistress of Spices*, 1997), Kran Desai (*The Inheritance of Loss*, 2006), etc. In their writing theme of migration leading to self-discovery holds an important place.

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