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Nation and Indian Writing in English

Abstract: India is a country in which multiple languages are spoken. Though Indians treated English as an alien tongue until 1950s, it became part and parcel of the lives of Indians today. It gained the status of being as one of the official languages of India in due course. Literature is nurtured in India in as many languages as possible. However, there has been a great divide between literature produced in English and literature produced in regional languages of India. If Indian literature is recognised by the world, it is most often due to the literature produced in English but not the literature produced in vernacular languages of India. This has been the case since 1930s or even earlier. If we look at the literature produced in India at a broader perspective, literature produced in English engages with issues at national and international level whereas literature produced in regional languages engages with issues at domestic level. Because of this wide gap with respect to the themes dealt with, Indian Writing in English gained more prominence than literature produced in vernacular languages in India. I would be discussing in this paper the way Indian Writing in English became a part of world literature by portraying nation and national events in the novel writing.

Key Words: Emergency, Independence, Nation, Partition, Riots

There are 16 official languages in India. It's natural for literature to be produced in all these languages. When it comes to Indian Writing in English, it is about the literature produced originally in English by Indian authors. There are works written originally in regional languages and then get translated into English. Though translations are a part of this larger body of Indian Writing in English, they cannot be taken into this oeuvre. Here we have to notice that most of the authors are able to write both in regional language and in English, but there are some authors who intentionally choose to write in English to reach wider audience. To get recognised by the world, one may have to write in English. Aijaz Ahmed says, "Every national document gets national attention only when it gets published in English which is a language of authority. So many writers wrote in English for recognition."

From the introduction of this paper, as we have noticed, two kinds of literature are produced in India - literature originally produced in English and the literature produced in regional languages. This distinction was actually made by Salman Rushdie who argued that authors of Indian Writing in English contributed more to the world literature but not the authors writing in regional languages. In 1997, Rushdie published an article titled "Dear, This is the Oriental Scene for you" in the journal *New York*. This article became "Introduction" for *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West. In this "Introduction", Rushdie made controversial remarks about literature produced in Indian regional or vernacular languages: "The prose writing - both fiction and non-fiction - created in this period (1947-97) by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 "official languages" of India, the so-called "vernacular languages," during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning "Indo-Anglian" literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books" (Narayanan 117). As though it is not sufficient, Rushdie even dares to call vernacular writers parochial

while privileging authors of Indian Writing in English cosmopolitan. In his view, some vernacular authors are okay but they could not make 'Final Cut'.

How different Indian Writing in English is from literature produced in regional languages of India? When we take a look at the works produced in English, they all talk about bigger issues like nationalism, partition, emergency, riots etc. but when we look at the works produced in regional languages, we find them talking of local issues. Very few works like *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy might not be dealing with the subject such as *nation*; otherwise most of the works of Indian Writing in English deal with *nation* in some way or the other. Jon Mee says, "The better novels in English participate in this larger debate of 'reimagining the nation'."

Another thing that we can notice is with regard to identity of the authors. Most of the authors of Indian Writing in English do / did not reside in India while producing most of their seminal works in English though they were born India. We can also see their works being published abroad. Raja Rao was abroad when he produced most of his works in 1940s. Ruth Praver Jhabvala was not born in India but was married to an Indian and lived in India for 24 years. Rushdie was born in Bombay but he is currently residing in Britain. On the contrary, regional writers reside in India and produce their works in vernacular languages.

Among the authors of Indian Writing in English, there are male and female writers but the prominence was gained by male writers, not the female ones because male authors could take up larger subjects such as nation, partition, emergency, politics, riots, postcoloniality etc. for their works whereas female counterparts like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandeya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, during 1950s and 1960s, confined themselves to issues such as domesticity, family, home, relationships, tradition, women's predicament, motherhood, local realities, provincial towns, gender etc.

Authors of all genres of Indian Writing in English are as follows: Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore, M.K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, G.V. Desani, Khushwanth Singh, Ruskin Bond, Arun Joshi, Verrier Elwin, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandeya, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Nayantara Sahgal, Rohinton Mistry, Gita Hariharan, Chaman Nahal, Mukul Kesavan, Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao, Shashi Deshpande, Chetan Bhagat etc.

There is another group of authors whose works are known as Stephanian School of Writing in English; this group comprises authors such as Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Allan Sealy, Vikram Seth, Upamanyu Chatterjee etc. They all studied at St. Stephen's College, Delhi and Oxbridge hence they are called Stephanian School of Writers. Tharoor said that their writing cannot be called Stephanian School of Writing because they did not come together to produce particular kind of works. But they defended themselves saying that kind of writing cannot be possible without studying at St. Stephen's College. Upamanyu Chatterjee could not have written work like *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) unless one has that kind of education and cosmopolitan exposure.

Technically speaking, Indian Writing in English contributed literature of all genres but fiction writing occupied predominant position. It is fiction or novel writing which brought name and fame to Indian Writing in English. Novels like *Heat and Dust* (1975) by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai and *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga even went onto win Man Booker Prize. So, Indian Writing in English represents novel writing mostly for that matter. For the same reason, novel writing in English by Indian authors is considered for this paper. In this paper, we would be focussing only on novels which

could grab the attention of readers across the world with *nation* or *national events* as the major theme, but not all the novels that were written in English as part of Indian Writing in English.

Though *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay is the first novel published by an Indian author in English, 1930s is generally seen as starting point in Indian Writing in English. After the publication of *Rajmohan's Wife*, there was no any other novel which could really be appropriated into Indian Writing in English. In fact, Bankim himself gave up writing in English for political convictions after publication of his first novel *Rajmohan's Wife* which was originally serialized in the periodical *Indian Field* in 1864. It was brought out in a book form only in 1935. This attempt of Bankim was termed as 'False Start' by the critics of the day.

1930s was the time Indians were fighting for freedom from the British rule with Gandhi as the leading figure. It is at this juncture Raja Rao came up with *Kanthapura* (1938) which talks about Gandhian Nationalism. In this novel we can see Raja Rao's portrayal of the village named Kanthapura getting affected by freedom movement with Murthy who is a disciple of Gandhi as a leader. *The Cow of the Barricade* (1947) is another work by Raja Rao that talks about Indian freedom struggle. Raja Rao wrote these works with lot of commitment towards Indian freedom struggle; his works literally took up the burden of spreading the Gandhian ideals among Indian educated men. However R.K. Narayan who was a contemporary of Raja Rao takes altogether a different stance. While Raja Rao promoted Gandhian ideals as much as possible through his works, R.K. Narayan expressed scepticism about Gandhian Nationalism through his novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955). R.K. Narayan was actually apolitical. Though R.K. Narayan satirizes Gandhian National Movement in *Waiting for the*

Mahatma, it is usually seen as a sequel to *Kanthapura*. If *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) had been written before 1947, it could have become a tool in the hands of the British.

After India became independent in 1947, authors of Indian Writing in English started engaging with Partition of India and its repercussions, Emergency 1975-77 and Riots at different times of the Indian history. We do not have to think much to say how bloody events were with the partition of India. In fact theme of partition gained more prominence than Indian freedom struggle in 1940s. First and foremost novel of Indian Writing in English that dealt with partition is *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwanth Singh. Singh not just depicts political events surrounding partition but also narrates how people were forced to participate in brutalities that emerged as a result of partition. Another novel that dealt with partition is *The Heart Divided* (1957) which was the first and last novel by a Pakistani author named Mumtaz Shah Nawaz. In this novel, she puts forward the inevitability of the formation of Pakistan. This novel is set in 1930s and 1940s. She argues that we were not just separated geographically but even emotionally: “the division of India had already taken place...in the heart, i.e., in the universe of emotions and relations” (Gopal 73). After nearly two decades of the publication of *The Heart Divided*, Chaman Nahal brought out *Azadi* (Freedom) in 1975 that talks about both Indian freedom movement and the partition of India happening in 1947.

Next important and well-remembered novel forever is *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie. Reading *Midnight's Children* is like reading Indian history per se. This novel is not merely about two individuals named Saleem Sinai and Shiva but also about India as a whole. It cooks up all Indian historical events into a finer dish to serve as a background. It thus talks about Rowlatt Acts 1919, Amritsar Massacre 1919, Transfer of Power in 1947 and subsequent partition of India into India and Pakistan, States Reorganisation Act 1956, Indo-Pak Air War 1965, Bangladesh Liberation War 1971, Smiling Buddha - India's first successful

Nuclear Bomb Test 1974, Emergency 1975-77 imposed by the then Prime Minister of India Mrs. Indira Gandhi and subsequent sterilization and Civic Beautification Programs etc. This novel is set in between 1915 and 1977. Post-modern critic Linda Hutchin coined a term to describe these such works as 'Historiographic Metafiction'. Rushdie reinforces the idea of partition once again in his third novel *Shame* (1983) which talks about humiliation and shame suffered by women when Pakistan was created to separate the Muslims from the Hindus. There was no single agency which could really help women from sexual violence.

Next in order comes *Rich Like Us* (1985) by Nayantara Sahgal who was a niece of Nehru and cousin of Indira Gandhi. Unlike many other female authors of Indian Writing in English, Sahgal's novels are very political in nature. *Rich Like Us* is one such a work which targets Emergency 1975-77 imposed by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who is referred to as *Mother Tsar* in the novel. She critiques forcible sterilization that was enforced by Emergency very vehemently. Sahgal even went to an extent of calling Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi as power mongers. Emergency is depicted as a complete subversion of Democracy. This novel also makes a mention of Gandhi, Quit India Movement, Formation of INA and Sati along with Emergency. However all these national and historical events are used as a background not disrupting the actual story of the lives of the two female protagonists Rose and Sonali and their fight to live in the times of political turmoil. Reviewing this novel in an article which appeared in 1986 in the journal *World Literature Today* Uma Parameswaran said, "*Rich Like Us* is a fragmented superficial novel without nothing to hold it together either in content or in technique...Nevertheless asserts the female writer's entry into narrating the nation."

Next in row happens to be *The Shadow Lines* (1988) by Amitav Ghosh which is set against the backdrop of historical events such as the Swadeshi Movement, II World War,

Partition of India and Communal riots in Calcutta and Dhaka 1963-64. It was written in the aftermath of Sikh riots in Delhi 1984-85. Ghosh, through this novel, questions the political freedom of the nation that could not prevent inhuman massacre of the Sikhs.

Generally when we think of partition of India, first work that strikes our mind is Bapsi Sidhwa's heartbreaking novel *Ice Candy Man* or *Cracking India* (1988) which was written exactly 40 years after the event. Sidhwa is a woman writer from Pakistan. She sets this novel in Lahore in 1940s and presents iconic images of the partition – railway carriages full of corpses, burning houses, intolerable shrieks and wails of women being raped, a tangled pile of unrecognizable bodies, gunny sacks filled with chopped-off breasts. Main protagonist of this novel is a Parsee girl named Lenny Sethi who begins to narrate the story when she is only four years old, and ends four years later. After a decade of its publication, Deepa Mehta filmed this novel in 1998 with the title *Earth 1947*. Mukul Kesavan's first novel *Looking Through Glass* (1995) which is set in the midst of the turbulence of Indian partition and independence asks the question "What if partition had not happened?"

A Fine Balance (1995) by Rohinton Mistry exposes the changes in Indian society from independence in 1947 to the Emergency 1975-77. This novel is set in an unidentified city in India initially in 1975 and later in 1984 during the turmoil of the Emergency. Mistry is very critical of Indira Gandhi in this novel. He critiques atrocities caused due to the Emergency on the poor and marginalised during the period. It is the poor who had been affected much by the decision made by the Prime Minister. Conclusion of this novel is really pathetic. The main characters Ishvar and Om - one disabled and the other castrated, end up leading their lives as beggars on the streets. Shashi Tharoor, one of the Stephanian writers, published *Riot: A Novel* (2001) which deals with love, hate, cultural collision, religious fanaticism, Sikh Riots,

Babri Masjid controversy, Coca-Cola controversy in 1970s, communal riots in 1990s etc. It's a narrative of the nation. Indian history plays a definitive part in the novel. This novel is based on an actual incident related to a riot that took place in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. Story revolves around an American woman named Priscilla Hart who gets stabbed to death on 30 September 1989 in a riot that erupts in the town of Zalilgarh, East of New Delhi.

Until 1980s, following were the subjects of Indian Writing in English: the nation and its stories, secularism and the secular self, partition, emergency, post-Ayodya events and communal riots, religion, gender, region and language, caste etc. Both in 1930s and 1980s, nation was talked about but mode of narration changed greatly. Josna E Rege says, "By 1980, nation and novel had reached a state of impasse: both the unitary model of the modern nation-state and the narrative of the modern Indian English novel needed radical rethinking. The publication of *Midnight's Children* broke both deadlocks simultaneously: at once eulogy and elegy for the unitary model of nation-state that had failed to deliver the promises of Indian freedom movement, and a new literary and conceptual model that opened new worlds of possibility for re-imagining and representing enabling relationships between individual and nation." Till 1980, nation was projected in the forefront in Indian Writing in English, but this scenario changed with the publication of *Midnight's Children* (1981) in which *nation* is used just as a backdrop. Glorification of nation is found no more in Indian Writing in English after 1981. This new tradition was picked up by authors who wrote novels after the publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981. Nation continues to be a part of their fiction but they break away from the anti-colonial rhetoric. Appiah says, "They reject not only the Western imperialism but also nationalist project of the postcolonial national bourgeoisie." Now their focus shifted from *nation* to *individuals*, making nation or national events serve as a background. This can be visible in *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy, *The Shadow Lines* (1988) by

Amitav Ghosh, *English, August* (1988) by Upamanyu Chatterjee, *A Suitable Boy* (1993) by Vikram Seth, *The Gin Drinkers: A Novel* (2000) by Sagarika Ghose, *Riot: A Novel* (2001) by Shashi Tharoor, *The Hungry Tide* (2004) Amitav Ghosh, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) by Kiran Desai, *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga etc.

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