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### Locating Indian Imprint in Contemporary Indian English Literature

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#### Abstract

My paper enquires into the nature of Indian ethos that supposedly guides Indian English literature and gives the genre its name. Most studies conducted on this subject are focussed on formalistic aspects like language and narratology. Also it is observed that most novels belonging to this category represent Indian identity through apparent cultural traits like dress, food and lifestyle or social norms, practices, traditions, etc. Even the fiction dealing with political issues relevant to India are subsumed under this category. My contention is that these dimensions do project

the Indian identity but only partially. There is the not-so-obvious part at the base of this superstructure that is the most important element but has not been explored seriously and judiciously by most writers due to prejudices or disinclination. The Indian ethos is reflected in Indian philosophy, values and worldview which are not adequately represented in Indian Writing in English. I have analyzed a number of novels to make the point clear which makes this study unique and promises to be helpful to future researchers.

**Keywords:** Indian Identity, Indian English Fiction, Indianisms, Bhasha Literature

#### Introduction

The genre of fiction occupies a dominant position in our times and this genre is the subject of study here. It has won acclaim for India at the international level as the most visible and vibrant literature and has been credited for being a link between India and the West. In this, the role of the diaspora is quite evident which adds another dimension to the problem at hand. Coming to the representation of Indianness in Indian English Fiction (hereafter referred to as IEF), let us survey the prevalent modes of identifying it and discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

While reviewing the literature already available in IEF category, one finds that most critics judge identity on the basis of words from Indian languages. We find that the novelists have increasingly used words from Hindi and regional languages in English novels to bring about a touch of reality which shows growing confidence of the Indian writers. The premise here is that language is the gateway to culture. Therefore, more and more words of the native language ought to be introduced into IEF. It started with the great trio -- Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan came out with their first fictional works in 1935, closely followed by Raja Rao in 1938, all of whom used words from native languages in translated as also transliterated forms.

In contemporary IEF, we find a division of sorts, with some writers brought up in foreign lands or in an Anglophile milieu choosing to write in British/American English, using even colloquial words, while others choosing to use English in a rather Indianized manner as was done by R.K. Narayan. The problem of language was put in proper perspective by Raja Rao, in the famous preface to his novel *Kanthapura*: "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own." (Rao 2).

Clearly, for some critics, debate about the Indianness of English literature turns to the use of English as the medium of literature as done by Indian writers. But there is more to Indianness than language alone. One may write well in English – may be like or even better than the English writers but may only convey what is totally alien to India or Indian people. In an interesting piece about the Indianness based on language use, R.V. Dhongde concludes his survey with the observation that these considerations do affect the point of view of the writer, but at the same time, "Its (Indianisms') main use is imparting content to the world outside India" (Dhongde 70). In a way, the study disputes the significance of language as a marker of Indianness.

The use of Indian narrative forms like circularity, diversions, story-within-story, orality, etc. can also lend a touch of Indian to a text. The Indian literary narrative forms have been used by a few writers, while most Indian writers have stuck to western modes of style and narratology. Starting with the realist narrative to the stream of consciousness to magic realist mode – all these have been tried in IEF. At the same time, some novelists, starting with Raja Rao and culminating in Salman Rushdie have also used Indian mythical narrative modes of circularity and story-within-story, etc. This is becoming more and more

popular now.

### Indian themes, characters, etc.

Apart from the formalistic and linguistic modes is the thematic mode that determines the Indian identity, and we find ample use of the Indian socio-cultural traits and problems which stand out clearly. These obvious socio-cultural traits include descriptions of locale and ambience, attitudes and lifestyle, daily routine and household chores, relations and kinships, social structure and behaviour, customs and traditions, occasions of joy and sorrow, etc.

So, if a novel takes up a problem related to India or Indian life, it fulfils the requirement of being an Indian novel to a certain extent. Take, for example, the family ties. The trait of respect for the elders is something that cannot be missed out on in Indian family structure. Most serious literature will reflect this aspect. Now, since the very texture of fiction is problem-based, there would be deviant characters who will not abide by the socio-cultural norm. However, the writer's depiction, guided by the prevalent social discourse, will not condone it. If in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, (1963), Maya kills Gautam, her husband, on account of belief in an astrologer's prediction and her desire to gain life at the cost of her husband's, she is shown to be mentally unsound and is admitted to hospital.

Among the many issues and problems of Indian society, the patriarchal set-up and the rights of women are mostly talked about in fiction. Despite the constitutional guarantees and favourable political measures like reservation in local administrative bodies, etc. the equality of sexes remains an illusion. Any number of novels, right from the pen of the first novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) to the novels by the great trio, to the contemporary award winners like Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1989) or Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) can be cited to show coverage of this problem persisting in our society. Again, a unique trait of our community life in India is the caste factor. No fictional work probably is written without reference to this inhuman trait that has done incalculable harm to the society at large. Writers from the beginning – the great trio included – down to Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Amitava Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies* (2008), etc. have included this in the portrayal of social life and rightly condemned it in their individual style.

The dichotomy in our public conduct vis-à-vis private lives forms the subject matter of many novels. A glaring example of this is our attitude towards sex. While treating sex as a taboo publicly, most Indians drool over it privately. This hypocrisy is hugely responsible for the high incidence of crime against women. The subject was hardly touched upon in olden times the way it is done now. Now, even women writers do not mind taking up sex-related issues and descriptions in fiction. Shobha De's *Sethji* (2012), Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* (2009) and Namita Gokhale's *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) are some of the examples. Similarly, the superstitious nature of ordinary Indians finds wide mention in contemporary IEF, as for example, in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991), or *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), portrayal of Indian life without reference to this aspect is considered incomplete.

Of the many socio-political problems that have been taken up by novelists is the communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims. It has the historical connection from the times

of Aurangzeb down to the Partition. Truly, it is politics that is to blame here and this fact is brought out in a number of novels like Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* (2001), etc.

There are numerous other issues like poverty, class prejudice, inadequate infrastructure, political problems, crime, corruption, etc. The portrayal of such issues does lend an Indian touch to fiction, but it must be borne in mind that most of the aforesaid issues are also universal. For example, the hypocrisy regarding sex is a feature of various societies across the world. Religious discrimination, class conflict and racial prejudices are also common in most societies. Literature worldwide is rightly focused on such issues. Being common in the world, such features cannot lend a unique identity to any literature claiming to represent a society, and so, these cannot locate a distinct Indian identity in IEF too. What then should be the real marker of Indianness here?

### Cultural ethos

Portrayal of individual and social life with all its joys and miseries is the major concern of fiction everywhere. However, behind what we like and feel pleased with or hate and feel pained by, lie our judgment, our ideals, and our standards that satisfy or disenchant us collectively -- as society -- because our lives are not led individually. These are the real markers applicable to any society that functions on the principle of a collective. IEF misses out on, or at least, fails to project effectively this underlying cultural ethos, which can lend legitimacy to the 'Indian' tag. Figuratively put, the linguistic or formalistic markers are the attire; external socio-cultural markers represent the body, but the subterranean cultural ethos is the real essence of Indianness. This ethos includes Indian worldview and the Indian philosophy of life.

For want of space, it can be put here reductively that Indian cultural constructs are inspired by the seminal belief that the world has been created by divine forces and it is not totally chaotic but runs according to a divine plan. That being the case, all creation is inter-linked and partakes of the same divinity. The physical world including the human body is always in a state of flux but the divine centre is constant and eternal. The cosmic principle has been called Dharma in Indian philosophy which is constant, and at the same time malleable in relation to time and space in the world where we live. As, for example, according to the Indian philosophy, man is free to act but is bound to reap the fruit of his actions whether in this life or the next one. Similarly, the ultimate aim to have salvation can be achieved in one life or over several lives as the spiritual development continues from one life to the other even when the physical body ceases to exist.

The acceptance of change in worldly matters is what makes an Indian adaptable, liberal and pluralistic even as he believes in certain unchanging ideals and values that help in spiritual uplift. No doubt, the gap between ideals held aloft in a society and the practice at the grassroot level is visible, and it is a universal trait of human imperfection, but the covert cultural ethos is what can be looked upon as a specificity of a particular human society. Therefore, to reflect Indianness, the ideals or values revered in Indian society ought to be in focus.

Once in a while, we come across a Raja Rao who makes this philosophical core the resting ground of his novels like *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965). Literary historian Srinivasa Iyengar aptly remarks about the central problem of *The Serpent and the Rope*: "... the real problem is, not establishing harmony without, or with another, but within, and with oneself. All problems are, in the final analysis, really spiritual problems. Yet it is true that the phenomenal world – the serpent – cannot be easily conjured away. We are caught in the interstices of Maya's net, samsara's bondage, one way or another, and time and again" (Iyengar 403). This succinct assessment encapsulates the Indian worldview. How beautifully does Raja Rao narrativise the philosophic movement from *karma* or action in *Kanthapura* (1938) to *jnana* or knowledge in *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) to *bhakti* or devotion in *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965) and completes the spiritual trajectory as laid down in our ancient books. On the other hand, Indian philosophy fails to free Arun Joshi's character Som in *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) from the existentialism angst even though he puts in sincere efforts.

Salman Rushdie has discussed many philosophical concepts as part of discussion among characters, briefly though, in his *The Golden House* (2017) like the problems of good and evil, self, society, morality (Rushdie 147), the Indian myths of Bramha and Shiva (Rushdie 102-3), mind-body equation (Rushdie 250-1) etc. The point sought to be underlined is that in order to earn the epithet 'Indian', literature should also discuss the deeper Indian philosophical concepts *a la* Goethe, Carlyle, Rousseau, Camus, *et al* who did it with regard to western philosophy.

As pointed out before, unity of all life is an integral part of the Indian worldview. As man is one of the 84 lakh *yonis* in the cycle of creation, it follows, therefore, that the different species are endowed with the same life force. As the awareness about environment has improved, we find an increasing number of novelists taking up ecological themes. Leading novelist Amitav Ghosh banks upon local legends about forest deity in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (2013). Animal-human-superhuman correspondence also appears in the novels employing magic realism mode as in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), *Two Years Eight Months & Twenty Eight Days* (2015), etc., but it misses out on the deeper philosophical message.

While Indian ethos is admittedly spiritual, most novels in our times project a distrust of ancient scriptures, spirituality and spiritual masters. The dismissive attitude is seen in the treatment of hallowed ancient Indian *itihasa* texts like Ramayana and Mahabharata, whose stories are twisted, upturned and disfigured to titillate the western readers. As such, in place of reverence for the idealistic messages like Rama's devotion to parents, or Krishna's philosophical outlook on life, writers like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelkantan, *et al* have presented these characters as cardboard heroes even though such books sell in large numbers in the West, raking in big money for the authors. Lord Shiva, for example, is portrayed as an ignorant tribal chief in Amish Tripathi's *Immortals of Meluha* (2010) who does not know the meaning of 'Om', Kauravas are shown as victims in Neelkantan's *Ajaya* series (2015, 2017) contravening the moralistic message of the Mahabharata. This tendency, supposedly a fallout of the postmodern irreverence, is actually incompatible with the Indian value system. (Batra 2011)<sup>[1]</sup>.

The Indian worldview is holistic and one word that guides human life and society is dharma. It is an open-ended righteous approach and not a doctrinaire creed. Feminism thus is the dharma of our times and Indian feminism, as some scholars have outlined it, becomes the dharma for Indians as well. Now, if the litterateurs condemn the treatment by the society of that time to women like Draupadi and Sita in the novels like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) respectively, this is understandable. But to say that Marxism too is a 'dharmic' view (Paranjape 2000)<sup>[7]</sup> in our times is to misinterpret dharma, for in the *purushartha* scheme, dharma governs *artha* or material prosperity, not the other way round as is stipulated in the Marxist philosophy.

The Indian worldview is best explained in ancient Sanskrit aphorisms like *Ahimsa Paramo Dharma*, or non-violence is the ultimate dharma. Without going into the intricacies of the imperfect translation here, we find it most relevant to the world threatened by terror today. A call for practicing this discipline of non-violence in raging communal hatred *a la* Mahatma Gandhi has been made in Rajat Mitra's novel *The Infidel Next Door* (2017) which is the story of the neglected plight of the Kashmiri Pandits who were forced to leave the valley by the terrorists and rendered refugees in their own country.

In conclusion, it can be said that though Indian English Fiction started with the urge to showcase Indian identity, delving deep into Indian philosophy, the trend was lost post-independence, due to focus on the contemporary socio-political and economic issues. The imitation of western modes and theories too has distracted the Indian English writers, as that has the charm of making money through saleable stuff. We find that while words from Indian languages and the themes dealing with the overt culture (lifestyle, landscape, behavior, traditions, socio-political problems, etc.) have been used in IEF, what is lacking is the serious portrayal of Indian philosophy that acts covertly as the underlying consciousness.

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