

Vol. 2, No.2, July - December 2013

ISSN 2277 - 1786

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THE DAWN JOURNAL

Reforming Beliefs

CHANGING THEMES OF INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS – AT A GLANCE**Dr. Vikrant Rajput, Dr. Yashpal Singh & Dr. Anita Dhall****ABSTRACT**

From the year that saw the publication of Ram Mohan Roy's *Sati* to the present day, it is nearly a stretch of 200 years. The effective presence of the British in India that made Indian writing in English possible was about half a century (Plassey was fought in 1757), when enterprising Indians started writing in English.

One can perceive a rhythm-or a pattern-in the history of all those territories that have affected the difficult passage from colonial subjection to political independence, covering a long period. First came the shock, the trauma of conquest, a stage of demoralization and mute acceptance of the alien rule. Then came the period of slow awakening, the sense of hurt and shame and resentment, and also the desire to imitate the rulers and adopt their language their manners and even their religion. Then followed the slow stirrings of dissent and the rumbling salvos of revolt, eventually independence but at the cost of partition of the country. Anyhow no one can deny the fact that the British conquest had also meant in the long run, that it also brought with it to India the English education and renaissance in literature. English literature becomes a means for Indians as well of giving form and utterance to the hopes and despairs, the enthusiasm and apathy, the thrill of Joy and the stab of pain, in the nation's history as it moves from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence and again from independence to the tasks of reconstruction involving further experiences of success and elation or futility and failure. According to M.K. Naik:

Thus during the period from 1857 to 1920 the Indian ethos gradually underwent a sea-change from the shock of defeat and frustration and the trauma of inferiority to a new found self-awareness and self-confidence. It is against this background that the work of the prominent writers of this period must be viewed....¹

The Indian writings in English, to name a few Mulk Raj Anand: *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two leaves and a Bud* (1937), R.K. Narayan: *Swami and friends* (1935), *The Dark Room* (1938), Raja Rao: *Kanthpura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rape* (1960), *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947), Kamala Markandaya: *Nector in a Sieve* (1954), *A Silence of Desire* (1961) and *Possession* (1963), were a response to the impacts of above mentioned political events. These novels also usually depicted the Indian society, especially the common man rather than the elite and the sophisticated, preferring the familiar to the fancied, explored the by lanes of the outcasts and peasants and the working people. None of them cared to produce realistic or naturalistic fiction. It is generally argued about these writers that several of them were more interested in a foreign audience than in audience in India. It is said that these writers instead of presenting a true image of India, gave the kind of image that the west is supposed to want or expect: cobras and sadhus and decadent Hindus and phoney intellectuals and corruption in high places and fantasy and superstition.

As India moved from colonialism to independence and the old feudal order was lost, it gave place to the exertions, frustrations of the post independence era. Novels of Miss. Attia Hosain: *Sunlight on a Broken column* (1961), *Phoenix Fled* (1953) and Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* deal with this theme.

Then came writers like Anita Desai. In her novels, *Cry the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965). We find that her forte is exploration of sensibility the particular kind of modern Indian sensibility that is ill at ease with the barbarians and philistines, the anarchists and the moralists. She is preoccupied with the inner world of action, which tends to be very unlike the earlier novelists where focus is on the backgrounds-economic, political, cultural and social and are often changed for writing to please the west.

Thus, we see that date the western impact, the infusion of English literature and European thought and resulting cross-fertilization have been the means of emergence of Indo-English literature.

After the era of the writers who wrote about the pain of partition and Joy of independence arrived a host of new writers. This was the era of immigrants who left their lands to explore the

new horizons. Writers like V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahri fall under this category. The major theme in their works is the experience of Indian immigrants torn between the two worlds. They evoke ideas of homeland, their personal feelings towards rootlessness and their problems of adjustments. Some of the problems that they deal with are suppression, frustration, anger, identity crisis, resistance, humiliation and moral dilemmas. The dilemmas don't end with the first generation. The subsequent generations have their own set of problems. They are torn between their parents' expectations who want them to be more Indian, little realizing that they are also the children of America now. Hence, they have intense pressure on them to be two things at the same time loyal to the old world and fluent in the new. Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) all belong to this category.

The Indian American novelists express this inner turmoil caused to the immigrants as they try to settle down in the alien land-from de rooting to their assimilating in the foreign land Debjani Banaerjee remarks that:

Contemporary writing from South Asian Diaspora bears the marks of a cultural encounter that combines the rewriting of history with nuanced responses to dislocation and marginalization by hegemonic structures. The raw energy of first generation politics is substituted by a more complex response to issues of race and unbelonging. The new writers retort to their attempted marginalization, not by dissolving into mainstream but by rendering their distinctive voices...²

Thus, there is a marked difference between the themes of earlier writers like Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand and Indian American novelists who write about their first-hand experience in foreign land.

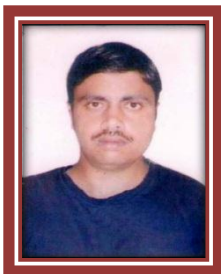
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Dr. Vikrant Rajput is presently employed as Lecturer and Head, Department of English, Baraut College Education, Baraut, Baghpat (U.P.) India. He received his B.A. in English Literature in 2002 & M.A. in English Language and Literature in 2004 from S.D. College, Muzaffarnagar affiliated to C.C.S. University, Meerut and M.Phil. in 2005 from C.C.S. University Campus, Meerut, U.P. India. He was awarded Ph.D. (Doctorate of Honours) in Indian Literature from C.C.S. University, Meerut in 2008. He is specialized in Indian Writing in English. He

has published several articles in various reputed international journals and presented papers in several national and international conferences.



Dr. Yashpal Singh is presently employed as Lecturer and Head Department of English, M.S.K.D. (PG) College, Morna, Muzaffarnagar U.P. India. He received his B.A. in English Literature in 1999 and M.A. in English Language and Literature in 2001 from Meerut College, Meerut. He obtained his M.Phil. in 2003 from C.C.S. University Campus, Meerut, U.P. He was awarded Ph.D. (Doctorate of Honours) 2007 in Indian Literature from C.C.S. University, Meerut. He has

published several papers in various reputed international journals and presented papers in many national and international conferences.



Dr. Anita Dhall is presently employed as a Lecturer in the department of English, D. A.V. (PG) College, Muzaffarnagar, U.P. India. She received her B.A. in English Literature in 1993 & M.A. in English Language and Literature in 2000 from S.D. (PG) College, Muzaffarnagar affiliated to C.C.S. University, Meerut. She was awarded Ph.D. in 2007 from C.C.S. University, Meerut. She has published several papers in reputed journals and has presented papers in national and international conferences.