Caste and the Indian Novel: Some Theoretical Issues

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt is made to locate caste as one of the most important structuring agents of Indian narratives. Various critics have already been trying to devise a 'poetics' of the Indian novel. The argument posited in this article is that no poetics of the Indian novel can be conceived without taking into account the caste-factor. It must be an integral part of any such poetics. Critics have invariably failed to lay down the exact nature of the correspondence that exists between caste and Indian novel.

The present article inquires the relationship between caste as a socio-cultural phenomenon and the Indian novel, its narrative. Some of the central questions around which the thesis revolves are:

--- What exactly is the relationship of caste with Indian novel?

--- Can caste be considered a factor which differentiates the Indian novel as a distinct category?

--- How and in what ways does caste function as the structural principle of Indian novel?

--- What is the relationship between caste and nation and novel?

The main hypothesis which is examined here is that we cannot conceptualize Indian novel without taking into account the caste factor. In one way or other, Indian narratives are caste-centered.

Key words: caste, complexity of social strata, caste in Indian fiction, portrayal of caste and caste characters, Marxist position, Bakhtin's Theory

Recent Spurt in the Study of Postcolonial Cultural Studies

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The recent spurt in the 'theory' and the popularity of postcolonial cultural studies within English departments has led to a certain diversification and innovation regarding interpretation of literary texts. The text is no more considered an autotelic structure which contains all the 'contexts' required for its analysis. Text is now considered a site of diverse cultural forces. The production/interpretation of texts does not take place in ideologically neutral zones, but is affected by numerous socio-cultural factors. The poststructural theories have blurred the boundary between the literary/non-literary texts and interdisciplinary focus is in vogue. While it has proved largely fruitful for literary studies, the trend is not without its pitfalls. It has resulted in a lot of pseudo-sociology being produced in the name of literary studies. Interdisciplinary focus should ideally imply bringing to bear upon the text a wide frame of reference from extra-literary sources, leading to a comprehensive, exhaustive and more useful understanding of the literary discourse; rather than blatant erosion of all boundaries.

Caste and Literary Interpretation

No interpretation of the Indian novel can be justified if it ignores the caste factor. One can go to the extent of saying that, in the case of Indian novel, caste becomes even more conspicuous by its absence rather than its presence. The thesis tries to explain the politics of these absences. Have some sections of Indian society become immune to the effects of caste or is this just a wishful thinking?

Structural-Functionalist

Caste remains the common denominator of Indian society even in these 'postmodern' times. Western scholarship has always sought to underplay the importance of caste in Indian society. The enlightenment/modernist philosophy views the movement of mankind in positivist terms as one from darkness to light. In this view, society moves from the traditional to the rational. In the field of sociology this is recognized as the structural-functionalist school. The main contention of this school is that as the society advances, there is a movement away from the community orientation to universalistic ethos. But caste as a strong, dynamic and viable phenomenon cannot be reduced to such mechanistic schemas.

Subversion-containment Dialectic

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Stephen Greenblatt, a new historicist, has explained, although partially, the cause of the durability of such phenomena. Greenblatt's thesis, termed the *subversion-containment dialectic* claims that in order to sustain its power, any durable political order not only to some degree allows, but actively fosters 'subversive elements' and forces yet in such a way as more effectively to 'contain' such challenges to the existing order. The operation of caste in Indian society, however, is much more complex. First, this is not a phenomenon which is forced on us by some external agency. Second, caste has functioned differently in different eras and differs hugely in its fine details over different parts of the country. As a social force, caste has gone through a complex process of evolution over the years.

Resurgence of Caste

The main point remains, however, that we are witnessing a resurgence of caste in India. Elections are won and lost because of caste solidarities. The recent caste-related violence in Punjab, arguably the most modern state in India, indicates the temporal viability and dynamism of caste as a phenomenon.

The system of caste is rooted in myth, folklore and has become a part of our "racial memory" or "collective unconscious" (Jung's terms) and "political unconscious" (Jameson's term). Both caste and novel are very strong phenomena, capable of re-inventing themselves against all odds and a kind of homology exists between the two in this regard.

This is, however, not meant to be an apology of caste. But the challenge to any discourse is predicated upon a sound understanding of the intricacies of its mechanism and it is hoped that the caste-discriminations will be automatically challenged during the course of this predominantly descriptive analysis.

Novel and Caste

Situating caste as the core concern in any formulation of Indian novel hinges on the more elementary issue of the definition of the genre itself. How can we relate the supposedly 'traditional' issue of caste with a 'new' genre like the novel; which has a history of barely two

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hundred years? One will have to devise a sufficiently comprehensive definition of the novel so that it can incorporate the so-called traditional elements.

The available theories of the novel hardly help in this regard because they are largely based on Western texts and cater to the Western audience. Further they pick up texts from a particular period in the history of the novel in the West, specifically Britain, as the norm against which they define the novel. These theories are silent about the intrinsic characteristics of the genre itself; and wherever these are given, they have a very limited applicability, at most to a particular period of literary history.

Reality after the Renaissance

As an example, one can take the most representative of these theories, the one proposed by Ian Watt in his book *Rise of the Novel*. Watt locates the emergence of the novel in the general shift in man's view of reality after the Renaissance. This shift is reflected in the philosophies of Descartes and Locke. This change in man's outlook defined the general temper of the modern age- critical, anti-traditional and innovating; and reflected in novel's "more dispassionate and scientific scrutiny of life"[1].

According to Watt, realism is the defining feature of the novel form. Novel's realism rejects tradition on five levels: 1) Plot- Traditional plots are rejected in the novel 2) Characterization. 3) Time 4) Space, and 5) Language. Novel takes a very comprehensive view of reality and "attempts to portray all the varieties of human experience and not merely those suited to one particular literary perspective: the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents but the way it presents it".[2] In other words, the novel says nothing new, but says the old thing in a new way. 'Formal realism', i.e., a set of narrative procedures, is the defining feature of the novel:

> . . . novel is a full and authentic report of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its readers with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms. [3]

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Applicability of Formal Realism

As can be easily seen, Watt's definition can be applied only to the eighteenth century British novelists like Fielding, Richardson, and Defoe. 'Formal Realism' as a criterion, cannot account for the complexities found in novels of the later periods and the non- Western novels. The definition is culture and period-specific and if at all, it is suitable for only a small number of texts; as Watt himself acknowledges the predominantly Western background of his theory:

> . . . from the Renaissance onwards, there was a growing tendency for individual experience to replace collective tradition as the ultimate arbiter of reality and this transition would seem to constitute an important part of the *general cultural background* of the novel.[4] (emphasis added)

Meenakshi Mukherjee's Approach

Meenakshi Mukherjee has made the culture-specific nature of Watt's analysis the ground for criticizing him and formulating her own definition of the Indian novel. She takes up a point-by-point critique of Watt's formulations; saying that novels originating in non-Western cultural environments may not operate in the realist mode. Talking specifically about the Indian novel, she says that plots of these novels are not original but derived from traditional narratives, myths, *kissas,* etc. Secondly, narrative in Indian novels does not progress in a linear, cause-and-effect manner. Thirdly, time is configured differently in Indian novels. Fourthly, these novels show indifference towards giving external details/background. Lastly, the characters in these novels are not individuals with free will but rather 'passive agents':

> The Indian novelist had to operate in a tradition-bound society where neither a man's profession nor his marriage was his personal affair. His life was mapped out by his community or his caste. [5]

Vinay Kirpal's Features of the Third-World Novel

Taking a similar approach, Viney Kirpal enumerates the distinctive features of the Third-World novel: 1) "the loose, circular, episodic, loop-like narrative technique," 2) plotless-ness, 3) "the use of language which is regional, ritualistic, proverbial, metaphoric and therefore quite

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distinct from language in the English novel," 4) use of myths and 5) "illustrational" or "archetypal" rather than "representational" characterization. [6]

Gross Generalization

The problem with this kind of approach is that it defines Indian novel against a grossly generalized view of the Western novel. The departures are placed against a norm which is itself ill-defined or at least partially defined. Ian Watt's view represents the canonical attitude of the Western theorists- that they take the realist mode as the norm/rule and other modes as exceptions as Andrew Gibson in his book *Reading Narrative Discourse* observes, "There are many kinds of narrative and many kinds of novel. But critics none the less take the realist novel as the norm for fiction, and to assimilate other forms to it".[7] But the realist mode does not apply in a multicultural scenario as Paranjape puts it:

> By implication, when such 'formal realism' yields to naturalism in France and Germany, to Religious traditionalism in Spain, provincialism in Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria, spiritual nativism in Russia, the kind of novel that Watt has written about is well and truly finished. Furthermore, with the advent of modernism all over Europe and America, Expressionism in Germany, socialist realism in Russia, and nationalism in the colonial world, the novel as a category became so vast and varied as to no longer refer to a specific and easily definable literary genre. [8]

Marxist Position

The other prevalent position, namely the Marxist one, represented by George Steiner and George Lukacs and others, is also Eurocentric in orientation. Steiner attributes the advent of this genre to the rise of bourgeoise and modern capitalism. So, the novel caters to the middle-classes and incorporates the values of this class as against the feudal values of the epic or romance. The ideology implicit in this and all such perspectives is that of modernism and enlightenment. Novel, in this restricted sense, becomes a hegemonic tool as Paranjape observes:

> The tyranny of realism is . . . intimately tied up with the tyranny of the novel itself. The latter . . . is a pre-eminent modern genre, defining itself as the new and unique, the embodiment of an ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, and axiology engendered by techno-modernism, and thus, ultimately, the carrier of cultural and

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methodological imperialism. The novel, then, is a sort of master-narrative of modernity. [9]

Inherent Possibility to Misunderstand

The term "novel" is itself to a considerable extent responsible for itself being misunderstood. The word comes from the Italian word "novella" which means a new kind of story. The novelty of the novel readily facilitates its incorporation in the rubric of modernity and the resultant idealism woven around it. This idealism is reflected in the now routine proclamations of the death of the novel etc. Critics have largely failed to come to terms with the genre. They have invariably failed to lay down a universally acceptable definition of the novel. Marthe Robert in *Origins of the Novel* points towards the fact that "the novel is constitutively an 'undefined genre'".[10] The search for alternative genealogies is, therefore, not only necessary but is also an act of post-colonial resistance.

Bakhtin's Theory

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel is far more comprehensive both in its exhaustive approach and anti-elitist orientation. Bakhtin's analysis is based on a wider selection of texts both geographically and chronologically, and has a cross-cultural validity. Furthermore, he traces the roots of the novel in traditional societies and pre-modern civilizations unlike other theorists who almost exclusively begin with the eighteenth century. Bakhtin is valuable in another regard, especially in the postmodernist scenario: he selects non-canonical texts for analysis.

Bakhtin argues that novel is so profoundly different from other genres that we will have to revise the basic categories of genre and style to account for its uniqueness. The critics have failed to recognize the absolute novelty of the novel. While other genres have completed their course of development, the novel is still evolving as Bakhtin says, "Studying other genres is like studying dead languages; studying the novel . . . is like studying languages that are not only alive but still young".[11] Novel cannot be understood in generic terms and if at all, it should be seen as a "supergenre", "whose power consists in its ability to engulf and ingest all other genres . . . together with other stylized but non-literary forms of language…".[12]

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Compare Novel with History

Novel can be compared with history because both try to give shape to heterogeneous and disparate social reality. Both are based on a "lived" reality and try to comprehend it. But while history goes about its job in a repetitive manner, the norms of history writing being fixed, the novel is always innovative:

> So militantly protean a form as the novel raises serious problems for those who seek to confine it to the linear shape of most histories. The difficulty is compounded if we recognize further that such histories usually begin by pre-supposing the very organizing categories that it is the nature of the novels to resist.[13]

A Self-reflexive Genre

Novel is a self-reflexive genre. On the one hand, it is critical of the other genres for their conventionality and stylization, it is also capable of resisting its own settlement into a fixed form. It enhances the novel's capacity to comprehend contemporary reality and impart to it "indeterminacy, living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)".[14]

We can not think of the novel like other genres, in terms of form into which a content is assimilated; the novel shapes itself according to the reality it is representing. We can also think of it in terms of a process which Bakhtin terms "novelization" which infects the 'purity' of other genres. Novel uses this process to parody other genres and to assimilate them into its own structure, thus becoming a supremely hybrid and fluid genre. Novelization, thus, becomes a process of evolution, transformation and renewal. While the classicism of "all non-novel genres" is reflected in their orientation towards completeness; novel is defined by its fluidity and is thus a "genre-in-the-making".[15] This also accounts for the anti-canonical nature of the genre:

> The novel, after all, has no canon of its own. It is, by its very nature, not canonic. It is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever-questing, ever-examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality.[16]

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Process of Novelization – Bakhtin's Alternative Theory

This process of novelization was operational in the ancient times as well. So, the origin of the novel, according to Bakhtin, is rooted in ancient folklore and popular laughter. Parodies and travesties, as socio-comical genres, were "the first and essential step in the evolution of the novel as the genre of becoming".[17] These genres are akin to the novel because 1) they deal with contemporary reality and involve no distancing; 2) they place speaking and conversing man as the central image and 3) have a language close to the spoken one.

Bakhtin postulates an alternative history of the novel which goes back to *Socratic dialogues, Manippean satires* and includes a text like *Don Juan.* Bakhtin says that the novel is a product of polyglot consciousness which has a "pre-history" of its own. Polyglossia, or alternatively Heteroglossia refers to the fundamentals of all communication. A communication may be understood in terms of *langue* and *parole*. In Bakhtin's scheme, *parole* is not a passive manifestation of the *langue* but is capable of subverting the system itself. So, the novel does not lack system but its "systemizing principles are of a different order from those regulating sonnets or odes".[18] Novel is the site of struggle of centrifugal and centripetal forces and language is an active agent of this struggle. Language is further stratified into languages which are socio-ideological and novel is the site of the dialogic struggle of these languages. Bakhtin thus defines the novel as follows:

> I find three basic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish the novel in principle from other genres: 1) Its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-languages consciousness realized in the novel, 2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image, 3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact (with contemporary reality) in all its open-endedness.[19]

A Product of Polyglot Consciousness

Novel, as a product of polyglot consciousness existed even in ancient times but was "appropriated and canonized among all the genres".[20] As the novel is embedded in contemporary reality, it is organically linked with extra literary genres, current ideologies and power structures

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(Caste is also such power-structure). In its treatment of past, the novel always questions and re-evaluates it.

Novel, as a polyphonic discourse of multiple languages, contains both the traditional and the contemporary. As I said, Bakhtin uses the word *language* in a broad sense to mean 'ideology', 'discourse', and 'narrative'. One of the most significant aspect of his formulation is that he thinks of the novel as a culture-specific phenomenon. Every novel is conceived of as distinct. It takes the distinct flavor of its culture. This makes it easier for us to include caste within the framework of the novel. Caste as an ideology having a multi-level presence in society, thus becomes an integral part of the novel's structure, even shaping it at various levels. For instance, the ideology of the writer himself may be shaped by caste.

The Unconscious Cast(e) of Indian Novel

The majority of available criticism analyzing the relationship between caste and Indian novel has failed to define the exact nature of the correspondence between the two. Much of this criticism is based on *dalit* writing and hence deals with the caste factor in terms of a binary opposition between upper castes and dalits. This criticism is not devoid of its own merits, in terms of opening a site of resistance against caste-discriminations and giving a voice to the silenced sections of the society; yet it fails to address caste as a larger social phenomenon which affects life as it is 'ordinarily lived' and thus is grossly reductive and does not provide a comprehensive analysis of caste as it operates in the texts. The definition of caste must be re-oriented towards thinking of it as a "discourse" or "narrative" which is present in the unconscious, sub-conscious and the conscious of the public and affects life as it is lived, in a comprehensive manner.

A Dialectical Interplay

Novel is a site of the dialectical interplay of various socio-cultural tropes. The narratives of Indian novels are derived from a host of traditional sources which go back to antiquity, and also from contemporary reality. No site of Indian culture, be it ancient or contemporary, is immune to the operation of caste. By the same logic, there can be no 'caste-less' Indian novel

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where even the mind of the author is formed by the unconscious impact of caste which prefigures his psyche:

> To believe that the poetic [read creative] self exists prior to the communal one is a fallacy that under-evaluates the ubiquitous presence of narratives in our day-to-day life. The so-called autonomous self of the poetry [read text] gains authenticity only by means of negotiating with the norms of cultural practices, laid down in the mythical narratives of a specific culture. [21] (remarks added)

The Analysis of Caste as the Structural Principle of Indian Novel

The analysis of caste as the structural principle of Indian novel should be based on the functioning of caste at, "pre-textual, textual, intertextual, post-textual, and meta-textual levels" of creativity.[22] Contexts are not extraneous variables but active agents in the production of the text. But this process is not of direct reflection of the context into text. It would be better to think of it as "pre-figuration", as Raymond Williams uses the term. The exact form and manner of this pre-figuration can be understood only after a concrete analysis of the text.

Analysis of caste and how it affects the Indian novel along these lines can lead to an exhaustive and comprehensive understanding of the 'text' and by default of Indian culture and society. At the pre-textual level, for example, the writer's caste influences his views and outlook which get manifested in the text.

Paranjape's Proposal

Makarand Paranjape adopts this approach for his analysis of caste and its relationship with the IE (Indian English) novels. In his essay, "Caste of the Indian English Novel", he prepares a caste-profile of the major IE novelists; concluding that a majority of them are Brahmins. He goes on to argue that the IE novel is the novel of "debrahminised-Brahmins"; implying that the writers, owing to their westernized education and location in the urban, metropolitan cities, tend to eschew and even criticize the prevalent caste-hierarchies in Indian society. This kind of Brahmin-centric analysis itself smacks of a parochial politics. The multiplicity of the Indian novel cannot be homogenized in this overgeneralized manner. Moreover, Paranjape takes into account only one level at which caste operates in a text; and the text itself remains excluded from his scheme.

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Need to Consider Many Diverse Issues

One must not ignore the way in which caste functions at the textual level, where it assumes almost the role of a character in some novels. On yet another level, one can analyze the issues of class and gender as they are affected by caste. For example, the precarious positioning of dalit women in the social-hierarchy leads to 'double colonization': in terms of caste and gender. One may also look at the complex relationship between caste and class and how the two are related. The theoretical issues thrown up by the operation of caste in Indian novels are also very significant; they have direct bearing on the relationship between the novel and the nation.

Anderson's Arguments

Benedict Anderson was the first theorist to define the relationship between the novel and the nation. According to him both the modern nation-state and the novel originated due to print-capitalism. In his seminal work, *Imagined communities*, Anderson reminds us that "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined".[23] He further argues that this imagining is made possible by the advent of print-capitalism. Newspaper and the novel are the agents of this imagining.

Novel, Anderson argues, brought about profound changes in the people's perception of time. Instead of the eternal' mythical time, it facilitated the presentation of "simultaneity" in "homogeneous empty time". Novel is a genre which facilitates the construction of a national consciousness by conjuring an imaginary space by employing an omniscient narrator. With the aid of the narrative procedures of the novel "fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark if modern nations".[24] This imagined world "conjured by the author in his readers' minds a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogeneous' empty time; is a precise analogue of the idea of a nation".[25]

Novel and the Modern Nation-State

Novel not only symbolizes the modern nation-state, it also reveals its contradictions as Franco Moretti has pointed out in his book *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800-1900*, the novel

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"functions as the symbolic form of the nation-state . . . it is a form that (unlike an anthem or a monument) not only does not conceal the nation's internal differences but manages to turn them into a story".[26] The "horizontal comradeship" that the nation fosters is not manifested in real life. Indian novel is a special case in this regard in that it imagines multiple communities or nations due to the operation of caste. In India, tradition operates in tandem with modernity and Anderson's theory does not explain why:

> … industrial workers who would not touch a new machine until it had been consecrated with appropriate religious rites, or voters who could set fire to themselves to mourn the defeat of their own clan and having kept the others out … to endorse these 'unbound serialities' while rejecting the bound ones is, in fact, to imagine nationalism without modern governmentality.[27]

Another position on the issue is that of Frederick Jameson, who calls all Third-world novels allegories of nation. But his thesis is based on only the English which really betray an anxiety for the nation due to their location in a global scenario, otherwise the allegorical elements in Indian novels are of an entirely different order. Many times they are the allegories of caste rather than the nation.

Viable Position of Homi Bhaba

Homi Bhabha's position is the most viable one in a postcolonial scenario. He terms the postcolonial condition as a "hybrid" one which contains elements which are both traditional and modern at the same time. There is no possibility of devising a 'pure' national identity. "Ambivalence" marks the national culture which has a "conceptual inderminacy" about it.[28] Caste-affiliations and their articulations in the novel forces us to 're-think' the formulation of the nation as an eternal, sacrosanct entity and allows us to resist the oppressions inherent in such a construct.

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NOTES

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4. *ibid,* p.14

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8. *ibid,* p.78

9. *ibid,* p.79

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14. Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1998, 11th rpt, p. 7

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16. *ibid,* p.39

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20. *ibid.*

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22. *ibid,* p. 3

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