Re-charting Indianness – A Study of Four Short Stories

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"We cannot write like the English.We should not."

—Raja Rao

The two short sentences above from the 'Foreword' to *Kanthapura*[1] show the undercurrent of pride that Raja Rao displayed in writing as an Indian, like an Indian. Although here he was talking of the use of English for creative writing, the words could well be applied to thematic and other concerns of Indian English writing.

"Indianness," of course, is an all-inclusive term and engulfs our entire culture, our traditional conception of human life, social structure, spiritual conditions, value system and the ideas and the ideals that have moved us since time immemorial, forming our character and sensibility. To this, we add the present day influences of the processes of modernity, industrialization, consumerism, feminism and globalization. The literature produced in modern India, be it in English or in other regional languages, cannot but be influenced by these discourses. To deny the existence of the current forces would be unrealistic.

Writing about the "Indianness" of Indian literature written in English, K.R. Srinivas Iyengar wrote as far back as the 1960s that what makes Indo-Anglian literature an Indian literature is the quality of its Indianness — in choice of subject, in the texture of thought and play of sentiment, in the organization of material and in the creative use of language. He further asserted: "To be an Indian in thought and feeling and emotion and experience, yet to court the graces and submit to the discipline of English for expression, is a novel experiment in creative mutation."[2]

Several other critics and scholars like V.K.Gokak and M.K.Naik voiced almost similar sentiments when they observed that the Indianness of Indian writing consists in the writers' intense awareness of his entire culture. Another stalwart in the field C.D. Narasimhaiah

feels that as long as the "operative sensibility" is Indian, it is Indian literature, "Indian writing in English is to me primarily part of the literatures of India, in the same way as the literatures written in various regional languages are or ought to be ... so long as the operative sensibility of the writer is essentially Indian it will be Indian literature."[3] By 'operative sensibility' he means the writer's awareness that the Indian versus Western issue needs to be examined in relation to the sense of cultural orientation. In fact, the "Indianness" of Indian literature can be mapped on three levels: the creative use of the English language; the technique of story-telling adopted by the author; and the cultural milieu within which the author sets his story and builds his characters. These aspects have unlimited possibilities and can be debated for hours no end. I am, therefore, limiting my paper to the textual analysis of four short stories, namely, Dina Mehta's 'Absolution,' Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Treatment of Bibi Halder,' Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'The Faltering Pendulum,' and Khushwant Singh's 'Karma.'[4]

I am aware that these stories are not "recent" in the strict sense of the word, but it may be granted that they are fairly recent in that all are written in the 20th century India. Further, the choice of the stories has not been made at random, but with a specific design in mind: I am interested in exploring how the cultural consciousness of the authors works to build up their themes and sketch out their characters, the actions and reactions of their characters, and the response they generate to a given situation. Moreover, the range covered, though not all-inclusive, is broad enough to give us a glimpse into some major social fields—the changes wrought by modern forces and modern Indian woman's resistance; the social set up which disregards a woman's needs and violates her individuality; the loneliness and suffering brought about by social taboos; and the fate of a marginalized man. I shall also refer to stories from Hindi and other Indian languages where necessary to establish a point or two.

Critics have often referred to Dina Mehta's 'Absolution' as the modern "Sitayana" as against the traditional Ramayana. It is the story of a young, docile and submissive wife who, after suffering long from her husband's infidelity, pays him back in his own coin. The author has chosen the mythological names—Ram and Sita—for her characters, probably with an express desire to show that if the modern Ram is not the prototype of his mythological namesake, there is no need for his Sita to be a model of purity. Thus, by subverting the Sita-myth, Dina Mehta recounts the story sometimes

with tongue-in-cheek style and sometimes matter-of-factly, until the reader smiles with the protagonist at the husband's discomfiture.

Ram, an executive in an office, is an incorrigible womanizer and is proud of his unconventional outlook. Interestingly, after every act of infidelity Ram comes with flowers in the morning, places them in a vase on the dining table as if to say, "these are for you" to condone his infidelity. Significantly and symbolically, he brings carnations. The story opens with a party where Ram openly flaunts Evelyn, his chic secretary, a new addition to his list of women. He looks at his wife "with cold, amused eyes" as if to declare, "I am free of all clichè, conventions, formalized gestures." But little does Ram realize that the "permissive order" gives as much freedom to the female as to the male, and that even his "slow, obedient and old-fashioned" wife could partake of the liberty. Dilip, her husband's bachelor colleague, awakens Sita to her miserable lot. Once when Ram leaves for a couple of days on the pretext of going on a tour, Dilip visits Sita, recounts the truth about Ram's whereabouts and makes meaningful suggestions. After initial (but weak) resistance, Sita decides to suffer humiliation no more and surrenders to Dilip. Next morning she wards off all assaults of guilt, anger and remorse on her conscience by consciously enjoying her bold step. The act has not only liberated her but has also transformed her. The story ends on a triumphant note. Ram on his return notices fresh carnations in the vase at its usual place on the dining table. To his query, "who sent you those?" her retort is, "They are not for me. I ordered them for you." Then she adds cheerfully, "Aren't they lovely?" and seals his fate.

It would be preposterous to believe that Dina Mehta, in letting Sita fall from the ideal, has sanctioned adultery. The narrator-protagonist does not jump into the extra-marital experience frivolously. Sita has ages of conditioning behind her. As Dilip says, she is the "docile, chaste and devoted Hindu wife ..." with that age-long tradition of "womanly faithfulness and days of long-suffering patience, all that disarming passivity," forcing her to conform to the stereotype. She finds herself attracted to Dilip, but she scrupulously keeps him at a distance. Only when Ram gives the final humiliating blow to her womanhood by his deceitfulness, does she react sharply, and takes her revenge.

Though marriage enjoins fidelity on both the partners, socially it is incumbent upon the woman to be a model of faithfulness, purity and submissiveness. The first person narration reveals Sita's side of

the story. In order to mitigate her hurt Sita endeavors to believe that her husband sends her flowers after every act of infidelity because he feels guilty. The flowers, she says, are an offering "at my shrine in expiation of his guilty deeds." It signifies "asking for absolution." This is Sita's version, but considering Ram's self-centeredness, it is doubtful whether he could ever have been burdened with guilt. Rather, he enjoys Sita's distress. Sita too offers him flowers but she makes no plea for "absolution," nor does she appear conscience-stricken. In fact, she does not want to lose the "splendour" of her decision by distorting it as "something graceless." Hers is a conscious step meant to teach her husband a lesson. She acquires a "radiance, a singular warmth" after the night. Sita retaliates with remarkable strength: it is almost like Shakespeare's Caliban saying to his master: "you taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse." Woman, like Caliban, is trained for docility, dependence, and when rejected she reacts and uses the master's language to curse him.

Ironically, in Sita's rebellion, there is less feminist rage than what Elaine Showalter terms, the urge for imitation. She does what Ram is guilty of – adultery. She succumbs to the charms of Dilip. Like Nayantrara Sahgal's Sim in *The Day in Shadow*, Sita allows a strong male (rather a male chauvinist) to dominate her. Both Sita and Sim are mute before the tirades of their male friends. Dilip shakes Sita into awareness and Raj is always up against the "self-effacing" Hindu character. Rebellion against the husband's extra-marital forays is not new to literature. Savitri in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* shows her resentment by walking out of her home. But there is a marked difference between Sita ("Absolution") and Savitri (*The Dark Room*). Savitri does not (and she cannot) think of retaliating in the manner Sita does. Interestingly both the names –Savitri and Sita—symbolize the Indian ideal womanhood but Narayan, a male writer, writing in the 1960s shows the female anger without letting her fall from grace; Dina Mehta subverts the Sita-myth in the post-modern stance, and by giving her heroine more freedom, tries to show the attitudinal changes in the social psyche. However, before reaching at any conclusive understanding of the two situations, we must remember the basic positing of the two protagonist –Savitri is from a small town and is tradition-oriented; Sita is from the modern elite environment of a big town.

Moreover, Dina Mehta's Sita need not slam the door on her husband and walk out, nor does she need to be apologetic, ashamed or guilty. She is very much like modern Nora painted by Clare Booth

Luce in her play *A Doll's House*, (1970), wherein her modern American Nora says, "I'm not bursting with self-confidence, Thaw. I do love you. And I also need ... a man. So I'm not slamming the door. I am closing it....Very... gently." Sita makes an explicit assertion of her individuality. Whether right or wrong, her step has made it clear to her man that even passivity has numerous possibilities, and that a woman, though docile, cannot be a doormat.

Jhumpa Lahiri who took the literary world by a storm by winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2000 for her *Interpreter of Maladies* has given a realistic portrayal of the female urge for sexual fulfillment in 'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar.' It is a saddening story of an epileptic young woman who suffers when her craving for marriage is thwarted because of her ailment. Bibi Haldar has everything negative to be a desirable commodity in the marriage-market: no looks so to speak of, no education, no parents, and above all she is epileptic and a simpleton at that. The story opens graphically, "For a greater number of her twenty-nine years, Bibi Haldar suffered from an ailment that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and fools" (p. 158). Further, the newspaper matrimonial advertisement is of no help in getting her a husband as her crafty cousin worded it rather unsympathetically: 'Girl, unstable, height 152 centimeters, seeks husband.' The slyness of her cousin and his wife juxtaposed with the naivety of the unfortunate Bibi Haldar helps in creating the required ambience of the social set up. Bibi Haldar's cousin and his wife ill-treat her, extract a lot of work from her and finally considering her a burden, they forsake her. Bibi Halder manages to stay alive with her own resources and the kindness of the neighbours Somehow, she fulfills her desire, begets a son (from whom, nobody knows) and is miraculously cured of her epileptic fits. The story, Jhumpa Lahiri says in an interview, is based on a woman she knew living in her neighborhood in Calcutta (now Kolkatta).

The depiction of the cultural, social and familial milieu is realistic, with helpful and sympathetic neighbours showing enough fellow feeling and pity towards the unfortunate being, juxtaposed with and the selfish kin devoid of feelings so as to evoke the readers' amiable response. The first paragraph graphically portrays a synthesis of superstitious beliefs and a modern scientific approach. It also speaks of human desperation as an incurable disease which forces people to try a variety of faith healing – Hindu, Muslim, Christian — irrespective of religious faith. At the subtler level, one can spot violence towards woman in the treatment meted out to Bibi Haldar. Helpless women like Bibi

Haldar are victimized not only by their families but also by the society. The word 'Treatment' contained in the title is significant.

Of the nine stories in the *Interpreter of Maladies*, four have an Indian setting. Out of these, two, 'The Treatment of Bibi Halder' and 'A Real Darwan' show a situational clash and give voice to the subaltern putting forward important points to be considered. Textual evidence bears out that *Interpreter of Maladies* is replete with Indianness and makes for convincing reading. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's account of the attraction that multicultural themes hold for her readers, can well be mentioned here namely that most women: Indian, American, and even immigrant women are interested in fiction written by Indian women because they are curious to know of the life patterns of Indian/Asian women. "Many of us articulate in our books the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and show them emerge, at least in many cases, as stronger and self-reliant women. Some of our characters are good role models for women readers and women activists."[5] The story under consideration, located in Calcutta, depicts the crisis in human values as also the human bonding that helps Bibi Haldar to survive even after her cousin's desertion. There still exist those values that keep us human the author seems to suggest. Lahiri's vision of India is limited to her visits to Calcutta, which she terms "tunnel vision" of India. "My own experience of India was largely that of a tunnel imposed by the single city we ever visited, by the handful of homes we stayed in, by the fact that I was not allowed to explore this city on my own. Still within these narrow confines, I felt that I had seen enough of life, enough details and drama, to set stories on Indian soil."[6] The result was the narration of two touching stories of helpless women and the callousness of society.

From the gender issue discussed earlier, we now turn to another aspect of the social question depicted in Bhabani Bhattacharya's 'The Faltering Pendulum', the story of the suffering of a woman on account of her poverty and the social stigma of barrenness. Together this produces an alienating effect on the victim, makes her slightly abnormal and accounts for her utter loneliness. A way out of this quagmire, the rag woman rightly realizes, is to wipe out her stigma and to find some company to release her pent up emotions. At the weekly bazaar she barters for a goat and three pumpkin seeds around which the entire story moves.

The old, desolate and unhappy rag-woman develops close ties, almost a mother-son relationship, with the tiny goat to which she

unburdens her heart. She talks to him and he listens attentively, responding occasionally with a bleat or two. That animals serve as therapists for human beings is a well-established fact. In literature we come across many incidents of men or women sharing their grief or intimate feelings with birds or animals. Iona, the cab driver in Anton Chekov's story 'Grief', for example, empties his sorrowful heart to his horse. Nearer home, in K.A. Abbas's 'Sparrows,' the birds help Rahim regain his lost humanity after his contact with a sparrow family in his loft. The rag-woman, too, achieves her lost balance after finding a mute but understanding companion.

There is a superstitious belief prevalent in India, particularly among the rural folk that a barren woman's accursed touch can dry up fruits, be they of a tree or plant or a human being. Childless women are shunned like the scourge. No wonder then that the rag-woman is a discarded being. Loneliness and the curse of barrenness make her hard. She is keen to wipe away the stigma vicariously; if her pumpkin vines bear fruit, she would feel reassured that she may be unfortunate but she is not vile; that the vines she planted and tended could bear fruits. Consequently, when the vines show no signs of fruit for long, she is given to doubt about herself. In her frustration she kills the goatling in a fit of temper because the animal had nibbled away some leaves of the vines despite her warning, and should he continue with his wantonness all her hopes to see the vines bear fruit would be crushed breaking her from inside. However, the animal seems to have done her a service. Through the nibbled part, a girl child spots two tiny pumpkins. Symbolically, it is the child who in her innocence and daring helps the rag woman wash off her curse. The vines, springing to fruitful life, "after their long barren dead-aliveness," have a symbolic significance. The story ends on a note of optimism: "A balance was achieved. The faltering pendulum had regained its swing."

That barrenness is a stigma and is considered a curse in the Indian social set up is depicted in some of the powerful regional language stories. Mallika Amarsheikh's Marathi short story 'Khel' (Game) for example, depicts the psyche of a barren woman who kills a little girl she loves from the core of her heart, not for any superstitious reasons but because the woman would not be able to face the girl's parents having detained the girl for a long just for a fun. In desperation, the woman beats her head to a pulp and after gaining consciousness of her inhuman act she commits suicide. There are dozens of such strong narratives that not only portray the barren woman's psychological anguish but also indict society for holding erroneous views and beliefs.

Bhattacharya takes pains to reveal the wounded psyche of the rag woman. She is not unaware of the core of temper inside her, which she calls "the hard nut". She makes efforts to control it but when the children hurt her, she flays at them like an insane person. Later, she feels ashamed of herself and confides in her goat "you saw? ... That angry thing rolled again in my belly." She clasps the animal to her heart as if to make amends for having cursed the children. The rag woman is neither mad nor wicked; only a victim of a situation that makes life hard. She finds a release in nature – the animal with its understanding and the vines with their rhythm of growth and life help her.

In the post-colonial era, many Indian writers have tended to re-write the empire, in what is termed as "writing back the empire," to show the corroding effect of the colonial situation on the psyche of the colonized. As Franz Fanon maintains, "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's head of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today."[7] Khushwant Singh, in his story 'Karma' directs his gaze at a marginalized man who remains the proverbial "Trishanku", neither 'here,' nor 'there.' The case of Sir Mohan Lal, the 'Brown Sahib' is closely linked with the superiority-inferiority syndrome of the colonial situation. Sir Mohan hates all that is Indian, including his uncouth wife and her kith and kin. He, a barrister and Oxford educated at that, considers himself a Sahib. In the Railway waiting room, he acts like a real Sahib shouting *koi hai* in a typical English manner and orders a *chhota* peg. His wife, on the other hand, is content to sit on her tin trunk on the platform in typical native style, eat out of her tiffin, belch, chew pan, engage in light conversation with the coolie and board the *Zenana* compartment on the arrival of the train.

Sir Mohan shows no hurry—hurrying and rushing is for the uncultured natives. For a Sahib like him, there is always a room in the first class compartment. So, happily imagining a fruitful journey with some British co-traveller of class in his first class compartment, and impressing him with his reading culture (for, Sir Mohan reads nothing less than *The Times*), his Balliol tie, Oxford reminiscences and gold cigarette case, he boards a first class compartment only to be thrown out by two British soldiers. Far from being impressed by his British garb, they recognize the colour of his skin even in their

inebriated state, call him "bloody nigger" and shunt him out unceremoniously. The climax occurs when his wife spits a gob of red *pan*-juice from the running train and in all likelihood the "dribble" falls on her pseudo-English husband, standing aghast on the platform. Symbolically, this is the fate the marginalized people encounter; they reject their own people and are rejected in turn by the dominant class.

Khushwant Singh has subtly evoked the colonial situation with its division between the ruler and the ruled. Those who lose their cultural identity are the dangling men. The ruling class is the empowered class. Even an ordinary soldier acquires the subconscious power to subjugate the ruled, irrespective of the latter's social status. In the colonial situation, people like Laxmi are no better either. They are the tolerant mortals who have learnt "to live with the idea of subjection." They live in their "lesser world" under the pretext that it was the whole world, forgetting that it was damaged by the colonial forces. V.S. Naipaul in *India: A Wounded Civilization* maintains that in general, the British were felt only through their institutions: the banks, the railways, mission schools. But in the ordinary world of the ordinary people its impact was not pronounced. Considering R.K Narayan's works, Naipaul says, in Narayan's early novels the lesser world of "small men, small scheme, high talk, limited means, appears whole and unviolated." Though these people appear to have preserved their identity, they are unconcerned and their attitude is damaging because their "inward concentration is fierce, the self-absorption complete."[8] The educated, half-colonized Indians like Sir Mohan are the privileged-unprivileged occupying an unenviable position in colonized India. Sir Mohan though privileged, is made acutely uncomfortable by his subject status.

The author observes his characters from a distance and without indicting them he lets them play their game and enjoys their foibles. He is not angry nor sympathetic, only ironic and comic. Khushwant Singh shows how the power of the master is felt in both cases – Laxmi, the representative of mute native subjects allows herself to be carried away by the British institution – the Railways here; the "alien insider', the pseudo-English Sir Mohan is already brain-washed by the same power – its educational system. The former by being "inward" and unconcerned allows the master to play his game; the latter plays the game of the master and suffers. Tolerance of the helpless, the powerless and the unconcerned does not help solve the identity crisis; what the country requires is the total awareness and ambition of the pragmatic.

Indian writing in English successfully interacts with the culture, tradition and the prevalent situations, and distinguishes itself by portraying the Indian reality, giving the readers an insider's view of the social and psychological reality. A creative writer is not a natural scientist, nor is he/she a social scientist in that a creative writer does not deal with lifeless forces or statistical data; he/she has to deal with human life and human characters with motivations, emotions and responses. The author has to look at them from his vantage point in time and social positioning and in re-creating them he cannot reject or forget his own roots. The creative writer in English cannot obliterate his/her identity as the thematic pattern and the narrative strategy of the stories discussed here reveal. Indian writing in English has established its strength as Indian literature; it is neither derivative nor imitative; it is indigenous in themes and concerns and it has been able to capture the psychosocial matrix of the society. The efforts of the writers have been to find an authentic self-image, an indigenous identity that defies domination and helps the writer repossess the past.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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