

Towards a Poetics of The Indian Novel in English

by Makarand Paranjape,
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"Those, who like reading plays and novels, should contemplate as to why and with what expectations they read them. If they are entertained by reading the wonderful incidents rendered therein, I want to ask them if there is any incident more wonderful than the whole process of creation by God in any kind of literature? . . . Sahitya (literature) can't exist without dharma (truth), because Sahitya is rooted in truth. Truth is dharma. If there is a kind of literature which originates from and is full of adharma (untruth), it will only please an immoral or perverted reader."

—Bankim Chandra (173-74)

" . . . true creation is the realisation of truth through the translation of it into our own symbols." —R.N. Tagore (21)

" . . . (True) art is that which leads a man one step forward on the path of morality and gives him elevated views. If it degrades him ethically, it is not art, but only obscenity." —M.K. Gandhi (225)

"The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined only by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by the literary standards."

—T.S. Eliot (97)

To begin an analysis of Makarand Paranjape's latest book, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*, with the views of four eminent writers/thinkers of the twentieth century on the meaning and value of literature may seem to be a critical non-starter. The spiritual imperative that underlies Makarand's discourse is that a poetics of Indian (English) novel should be grounded in the 'civilizational or spiritual imaginary' (that is the 'sanatan or eternal' dharma) of Indian society. This is what connects him to a tradition of modern writers/thinkers like Bankim, Tagore, Aurobindo, Gandhi, T.S. Eliot and Milan Kundera, to name only a few, who link literature with truth (*satya*) or spirituality. Having said that, let me hasten to add that the significance of Makarand's

critical intervention lies in the fact that long after the publication of Meenakshi Mukherjee's two important books (which were also an attempt to theorise the Indian English novel), namely *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971) and *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (1985), his is the hitherto most sustained critical discourse on the poetics (that is, nature scope and significance) of the Indian English novel. Critics like K.R.S. Iyengar, C.D. Narasimhaiah and M.K. Naik have written excellent critical surveys of the IE novel; but the project of writing a well-argued theory of Indian English novel remains ignored and incomplete. Here, I must mention the seminal significance of Prof. Kapil Kapoor's essay, "Theory of The Novel: The Indian View" (80-96) which also traces the evolution of prose narratives in Indian tradition and suggests detailed typologies of the Indian novel. Makarand expands the scope of Prof. Kapoor's discourse by offering a theory that takes care of the 'poetics' as well as the 'politics' of the IE novel. Hence, the added importance of Makarand's title that may help a discerning reader to properly evaluate and situate such (old and new) practitioners of the IE fiction as Raja Rao, Anand, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Amit Chaudhary, Allan Sealy, and others who have made it big in the west, in the broad framework of Indian civilization.

Makarand divides his book in five tightly written chapters apart from an "Introduction". The first four chapters, namely "The Ideology of Form: The Novel Across Cultures", "Inside and Outside the Whale: Politics and the New English Novel", "The Caste of Indian English Novel", and "The Anglo-Indian as Indo- Anglian: Ideology, Politics and Cross-Cultural Representation" deal extensively with the cultural politics of the Indian English novel which will be

discussed later on in this essay. I would, however, start with the "Introduction" and the last chapter, "Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel" which form the nucleus of his critical enterprise. Makarand's aim is 'to propose both a typology and a method of evaluation', as the blurb has it, in order to provide a reasonably good idea of what to 'expect when we pick up an IE novel' (Intro.11). He self-consciously employs the structuralist method to interrogate and explore the idea of the IE novel, which yields, in spite of its inherent dangers of large generalisations and explanations, 'not just epistemic but aesthetic rewards' (Intro.11). True, indeed. Even the most orthodox post-structuralists have to use a discursive 'structure' in order to dismantle an already existing structure. By poetics Makarand implies the "different and related perspectives" on the IE novel, which might constitute a 'theory of IE novel' (Intro.11). It is neither normative nor prescriptive in intent or execution, as the term 'poetics' seems to connote. His main concern is 'the identity of the IE novel' (Intro.12) and its interconnections with language, class, caste, political affiliations, and formal orientations. The final essay, from which the book under review gets its title, focuses on the relevance of *purusharthas* in defining our narrative traditions and using them as aesthetic, instead of ethical categories. In short, Makarand wants to tell us how best we can use our shared *dharmaic* context in the construction of an indigenous theory of the IE novel. His discursive framework is precisely neo-Gandhian and he is, perhaps, the first critic in Indian metropolitan academy to have advocated the application of a Gandhian perspective to the interpretation of IE novel. In his "Introduction", he lays bare his critical politics:

If we were to use a Gandhian perspective for example, we would

immediately see that for a contemporary text to be dharmic, it should be aligned to the interests of the people of this country; it should, in fact, make the life of the poorest of our poor slightly better. That is, after all, the implication of the Gandhian talisman. (Intro. 17)

This is no innocent aesthetics; its deconstructive potential may undercut the many-uncritically-accepted myths about the aesthetic as well as the cultural significance of the post-Rushdie IE novel(ists). Thus, Makarand's neo-Gandhian theory and praxis may set a wild cat among the pigeons of Indian English Academy; it offers a sound discursive template for a much-needed re-construction of Indian theory of narratology. One hopes (as well as fears) that the kind of socio-civilizational critique of the IE novel he builds up, in his book may trigger off a radical re-assessment of some of the acclaimed writers of the IE fiction. The spurious reputations, advertised, hyped-up and manipulated through the masterful manoeuvres of market forces and the native-peddlers of the west-sponsored theory, would fall apart if one were to agree with what Makarand says:

In other words, the values that the text espouses should interrogate the dominant ideology and work for a more equitable distribution of power, wealth, and well-being. . . . If the Indian nation itself is believed to have been founded upon similar, egalitarian premises, then a modern literary text ought to assist in the incomplete and unfinished project of nation-building. . . . Yet it is equally obvious that such a perspective must be applied in the broadest possible manner. . . . Indeed, we must allow for artistic excellence even when such a dharmic project is (seemingly) absent in a text. Artistic freedom, then, is sacrosanct, provided that a text subscribes to the overall civilizational aims of a nation. In case it doesn't, the text will not survive." (Intro.17-18)

It is in these prophetic, yet seemingly

reductive utterances, that Makarand seems to be concerned more with the civilizational politics (or poetics) of the Indian novel, than with the poetics of the IE novel only. Where and what is the harm, he seems to counter-question Frederic Jameson, if most of the third-world narratives turn out to be the national allegories? The tone and tenor of his discourse is quite critical and interrogative of the claims and contentions of the IE literature – which enables him to say with certitude that the book may invite his colleagues' wrath and dismay. But he doesn't glorify the *bhasa* writers at the expense of the IE novelists. The sensibility, according to him, is more important than the medium. And it is an open question whether the *bhasa* writers always portray the Indian sensibility more successfully and meaningfully, though they have "greater scope and capacity to represent our experience" (Intro.19) than the IE writers do. The whole agenda is to interrogate what kind of place IE writers occupy in the Indian "cultural spectrum" even if that means "bringing IE literature down a few notches from its surplus elitism and putting it in its 'proper' place" (Intro.20).

It is with these expectations and anxieties that we open the last chapter, "Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel" which remains the tour de force of the book as it is radically bold and surely subversive in nature. Etymologically, 'novel' comes from Latin 'novus' which, as Makarand aptly tells us, is quite close to Sanskrit 'navas'. Even the Sanskrit word 'naval' has the same meaning as its English equivalent 'novel' (new). Largely because of the consequence of Empire-building, the notion of eighteenth century realistic narrative as 'novel proper' got uncritical acceptance and recognition in the colonised parts of the world. The devaluation of realism in the contemporary European fiction made V.S. Naipaul pronounce the death of the novel in this manner: "... the best fiction was written between 1830's and 1895 ... the novel has been dead for nearly a hundred years now" (quoted in the Literary Supplement of the *Hindu*, 5 May

1995). The Indian critics, by and large, accepted the western parameters of 'novel' as the defining marks of the IE novel. Makarand foregrounds the hitherto unchallenged critical amnesia about the Indian narrative tradition which ought to have been the originary source of the theory of the Indian (English) novel. After making allowance for Meenakshi Mukherjee's two brilliant critical interventions (*Twice-Born Fiction* and *Realism and Reality*), he laments the fact that all Indian critics consider the novel as an imported genre whose origin is traced to the "colonialistic invention of prose in Indian languages, to the translation of the Bible into these languages, to the spread of print-technology, and the rise of a new, literate, English middle-class" (79-80).

Makarand takes a cue from Bhalchandra Nemade's influential essay, "Marathi Kadambari: Prerana va Swarupa" to underline the need to regard the Indian novel "as an indigenous outcrop, a native response to changing economic, social, and cultural forces" (80). It is worthwhile to quote Nemade here:

The novel is not an entirely English form: its origin too is not English. If one were to search its origin, one would have to move from country to country and refer to various writers and works like *Decameron*, *Bendelloe*, the *Panchatantra*, and so on. Max Mueller has established through Baghdad and Constantinople, to all of Europe. . . . It may then be possible to realize that though the novel as a form of literature came to India through our contact with the English, it is not entirely new in India as a form of writing (cited by Makarand on p. 81).

Hence, the case for locating the modern Indian novel in our civilizationally-loaded native narrative tradition. Makarand reserves a sound verbal drubbing for the tribe of "free-floating, deracinated, nation-less intellectuals" for whom the very existence of such an essentialistic thing as "India or Indian Civilization" may be a myth; but a car, a house, a British Council or Fulbright

fellowship, and so on, will remain very real and tangible" (82). In the second part of the chapter, "The Novel in Indian Civilization", he traces the origin of the Indian narrative tradition to the first chapter of Bharata's *Natyashastra* in which he makes Brahma say "I shall make a fifth Veda on *Natya* with the semi-historical tales (*itihasa*), which will conduce to duty (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*) . . . will give guidance to the people of the future as well in all their actions . . ." (cited by Makarand on p. 83). To put it simply, all narratives must, directly or indirectly, explore, expound and uphold dharma in the tradition of Indian narratology. The four cardinal principles (*purusharthas*) of existence, that is, *dharma* (duty), *artha* (wealth), *kama* (desire), and *moksha* (liberation) are the civilizational coordinates of the Indian narrative tradition. The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Manimekhalai*, *Silapaddikaram*, *Kathasaritsagar* (ocean of stories), *Brihatkatha* and the *Panchatantra*—all point up to the prominence of dharma in the Indian tradition. Here, the word dharma connotes eternal dharma, which is common to all the religious traditions of the world—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. The significance of dharma has been re-emphasized through the Bhakti saint-poets and the sacrifices of such modern thinkers/activists as Rammohan Roy, Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Gandhi and Tagore. All the narratives (old or new) produced in Indian society are consciously or unconsciously grounded in the *dharma-purushartha* axis.

In the third part of the essay, Makarand suggests the three workable types of the IE novel, that is, the imperial, the sub-imperial, and the subaltern, depending on the nature of relationship between the local, the national and the global, or the tension between the *marg* and the *desi*, or the great traditions and the little traditions. These terms, as he rightly argues, are at once aesthetic and political. The typologies may conflict or overlap as the examples of *Gitanjali* and *Pather Panchali* suggest. In both the cases, the local won

national acclaim only after its recognition abroad. Similarly, the *gramina* or the rural (the subaltern) as reflected in *Untouchable* and *Kanthapura* was first recognized at the global level, and subsequently, at the national level. In the fourth section of the essay, Makarand deals with the cultural politics of Indian English Literature highlighting the inadequacy of English in expressing the subtleties of the Indian sensibilities. This explains the absence of any dalit or folk literature in the IE literature. The geography of the Indian English novel, because of its urban, elitist-middle class location, is quite limited. He also points out the unfortunate trend in the contemporary criticism of the IE novel which regards the IE literature as the literature of migrancy and hybridity, a "strange and perverse cultural product which is always between two cultural systems, belonging to neither" (94). These writers live in the metropolitan West but write about India almost compulsively and regularly (like Rushdie, Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry, Jhabvala, Amit Chaudhary, and others), fostering a kind of orientalism propelled by the "power and might of Euro-American media and publishing conglomerates" (94). The national culture as it is represented in the IE novel, is "usually an inferior and colonized culture" (95). That is why Makarand calls it 'sub-imperial' as it derives its recognition from the international imperial order, and yet never attains a status of equality or dignity in that order. He concludes this part by defining "the dharma of an IE novelist as the will and ability to resist the values of western modernity and to demonstrate the continuing relevance of the cardinal principles of Indian civilization" (96).

In the fifth section, Makarand suggests three aesthetic categories, 'kriti, pratikriti and riti', of the IE novel. 'Kriti', as Nemade defines it, is "employed to indicate action and *pratikriti* to indicate illusion or image", whereas "riti" is used to "denote design – consciousness, and a formalistic, entertaining, affected and non-realistic aestheticism" (97). Going by this typology, the IE fiction, inspired

by nationalism is largely 'kriti' type (e.g. *Kanthapura*, *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *The Sword and the Sickle*, *Kandan the Patriot*, *Waiting for Mahatma*, etc.) Similarly, most of the postmodernistic IE fiction may be called 'riti' or 'pratikriti' type which foregrounds verbal and stylistic gimmickry. All the social problem novels, including those written by women novelists, may be included in the 'kriti or action-oriented' category. It is interesting to note that the famous Indian poet-aesthete, Bhoj in his *Sringaraprakasha*, suggests at least 24 categories of 'katha'. Prof. Kapil Kapoor also offers very useful typologies of 'katha' (90). He suggests five subdivisions of katha—i. Parikatha (i.e. string of anecdotes related to one theme), ii. Sakalakatha (i.e. multi-theme illustrative stories), iii. Upkatha or Upakhyana (i.e. sub-narrative), iv. Khandakatha or re-written story, v. Brihatkatha or complex and total narrative. Makarand also divides the evolution of the IE novel into four historical periods—i. The Colonial Beginnings: 1835-1900, ii. The Nationalist era: 1900-1950, iii. The Modernist Interlude: 1950-1980, iv. Postmodernism: 1980 onwards. In the seventh part of his essay, he focuses on the achievement of the IE novel, and attempts to prove, by using the dharma-oriented poetics, that Raja Rao, of all the existing IE novelists comes closest to be called a great novelist. No doubt, his claims about Raja Rao's greatness as a novelist may well be contested; but they emerge convincingly from a practical application of the proposed poetics to Rao's works.

In the first chapter, "The Ideology of Form: The Novel Across Cultures", Makarand contests the notion that the Third World novel is, indeed, different from the Western novel. He questions the very logic of sociological determinism implicit in the Marxist base-superstructure model of criticism which renders a novel as a product of certain socio-economic conditions. In his view, "the novel is not just acted upon, but in turn acts upon society itself" (13). The difference is more strategic than real and is invoked only to escape "universal-

ization and subordination" or to "create an alternative space from which to function . . ." (34). The second chapter, "Inside and Outside the Whale", analyzes the ideological trajectory of the IE political novel of the 80's and 90's by offering different readings of two important writers, George Orwell and Salman Rushdie.

The third chapter, "The Caste of the Indian English Novel" lays bare, as Makarand himself says, the "pseudo-sociology" of the IE novel. He also examines how and with what politico-cultural inputs the IE novel depicts caste. He also makes a caste-profile of the leading IE novelists and suggests that the IE novel, under various liberal influences, is de-brahmanising itself. The next chapter, "Anglo-Indian as Indo-Anglian: Ideology, Politics and Cross-Cultural Representation" is about "writing versus being written". Makarand's argument is that in the "fictional territory that is India, the Indo-Anglians have gradually edged out the Anglo-Indians—a proposition which is in keeping with the process of decolonization. This essay also addresses the issue of the authentic representation of

a culture. Is there a real India? It is more useful to highlight the unreal images of India in the IE novel, which, as Makarand tells us, exhibits the two syndromes, the NRI and the RNI (resident non-Indians). Thus, he critiques the textual politics of such writers as Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal.

All in all, Makarand Paranjape's book, as I presume, is provocative enough to elicit sharp reactions from inside and outside the Academy. It really goes to his credit that he has produced a 'poetics' of the Indian English novel to fill in a long-standing critical gap. He has made a significant contribution to the project of constructing an alternative, indigenous literary theory. His book is even more subversively critical and radical in approach than Ganesh Devy's *After Amnesia* (1992). What is even more surprising is the fact that while self-consciously writing a poetics of Indian English novel, Makarand seems to have prepared the first draft of the poetics of the Indian novel—quite unselfconsciously. Isn't Makarand in good company of

Premchand who has this to offer on the meaning of literature:

Literature which does not stimulate our good taste, does not satisfy us morally and spiritually, does not produce in us strength and activity, does not awaken our love of beauty—which does not produce in us genuine determination and real strength to overcome difficulties—is useless for us today. It does not deserve to be called 'literature'.(13)

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A National Agenda For Education

The book under review *A National agenda for Education* is published by The Mother's Institute of Research, Preet Vihar, Delhi, which is devoted to educational research. In response to the felt need for reforming and revolutionising education in our country this institute had constituted a few working groups under the Chairmanship of Kireet Joshi, compiler of this book. Kireet Joshi is an eminent educationist, having a very bright academic career and a vast experience of varied nature, especially in the field of education. At present he is Honorary president of the Dharam Hinduja International Centre of India Research. He is also Hony. Chairman of the Value Education Centre, the Indian Council of Philosophical Research and of the Auroville Foundation. He is

conversant with the current problems of education and the deficiencies of the present system of education because of his assignments in the Ministry of Education, Govt. of India, and U.G.C. and his close association with Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research as its founder.

Kireet Joshi deserves congratulations and accolades for doing a yeoman's job in bringing out this book, which can serve as a guide for those who are engaged or might be engaged in suggesting ways and means to improve the existing (not very satisfactory), conditions in our schools and colleges.

This book contains selected papers prepared by the working groups referred to above. These papers air the national thinking on the necessary

changes to be brought in the present system of education. The topics discussed in the book are: The National Agenda for Education; Comments on the National Agenda; Objectives of Education and Promotion of Excellence; Primary Education; School Education; Contents of Education for Character Development; Higher Education; Higher Education in Humanities and Social Sciences; and Teacher Education. The appendix dwells on Teaching of Sanskrit. It is a commendable exercise in highlighting the significant aspects of education which need immediate attention of the educationists and the government to make education more beneficial to the educands and thereby improve the tone of the Nation.

From time to time, since the British