

PROBLEMATISATION OF ETHNICITY IN INDIAN NOVELS IN ENGLISH IN THE ERA OF TRANSNATIONALISM

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Abstract

The active players of transnationalism, those who spend years in the multicultural ambiance, do not often shed the penchant for own roots and ethnic backgrounds. Hegemonic cultural values produced and propagated by multinational giants attain wide currency everywhere, yet the hold of indigenous culture does not wither away, and as a result the subjectivity of transnational citizens moves to the liminal phase to a very high degree and of those who remain in their regional boundary to the minimal. Life in alien countries or regular contact with transnational cultural space has largely begun to enliven the plots of Indian novels in English. Simultaneously, a strong inclination to preserve and highlight local culture is widely apparent. Many novels of the globalization era resonate the echoes of this scenario through fictionalizing history, satirizing the co modification of culture and by adopting narrative modes akin to oral tradition. Critical jargon like cultural osmosis and cultural invasion have been nullified in the problematised current cultural context as experiences of men in the globalized era cannot entirely be brought under the ambit of such terms. An understanding of the dialectics involved in the internalisation of aesthetic values and ideological stances visible in the plots of many contemporary novels would help comprehend the paradigm shifts in the cultural milieu of globalization.

Key Words: *Multicultural ambiance, liminal phase, transnational cultural space, dialectics in the internalisation, paradigm shifts in cultural milieu.*

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The aesthetic and ideological fabric of many societies has been reconfigured in tune with the sweeping changes ushered in by the forces of globalization during the last two and a half decades. A rapid surge in international migration unprecedented in history has been observed in the globalization era that the UN statistics reveal that 'one in 35 people in the world today is an international migrant' (Koser4). The heightened physical and virtual mobility realized by the revolutionary growth of information and communication technology and the boom in transportation facilities have accelerated the pace of social life and consequently sensibilities have been altered towards divergent directions inducing new patterns of cross cultural discourses.

The scope of human interaction has undergone paradigm shifts in all walks of life in the era of transnationalism. Transnationalism indicates the overall effect of the shifts in political, cultural and aesthetic standards resulted by the free flow of culture and capital and the ethos of the phenomenon is well embodied in the descriptions of the era as the age of mobility and the liquid times. 'As shorthand for several process of cultural interpretation and blending, transnationalism is often associated with the fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions and everyday practices,' observes Steven Vetrovec (7). Transnationalism is a historical fact. While applying Marxian terminology for analysis it is the thesis here. The antithesis is the sum total of attempts made on different fronts to resist the onslaught of globalization. A total resolution (synthesis) does not take place. Transnationals struggle to arrive at a stable mooring which is never realized. Instead they lead a dual life, compromising with the host culture and nursing the nostalgia for native culture or ethnic roots. This is marked by a swinging of allegiance to both sides. Even if a transnational individual makes himself/ herself prepared for total acculturation that won't be free from contradictions. Hence the thesis in the next stage becomes one of cultural duality that can be termed cultural schizophrenia in which the antithesis is an inclination to side with one of the conflicting forces. In the continuing process ethnicity would get disintegrated. Its features may get diluted and marketed or often function at the peripheral level only.

Ethnicity is usually defined as aspects that make a community culturally distinct in terms of language, customs, beliefs, religion, caste, aesthetic concepts etc. It implies claims

of commonality based on shared historical experiences, geographical origins, cultural practices, linguistic affiliations and kinship ties. Generational gaps in stances towards many aspects of ethnicity, including dress, food and marriage are quite obvious. But sociologists observe that 'despite such inter-generational dilution of practices, ethnic attachments persist in powerful ways' (Ansell65). Many sociologists had assumed that modernity and urbanization would erase the allegiance to ethnicity in the postcolonial era and mass migration and increased cross cultural contacts were expected to further weaken the inclination to the primordial in the globalization era. However, that did not happen. Today ethnic attachments are viewed from differing perspectives like 'primordialist' and 'circumstantialist':

Primordialists believe in the intractable power of ethnic ties to provide a fundamental source of identity and promote intense feelings of belonging and social solidarity. The circumstantialist view holds that ethnicity is continually reinvested with meaning as groups come into contact with one another in competition over scarce resources, such as jobs, housing, political power or social status (66).

The depictions in many contemporary Indian novels in English prove that the former perspective is more significant in the case of transnational citizens having roots in India. The increased foci on elaborate depictions of matriarchal family ambience, on the manifestations of caste-based identity and ethnic food in many novels of the era underline this phenomenon. The burgeoning of enthusiasm in family get-togethers, alumni meets and publication of family history books and books on genealogy in the last two decades further reveal the significance of the people's allegiance to the 'primordialist' view.

The free flow of culture and capital has shaken the very foundations of territoriality and sovereignty. Many aspects of ethnicity can no longer be restrained to territorial boundaries. The number of people who may be brought under new notions of ethnic multidimensionality, like the Asian-American, Indian American, Japanese-British, Chinese-Canadian, Indo-British has increased manifold necessitating new modes of creative expressions. Unlike the Diaspora community of the pre-colonial era who comprised mainly of labourers, many new sections of transnational citizens in the globalization age belong to the category of educated and skilled workforce making considerable income and they savour multiple avenues to freely mix with people and culture of host countries. The second generation as well as new generation transnational migrants who are more or less free of the emotional baggage of the ethnic roots celebrate the avenues that facilitate ethnic

mixing and the reverberating pulses of that liberated life are delineated in *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* by Vikram Chandra.

Swift changes are visible in the rhythm and functions of many ethnic artifacts in the globalization era. Ethnic food, dress and objects are largely being metamorphosed in new, innovative modes designed by the motifs of market forces or political groups. Amidst the widespread processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization the queries regarding peoples' affinity to aspects of ethnicity including, religion, caste, language and region generate perplexing responses which find finer manifestations in many literary expressions of the current era. The widespread currency attained by the ethos of globalization has resulted in larger sections of people loosening ties with ideological and political affiliations but even then the hold of various elements of ethnicity remains largely intact. Pavan K Varma in *Being Indian* assesses the scenario as follows:

Like Fukuyama, Huntington argued that culture and cultural identity is what most people give real importance to. In the post-Cold War era, he asserts, the most important distinctions among people are cultural and not political, economical or ideological; and ancestry, religion, language, history, values and customs and institutions are the attributes by which people define themselves (13).

In *Namesake* Ashoke Ganguli, the professor with the Left lenience, tries hard to awaken in his son the pride over their higher status in the caste hierarchy in India. The caste-based collectives and outfits which had taken a back seat during the years of renaissance have started appearing in new forms by tapping the congenial ambience emerged in favour of identity politics as an aftermath of the 'incredulity towards metanarratives' fuelled by postmodernism. Whether the borderless flow of culture and capital accompanied by paradigm shifts in cultural and political milieu has resulted in evolving any kind of cosmopolitan sense of being is doubtful. Thomas Hyland Eriksen in *Ethnicity and Nationalism* observes that 'people tend to retain their ethnic identity despite having moved to a new environment' (9). Referring to the studies concerning ethnic identity in the United States Thomas adds that the concept of the 'American melting pot' never occurred but modern American society created new forms of self-awareness in people expressing concern about roots, origins and ethnic networks. The conclusion he arrives at by quoting anthropologist Jonathan Friedman is relevant in the context of globalization in India too: '[e]thnic and cultural fragmentation and modernist homogenization are not two arguments, two opposing views of what is happening in the

world today, but two constitutive trends of global reality' (9). The mushrooming number of caste outfits evolved of late, remoulding of ethnic art forms and the extensive marketing of products with ethnic tag, the increased presence of ethnic elements even in novels narrating globalization era point to the problematisation of ethnicity.

New platforms, including, online groups are utilized by caste/community/region based collectives to keep alive the eroding aspects of ethnicity. With the very beginning of the emergence of these collectives ethnicity seeks to search new avenues for its realization as a result of which the very core of ethnicity gets altered. The extent to which one can bypass the intense subjective feelings associated with varied elements of ethnicity, including language, place of birth and religion is matter of concern even in the case of transnationals who shuttle their life between countries and continents. The presence of characters crisscrossing cultural spaces of distinct nations has become an intrinsic element of many contemporary novels. The depiction of present day life in any corner of the world would become deficient to a considerable extent in the absence of such characters.

Food habits, major social divisions, their hierarchical order and functions, institution of marriage and rules regarding divorce, types of family, rules of inheritance, inter-family linkages, life circle rituals like rituals related to birth, adolescence, marriage, death etc, economic activities, including traditional profession, major sources of income, market system, rules and relations related to production of wealth, mechanism of social control like structure of traditional and statutory councils, forms of punishments, religious attributes, including the religion the community professes, family/regional deity, major centers of pilgrimage, major festivals and rituals, role of ritual performers and inter-community linkage are the parameters adopted by cultural anthropologists while preparing ethnographic profiles of communities (Srivastava60). Transnational individuals generally follow the rules, habits and practices, existing in the host country and that doesn't result in any serious conflict. However, majority of the transnationals stick to their tradition in the case of life cycle rituals. The annaprashna, rice ceremony of Gogol in *Namesake* where Bengali community is gathered in ethnic dress and Bengali cuisine is served indicate the significance they attach to life circle rituals even in transnational situations.

The traits of problematized ethnicity are vividly present in many contemporary novels, the axis of which are formed by transnational and transcultural experiences. *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* by Vikram Chandra, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *One Night @ the Call Center* by Chetan Bhagat are some of

the works which echo the manifestations of problematised ethnicity whereas Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills*, which has won worldwide acclaim, and *The House of Oracles*, a notable work by Chandhini Santosh, are rooted totally in family history, customs, rituals, and other elements of ethnicity. *Tiger Hills* and *The House of Oracles* represent a tendency for a complete withdrawal from the contemporary cultural ambience to the past and the roots. The writers experiencing cosmopolitan life often feel of freeing themselves from the pressures of transnational metropolitan civilization. When they give expressions to memories and thoughts they are forcefully drawn to the cultural space of native land. Sarita Mandanna who spend life between Toronto and New York as an equity professional reveals how the reminiscence of the native land fuelled the creative expression:

It was ancient custom in Coorg to bury the umbilical cord of a newborn. Past the jungle undergrowth, tucked among root and shale, deep into the earth. It served as a talisman, it was believed, a beacon showing the way home. So that no matter how far one went, no matter neither the distance nor the passage of time, ever this electric longitude, pointed towards home. Perhaps inevitably then, when I began to write *Tiger Hills* six years ago, Coorg was the setting that naturally unfurled (Mandanna).

The complexities involved in discrepancies in stances towards aspects of ethnicity are getting unraveled as the characters of these novels encounter issues encircling caste, religion, language, food, dress and other cultural products. The basic tenets of ethnicity like language and caste still beckon the consciousness of considerable sections of people, be it the affluent, the mediocre or the downtrodden. Jayojit in *A New World* prefers Bangladeshi Biman to fly between New York and Calcutta seeking solace in hearing the dialect of East Bengal, the region from where his parents hail (9). *The God of Small Things* presents characters who maintain scornful attitude towards the mother tongue. The US- returned Baby Kochamma levies fine on younger children at home for speaking in Malayalam and Comrade Pillai makes strenuous attempts to converse in English with Oxford-returned Chacko. *Namesake* presents a totally different situation where Ashima, who was proud of her skills in English while in Calcutta, painfully regrets her lack of mastery in the language while undergoing treatment in an American hospital. *One Night @ the Call Center* brings an altogether different context where characters' national sentiments are awakened while being exposed to the hegemony of English in the virtual world.

The inclination to ethnic roots sometimes evokes regressive elements even among transnationals. Baby Kochamma renounces ethnic food and dress but embraces the

oppressive aspect of caste in eliminating a subaltern from social life. In *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* Abhay, the protagonist of the novel, becomes reminiscent of the ceremonies through which he was initiated into Brahmanism while in the U.S. In transnational situations the representatives of host culture watch the ethnic practices of outsiders with certain amount of curiosity mingled with a tinge of sarcasm. The transnational citizens' awareness of this reality may compel them to contemplate consciously or unconsciously on establishing the superiority of their position in the structure of the root culture. Many elements of indigenous culture are largely getting redefined to ensure a feeble existence amidst the unbridled sweep of hegemonic cultural icons and images. *The God of Small Things* brilliantly portrays this scenario with the description of Kathakali, performance for tourists at 'Heritage Hotel' (127). Everyone is tempted to dazzle taste buds today as the cuisines of all regions travel around the world through restaurant chains or eateries at malls. The appetite for the indigenous tastes and the craving for the multi-ethnic or junk food pops up in all novels. References abound on home-made items, dhaba food, bakery items, supermarket stuff and that of the products of MNCs. Food becomes a motif to preserve ethnic culture in many contemporary Indian novels in English. The globalization era creates an ambience that allows ethnic practices to get successfully assimilated into the practices of host culture. A reconstitution of the content of the ethnic practice takes place during the process. The birthday party event is an instance where people from all ethnic communities are invited and food is served providing the possibility to select from the items according to one's preference. The elements of ethnicity seek new modes through what Arjun Appadurai terms as 'ethnoscape' too (Appadurai 29). The more or less vehement stance towards 'ethnoscape' pursued by children of migrant parents is succinctly portrayed in many novels.

The attitude towards ethnicity has largely been redefined in the era of transnationalism. The stance of transnational citizens and those who remain within native regions has been reconfigured in tune with the wider changes in cultural, political and aesthetic perspectives resulted by the onslaught of late capitalism. The core ethnic aspects of indigenous communities are getting altered. Sometimes those traits lose the traditional aura and a kind of camouflaged integration of all ethnic aspects is imminent. The double-bind being pursued by large sections of people during the ongoing liminal phase may evolve into an attitude that welcomes inculcating or integrating of aspects of multiple ethnic groups.

Globalisation, transnationalism, late-capitalism, multinational capitalism, neo-colonialism/imperialism are used as closely related terms in many contemporary discourses. Transnationalism is the aftermath of globalization and globalization viewed from a political angle is neo colonialism/ neo imperialism. Transnational capitalism is viewed by some scholars as the manifestation of late capitalism. Globalization has brought about dramatic changes in all spheres of human activity. Art and literature search for new modes of expression which would enable them for the meaningful depiction of these realities. Along with other terms the highly imprecise word postmodernism is generally used to define the social and cultural ethos of the contemporary age. Postmodernism has been famously defined as the cultural logic of late-capitalism by Fredric Jameson. Contemporary Marxist theoreticians like Aijaz Ahmad hold the view that postmodernism is a technique evolved out of a capitalist agenda to sideline many harsh realities in the underdeveloped countries. 'Philosophical postmodernism, according to Ahmad, offers itself not only as a philosophical alternative to Marxism but also as a radically new ('Post-Marxist') practice of politics' (Ahammad). While assessing the contemporary Indian writings in English one will have to make use all the above terms, theoretical positions and analytical techniques related to them. If one adheres to an orthodox stance he/she may feel that the present day discourses in literary criticism are altogether devoid of precision and clarity. Life in the ambience of globalization is not a well-wrought one. Its edges are shattered. Unless one becomes aware of this fact he/she cannot formulate a meaningful mode of analysis for deciphering the real content of contemporary literature. Problematisation of many aspects of life takes place today and ethnicity is one among them. Not only transnational individuals but those who remain in Indian villages having no direct experience of life in foreign countries feel that their traditional concepts of life and ethnic roots have become unsafe.

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