

Moral Crisis in Select Indian English Political Novels

Md. Sharique Haider

Ph.D. English

Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara

Indian English Novel has undisputedly established itself as a distinct genre in itself. A number of Indian English novelists have garnered international recognition and acclaim. Like the enigma which India is, the corpus of Indian English Novels is also myriad and multivalent. There are many dimensions which the Indian English novels incorporate and articulate viz. social, political, economic and cultural. Different novelists have a penchant for different dimensions. Political dimension is one of the most important ones documenting the socio-political metamorphosis of India as a nation.

With the emergence of Gandhi on the political scene, the political scenario in India took a revolutionary change. From the 1920s, India's struggle for independence acquired a new dimension until the British were thrown out of India. The manner in which India attained its independence offers itself to debates varying in perspectives. Many historians and political commentators hold that the partition of the country could perhaps have been avoided.

This paper seeks to study four selected novelists for their political dimensions and established a moral crisis in them. The selected novelists have altogether different religious and ethnic backgrounds. The novels selected are Khushwant Singh's (1915-2014) *A Train to Pakistan* (1956) and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959); Nayan Tara Sehgal's (b.1927) *A Situation in Delhi* (1977) and *Rich Like Us* (1985); Chaman Nahal's (1927-2013) *Azadi* (1975) and *The Crown and the Loin Cloth* (1981) and Kamala Markandaya's (1924-2004) *Some Inner Fury* (1952) and *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977).

If assessed for the political score all four novelists shall fall short in their political index because they never had active political affiliation or faith in any political party. Khushant Singh (1915-2014) is a witness to bloody post-partition communal genocide that ensured the partition of India. It is undoubtedly one of the bloodiest political mayhems in the history of Independent India. Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* is the result of his sense of guilt and moral crisis which had built up in the collective psyche of the novelist and of India as a nation. The moral crisis is that neither Khushwant Singh nor the other feeling fellow Indians could do anything concrete to avert the blood-bath and save innocent lives. The moral crisis was that the common masses behaved like wild beasts with a herd-mentality.

The second novel of Khushwant Singh under consideration *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* has also got apolitical backdrop. Singh explores the conflict and tensions that arises in the family of a Shikh magistrate Bhuta Singh. Bhuta Singh is a moderate nationalist, strong supporter of the British and the war against Japan. Like a true hypocrite, Bhuta Singh when with Englishmen, proclaims his loyalty to the Raj and when with his own country men, he is critical of the English ways. He leads his son Sher Singh cast his fortune with the nationalists and does not object to organizing the students and making political speeches. His political tactics are evident in his advice to his son:

Do not say anything which may cause trouble. Remember my position, I do not mind your hobnobbing with these nationalists as a matter of fact, it is good to keep in with both sides. (15)

The novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* though reflects the political upsurge of the early 40s, does not take into account some important events that dominated the country during that period. The Novelist does not take the cognizance of the Quit India Movement 1942. The moral crisis corrupting the conscience of Bhuta Singh is pathetic and representative of a hollowness which had gripped the collective conscience of the Indian masses.

The second novelist understudy, Chaman Nahal (1927-2013) won the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1977. His masterpiece *Azadi* (2001) is his first-hand experience of the horrors of the partition. After a long heroic battle India achieved *Azadi* i.e.; freedom from the British colonialism but it split the country into two causing sufferings, humiliation and bloodshed. Fifty year old Kanshi Ram

anxiously awaits the decision of the British government regarding the political freedom to be granted to India. He feels that everything will be ruined if Pakistan is created:

After all how could it happen? The Congress had a promise to keep to the people. For the last thirty-years, since the wizard Gandhi came on the scene, it had the stand that India was a single nation not two. (49)

When the partition of India and Pakistan is announced over radio, it gives a shudder to the listeners. Muslims in Sialkot celebrate it by bursting crackers and setting fire to the Hindu establishments and the Hindus did so in more than equal measure in their ghettos. This happens on the 24th of June. Meanwhile, many cities of Punjab go aflame for months. There are large scale killings and lootings in several parts of the country. Many women are raped. This is the cruel turn of dirty-politics of two communities and is an outcome of the deep-seated moral crisis which had set in the collective conscience of the Indians.

In the second novel under consideration by ChamanNahal *The Crown and the Loin Cloth* (1981), the novelist takes up the exploitation of the underprivileged by the privileged, as is evident from the title of the novel, such sort of exploitation could be present in the context of one community- the caste Hindus exploiting the Harijans or the privileged Muslims exploiting the underprivileged Muslims. It could have a more universal range, the humble and the meek being exploited by the strong, the world over. In the novel, the novelist tries to observe the complete detachment and never ventures to pronounce any opinion on the British. The most important British character in the novel is Brigadier General Reginald Edward Harry Dyer. He is a man without any moral consideration. He is an external enemy to the Indians though; he was born and brought up here. When he thought of Gandhi his indignation became more intense:

The conscience the government had made to that seditious Gandhi, the arch villain. He was causing nothing but trouble and he was trying to placate the Muslims and carry them with him sheer fraud. Gandhi was crooked and screaming. Though he lived in Ahmedabad he showed up instantly where trouble was brewing (85)

Very cleverly Gandhi made use of CF Andrew's or this reverend or that; to the Muslims he quoted *The Quran*, to the whites *The Bible*. He used non-violence in order to draw attention. Dyer was in JallianwalaBagh to suppress the rebellion but he was sorry that the government had turned Gandhi

back and had not let him proceed to the Punjab to lead these hooligans. Else Dyer would have finished him with his own hands. The cruelty of Dyer is seen on the day of the JallianwalaBagh tragedy. The Indians, he believed were fit to be thrown to the wolves. He speaks bitterly about them to Kenneth Ashby, the Assistant Commissioner. The whole day he trains his men to kill the Indians who would be present at the meeting, firing at the places where the mob was thickest.

In the novel, *The Crown and the Loin Cloth* Chaman Nahal documents moral crisis in the general political milieu of both the sides, among Indians and the Britishers. In the novel Nahal seems working as a political historian for he is clearly manifesting a political preference and a political choice.

The next novelist under consideration is Nayan Tara Sehgal (b.1927) who was born in May 1927 in Allahabad. She was the second daughter of Vijay Lakshmi Pandit and was a child of the rich heritage. Her parents and relatives actively participated in the freedom struggle. Politics entered the life of Nayan Tara very early and she learned to accept many unusual happenings as a matter of normal occurrence. Police raids, her parents jailed and her hectic political activity- all were accepted as ordinary events by her.

Nayantara Sehgal's approach to political and personal problems is based on Gandhian values. Her approach is three fold-based on tradition, consideration for the individual and dependence on moral values. In the novel, *A Situation in Delhi*, the followers of Gandhi clamming to be radicals are far removed from the millions of their country and they have nothing in common with them. Devi is isolated from these men of glib talk. His young son joins a Naxalite movement for bringing these social changes. Rishad realizes the complexities of the task before these young people. His own sense of identification with these peoples is not complete and the Naxalite movement lapse into disorganized violence because of the inability of Naren for proper guidance. This moral crisis in the political ideology and praxis comes at a huge cost. Usman is the spokesman of the novelist in *A Situation in Delhi*. He has Gandhian courage to resign and dissociate himself from powers such a moral strength and nationalistic fervor is lacking in the common Indians. These novelists under discussion every now and then depict the moral crisis deeply rooted in the Indian psyche.

In *A Situation in Delhi*, the novelist had attempted an analysis of the political situation in its totality. The novel goes further than any of her earlier novels in its concern for reasons and solutions. It has neither social nor personal problems. It is a novel full of political ideas. *A Situation in Delhi* is nowhere connected with the novelist's own experience of politics. The political happenings of the two decades have been telescoped into less than half the time. The novelist shows her concern not with Devi or Rishad but with the meaning of revolution. She suggests ways of bringing true revolution. In the novel it is Usman who has to see what has done wrong. He realizes that revolution never ends and they continue as usual :

Revolutions if they had any meaning; meant putting oneself into crucible of change...
revolutions went on. They did not congeal in their tracks or follow beaten tracks.(30)

Usman had the courage to do what most people in power are unable to do, he resigns. But this does not mean that he accepts the defeat on the contrary, he frees himself from the position of power to provide direction to the student's agitation. What had been true for him and his generation may not be true for the next. He understands the gravity of the situation and plans to act accordingly:

Individual penance for individual salvation, never mind what happened to the world or your neighbour. It was not his particular way, but it was a way that was how progress and change might be brought about here, by touching the individual readiness for hardship, the personal desire for sacrifice.(158)

The character of Shivraj is meant to be based on the character of Jawaharlal Nehru, the novelist's uncle. His idealism and his faith in human values, later his sense of frustration at twin events had taken is sufficiently true. But perhaps it is not possible to project a character faithfully once the given situation is changed to suit the demands of writing a novel. The similarity ends here and in any case Shivraj is already dead when the novel opens. The novelist presents many personalities of the contemporary political world in their eccentricities and obsessions. She also portrays them in their preference for certain definite political stands.

Nayan Tara Sehgal's one of the main aspects of fiction is her traditional faith and attitude to politics and personal relationships. Her fiction cannot be divided into themes like tradition versus modernity or east west encounter. There is much in traditional values and a great deal in modernity which she

rejects. Traditionally, India is mainly a religious country but ironically, missing morality and causing a vacuum as moral crisis in national politics.

The novel *Rich Like Us* by Sehgalis set in New Delhi, the political capital of India, one month after the declaration of emergency, an output of great moral crisis. The emergency in India meant many things to many people profit and power for some, jail for others, mobile vasectomy clinics for thousands more. For idealists like Sonali it meant the end of a dream, the extinguishing of a bright future that had burned since independence.

The political theme is presented mainly through the consciousness of Sonali Ranade a middle aged single woman who is an IAS officer in the ministry of industry. During emergency of 1975 she refuses to sanction a preposterous foreign collaboration project which had support of the powers that be. As a result of this, she is punished with demotion. She falls ill after her recovery, she watches helplessly, with other like-minded people, the spectacle of how absolute power corrupts absolutely at all levels. Various facets of life in the period are shown with all norms flouted. Individual rights curtailed in the name of political stability. It is done with the willing assistance of a general spineless bureaucracy interested only in self-seeking. Social uplift is sought to be brought about through hasty, ill-considered and repressive measure. The innocent are jailed for having committed non-existent crimes. The young and ambitious opportunists prosper through officially supported shady deals. The moral crisis in the political novels like these is deep and disturbing:

The trouble makers are in jail. An opposition is something we never needed. The way the countries being and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the cabinet or in parliament, means things can go full steam ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons forever. Strikes are banned. It is going to be very good for business. (8)

Neuman a foreign dignitary had seen huge posters of the Prime Minister's stern unsmiling face, and hoardings proclaiming the nation's support for the emergency declared a month ago, all over the city. They had made no impression on him. The walls had erupted with predictable regularity into the violent poster paint. Some of them covered announcement hailing a coup. Some of them told about the return of an old prophet or the rise of a new messiah. The situation was said to be very tense:

Almost any shoot out was labeled revolution, even if all it changed was the clique at the top for another clique at the tip. Political convulsions let him cold and political clichés bored him. He had no trouble avoiding controversy in the host country as he had been told to do. If the bosses whoever they were made their shambling bureaucracies easier to handle, it was all he asked and this host told him, had been taken care of. Neuman was a traveller on his way in or out. He had no interest in prolonging his stay (8)

The people are talking about a month's censorship. Those who have experienced and lived under it say that it kills all curiosity. One month is enough for an artificial silence to start exploding:

The facts it is trying to conceal shriek out to be noticed. Since June 26th officially all was well, but it was impossible not to be aware of sullenness building up along New Delhi's heavily policed roads, and news travelled from the old city of rioting when tenements were torn from under slum dwellers and they were packed off out of sight to distant locations. It did not need much imagination to sense the hate and fear insides the vans with iron barred windows like the ones used for collecting stray dogs for drowning that now roamed the streets picking up citizens for vasectomy.(23)

The deep seated Moral Crisis depicted in Indian English Political Novels like *Rich Like Us* is self-evident and thought provoking.

Kamala Markandaya, another novelist under discussion, is generally known to dwell on the twin themes of East-West encounter and the clash between the Indian-Urban and Rural societies. She also dwells on the theme of loss and recovery of identity in a quite different context in some of her works. Political and social upheavals attract Markandaya's attention *In Some Inner Fury*, apart from Mira's brother Kit and Richard, the four remaining characters are all involved directly in social and political action. The entire novel is an extended recollection of events by Mira, the central consciousness. All events and incidents are filtered through her mind, assorting, interpreting, speculating, the sketchy nature of the characters is the result of the narrative mode chosen by the author. But there are moments in the narrative when we suspect that it is not the narrator but the novelist who is speaking. For all her rich imaginative vigour, Mira is too young and immature to possess such a metaphysical dimension. In *Some Inner Fury*, there is a fury of Govind and his associates who set fire to the school and mob the court. It represents on a small scale the fury of a nation's struggle for independence. There is the other, private fury of love which consumes Mira

for a time. This makes this novel fit for the study of moral crisis in the domain of Indian English Novel. In the novel *Some Inner Fury* the unnatural and savage hatred for the British rulers felt by most people in India during the days of the struggle is graphically depicted in *Some Inner Fury*. Govind incites his followers to violence, makes them set fire to the newspaper offices where he himself worked for twenty years and is disappointed to hear that the Englishmen who had been his boss has escaped, banners put up in the streets have messages of hate and anger inscribed on them:

...there was no mistaking the sense of that message which and ended with obscene abuse, and which had been written with aahate such as only an occupied country can generate.(213)

Markandaya depicts how when freedom is suppressed, resentment spreads with lightning speed among the people and resistance gets organized. Only a person who breathes the air of India during the national struggle could write a graphic and sensitive description such as the following:

All day the city was full of a whispering. There were rumours, murmurs, mutterings of little faith in courts; of conspiracies; of men who were jailed for their beliefs and jails that were full too bursting. And the wind of discontent would pass from end to end, from quarter to quarter, and every little alley and side-street would be alive to its message. This is the price you pay, if once you have sought to circumscribe freedom.(265)

The early Indian English Novelists are by no means imitators but they are conscious experimenters who adopted an alien form and medium to socio-cultural situation and sensibility which were especially Indian.

By 1930, Indian English literature was more than a century old yet it had not produced a single novelist with a substantial output. And then came a sudden flowering when the Gandhian age (1920-1947) had reached its highest point of glory during the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 30s. It is possible to see a connection here. By this time the national upsurge had stirred the whole country to the roots to a degree and on a scale unprecedented earlier, making it acutely conscious of its present and its past and filling it with new hopes for future. R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao began their career during this phase. It was, in fact, during this period that Indian English Fiction discovered some of its most significant themes such as the ordeal of the

freedom struggle. Nayan Tara Sehgal, Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal and Kamala Markandaya discussed in this paper take up the pang of partition and post-parturition vicissitude.

From the point of view of social comprehensiveness- regionalism and communalism are clear-cut facets of Indian Fiction in English, which stoutly mirror the social and ethnic diversity of the sub-continent to a surprising extent. Thus, Khushwant Singh writes mainly about Sikhs, his novels *A Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale* are set in the Punjab which is also a pastoral background.

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