

action. Begum Sufia Kamal made a conscious political choice to remember history, not only to memorialize the past, but also to discard it. Memory became a powerful force to keep alive the sense of alienation, dissent and discontent to be recovered as an instrument of power and critical analysis.

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Postmodernism and India: Exploring Indian English Literature

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Western scholars based their formulation of the postmodern in the context of western societies. The Preface to Jean-Francois Lyotard's "Notes" on *The Postmodern Condition* clearly state about his study being restricted to the "condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" (xxiii). Many other scholars like Zygmunt Bauman too view it likewise. (Bertens 229-36). However, much water has flowed under the bridge, and the virus of postmodernism has spread far and wide as the world today is so much interconnected and interdependent. The notion of the postmodern must engage with the reality of the so-called third world/ commonwealth/ postcolonial or what you will, for when this latter part of the globe follows the western model of development, it is bound to find itself in the postmodern situation of the West too.

India presents a glaring example of postmodern situation of the co-existence of contraries, at the far ends of the spectrum—the super-rich and the pauper, the metropolis and the hamlet, the glittery and the gloomy, the elite and the underdog, and the learned and the ignorant. Arundhati Roy is right when she comments, "India lives in several centuries at the same time. Somehow we manage to progress and regress simultaneously" (187). It is also a society in which the colonial tendencies have not yet died, and the postcolonial and even the post-postcolonial¹ exist side by side—all in a welter which the term 'postmodern' can

aply denote. Let us take up the various postmodern strains in reflections on the Indian situation as found in contemporary Indian English fiction. Let me also, at this stage, make it clear that the postmodern tendencies are not prescriptive in the context of Indian society as these are not in case of any society. These are simply descriptive of the state of affairs, as the globalization process advances in various degrees and in various corners of the world.

Postmodernism is the synonym for acceptance, rather celebration of co-existence of contraries. In India, while hedonism is on the rise as a result of consumer culture, we also see the opposite tendency of religious essentialism. The belief that science and rationality have taken wind out of religion and that it would be substituted by art is no longer valid. In this sense, these vestiges of enlightenment are also totalizing narratives whose validity is questioned by Lyotard. To me, this metanarrative thing itself is a double-edged sword: if we believe absolutely in the negation of all totalizing narratives, then our postmodernism too becomes a totalizing narrative. Truly then, not all agree with Lyotard as Christopher Butler remarks: "The general sociological claim that such narratives are in decline in our period looks pretty thin, even after the collapse of state-sponsored Marxism in the West" (14). This observation rather than denting the concept of postmodern further bolsters it because postmodern does not know boundaries. It stands for 'cultural de-differentiation' as Scott Lash would say. We can say that when we try to contain it, it rather overflows. We can, therefore, look at this scenario from the broader premise of the postmodern being a site for the co-existence of conflicting tendencies. These contradictory tendencies are depicted in most serious literature starting from R.K. Narayan to Vikram Seth.

Social scientists have accepted that "the proliferation of theoretical proposals intended to establish a line of demarcation between science and non-science has failed by their own stand-

ards" (Seidman 4). Religion was a challenge to the modern thought as it did not conform to a reasoned approach and dabbled in what was cited as mysticism. Postmodernism tried to counter the modernist conception of religion by talking in terms of pre-moderns, lending legitimacy to phenomenological intuition and spurring movements like Radical Orthodoxy and Reformed epistemology. Postmodern theology conceived by them in response to incredulity towards the master narrative of Enlightenment "is a rejection of the optimistic view of historical progress, secular reason and man's ability to find truth without God" (Sim 80). But that is so far as the Western approach to religion is concerned, as Pamela Sue Anderson comments in her essay "Postmodernism and Religion": "Postmodernism has shifted much of both academic and popular concerns away from one dominant system of belief to culturally and historically nuanced practices which have bound individuals and groups together. Nevertheless, it is still common for westerners to think of the other religions in terms derived from their own values and concepts within a Christian tradition; but the other also sees itself in religion to the dominant" (Sim 79).

The 'other' need not necessarily look at the issue from the western perspective. Anderson notes further in the essay that the western postmodernism is engaged in searching for a new definition of religion. Now, the Indian concept of 'dharma' provides a truly postmodern alternative to religion. It is not the exact synonym of 'religion' and if we dissect it further, we find that it is actually a postmodern concept reflecting fluidity and diversity. It is focussed more on one's duty than on anything else and appears to be a social discipliner. At the same time, it joins human effort to the ultimate goal of salvation. In India, one may believe in one God (Vedantists), several gods (Sanatanists) or no God (Buddhists and Jains) at all. Hinduism actually does not have a single progenitor, scripture or system of worship. This dharma changes according to time, place and person, but does have an unchange-

able core of righteousness. Postmodernism in religion *should* (if I am allowed to change the description of past to a goal still valid) ideally become “an exercise in finding new possibilities in experiencing the impossible. Whereas modern philosophy of religion had been restricted by the limits of human knowledge, postmodern religion placed itself outside the possible, outside language, in the realm of mystery and, in what seems similar to the more traditional idea of grace, ‘gift’” (Anderson 82). Indeed, in India, one can find countless religious cults, united at the core by the Hindu notion of dharma. While we find reflections of this Indian brand of religion in poets from Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo, to Nissim Ezekiel, there are a few novelists like Raja Rao, Arun Joshi and the recent entrant into the field Karan Bajaj, who have tried their hand at this genre.

A foremost feature of postmodernism has been the rise of globalization which should not be mistaken with the globalized outlook in all spheres of human activity. It is mainly driven by economy and seeks to make the world an open playfield for multinational companies. India, like most states of the world, has dovetailed itself to the global financial and trade regime. Also seen is expansion of service economy even as mass production is a sought-after panacea of economic backwardness. Wider communication, accessibility of information and rapid transportation have followed as positive fallouts of this dovetailing. Reminiscent of the capitalist order that started towards the later part of the 20th century, the current phase dominated by multinational corporations is thriving in India with support from the mass media advertising and information technology. The picture of contemporary India is increasingly finding place in serious as well as popular fiction produced by Indian writers. Latest works touching on this theme are by Bharati Mukherjee, Chetan Bhagat, Aravind Adiga and others.

However, as Zygmunt Bauman remarks, “Nobody but the most rabid of the diehards believes today that the western mode

of life, either the actual one or the one idealized (‘utopianized’) in the intellectual mode, has more than a sporting chance of ever becoming universal” (Seidman 190), it would be foolhardiness to believe that consumerism would replace culture, and freedom would be re-designated freedom to choose as consumer only all over the world. India continues to live by its cultural mores even if the impact of globalism is being felt in many areas.

The ubiquity of mass media has been pointed out by Jean Baudrillard as a potent marker of postmodern society. The search for truth is abandoned as what we have are the inter-referential representations and copies of each other with no real, original, stable or objective source of communication and meaning. In a similar vein, Frederic Jameson believes that in the postmodern movement, the object world has undergone a “fundamental mutation” so that it has “now become a set of texts or simulacra” (38). His concept of simulacra points out the victory of the virtual over the real. Indians’ fascination for the television and the cinema probably surpasses that of any other nationality or people. More and more people dabble in hyper-reality. Thus online purchasing is catching on fast. According to one estimate, the volume of sales was 2.3 million US dollars in 2012 which is set to multiply by more than 27 times by the year 2018. Competition in consumer culture is based on consumption of status signs. India is already ranked second in the world in order of production of feature films. Most of the popular literature produced in India follows what is called the ‘formula film’ pattern and can easily be turned into ‘feature films.’ Take for instance, writers like Chetan Bhagat, Vikas Swarup, Nikita Singh or Durjoy Dutta and others.

The concurrent phenomenon of Postcolonialism most interfaces with postmodernism in the field of history. While post-colonial approach is to revise history which was corrupted by colonizers, postmodernism goes along so far as it provides voice to the ‘suppressed’ as understood in the western discourse, such

as women, homosexuals, etc. According to Hayden White, rather than searching for historical truth in a scientific manner (the discredited Enlightenment mode), postmodernism would go for pre-history also, if only it helps find meaning.² This unhinging of history from its foundational scientific moorings leads to the postmodern mixing of fact and fiction. The burden of argument advanced by Frederic Jameson in his *Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) is that we are headed towards a break with history as the obsession with present has crossed all limits. We revel in commodifying and consuming past as pastiche. But this is the postmodern reality. This has happened in a big way in our stylized fictional works which re-tell history. The question of history is sought to be reopened with official versions being interrogated and 'other' oral and unsubstantiated material on the one hand, and pure fiction on the other, since history is treated as just another narrative. Some of the novels belonging to this category are by Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Indu Sundaresan, Basavraj Naikar, and others.

Myths and legends have constituted the cultural bulwark of a people which the colonizers faulted on the basis of Enlightenment rationality. Franz Fanon, an apostle of postcolonialism, avers, "Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding people in its grip and emptying logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (169). However, in these postmodern times, myths have been revisited, not with the colonizer's critical gaze, but with a playful post-structuralist one, landing in an ambiguous territory. So, while a number of authors like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Anand Neelkantan have sold millions of copies of their books dealing with ancient myths, there are others who have taken upon themselves the onerous task of segregating the evasive grain of truth in these myths. One such project dealing with the life of Rama of the *Ramayana* places his existence some 5000 years before Christ. The proof comes from

the sage Valmiki's (a contemporary of Rama) description of stellar constellation existing at that time. In this, a comparison can be found in the oldest English epic *Beowulf*. A number of historians read in the fantastic tale the life-history of the northern chief Chochilaicus, who lived around 520 A.D. He is compared to the king Hygelac of the epic just as his nephew is identified with Beowulf (Long 17). Similarly, social scientist Arnold Toynbee 'regards Homer's *Iliad* [as] a unique blend of history and fiction' (Dhar 39). Scientists now suspect that references to extraordinary creatures in myths—Greek, Egyptian or Indian—may be real descriptions of existing life forms seen by visitors from outer space at that time.

Postmodernism interrogates the representational potential of language. Now, even though deconstruction and such practices have strengthened this theoretical distrust, the fact is that in practice, textual representation has not lost its credibility. A number of literary works being produced in India bear the impact of postmodernism. Style-wise, we find fragmented and mixed narratives, linguistic experiments, strategies like magic realism, self-reflexivity, open ending, etc. in the works of writers like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Irwin Allan Sealy, Boman Desai, Vikram Chandra, Rukun Advani and others.

Culture is no longer the preserve of the elite. It has been transmuted into popular culture. According to Scott Lash, "the newer, post-industrial middle classes with their bases in the media, higher education, finance, advertising, merchandising and international exchange, provide an audience for postmodern culture" (20). Not only audience, but aided by electronic media and inspired by self-interest, this "new elite" could also become arbiter of aestheticism: "This new post-industrial middle class thus could be entering into this sort of struggle with older dominant groupings in order to impose their own classificatory schema,

which [it] is comfortable with and evaluates postmodern cultural objects, as hegemonic for the whole of society" (21).

So, with the decline of the elitist culture, the ideals and icons fetishized until now are subject of derision, distrust and demolition. This is evident in popular literature. Take, for instance, a middle-class writer Aravind Adiga's lowly protagonist takes a dig at the deities, who are normally objects of awe and reverence by his class of people. In a TV serial, the protagonist 'RK' is shown offering meat to the statue of Lord Ganesha—something hitherto unthinkable. This tone of irreverence towards traditional icons is a growing postmodern tendency in the popular media of films and television. This postmodern culture also finds expression in most novels churned out by young writers in the form of thrillers and romances.

Postmodernism has sent out a potent message of freedom from tradition. The suppressed castes and classes have become shriller. Now, only in a democratic society can such talk of free speech and intended action be possible. Postmodern society has got to be a democratic one, where not one but several narratives are in circulation. The position of women is one which is amenable to multiple perceptions. A lot of literature written these days reflects the changes that have occurred in their plight over the years. Women characters, for example, even in serious fiction by Shashi Deshpande are seen transgressing the traditional boundaries of wedlock. Deshpande, who started with women characters who were oppressed and suppressed in patriarchal set-up, now depicts women who can even experiment with extra-marital relationships—something unthinkable until some years ago. In the business and political domain, we find women occupying seats of power. A movement is afoot to reserve 33% seats in Parliament for women.

This postmodern tendency has also led to movements aimed at providing better and equal opportunities to the third gender or the neuters. Simone de Beauvoir's observation that sex is given

by nature, but gender is constructed by society has moved mountains in these postmodern times. At the same time, it has given legitimacy to different sexual orientations like the LGBT community or the people going in for sex change. The women's organizations working for the amelioration of long-suppressed women have often joined hands with the queer groups in keeping with the global trend which include transgenders, transsexuals, transvestitism, bisexuals, etc. We have studies of some such people in the works of writers like Kamala Das, Khushwant Singh, Shobha De, Mahesh Dattani, Manju Kapur and others.

Politics is an aspect of social life that seeks to control all human activity. Postmodernist thinkers like Agnes Heller and Ferenc Feher find the prioritization of functional over structural apart from the waning influence of class-based politics. In the case of India, we have seen the decline of the influence of left parties like CPI and CPM. If after remaining out in the cold, they have now clinched power in Kerala and Puducherry, they have had to make compromises in terms of their ideology and policies. In keeping with the real and practical assessment based politics, we have seen the rise of BSP under Kanshi Ram and Mayavati. A kind of adhocism rather than farsighted policies based on any doctrine or ideology is favoured; Kejriwal's single agenda of corruption catapulted his party into power in Delhi. In other words, no grand narrative promising moon in future is favoured by the voters. One such grand narrative of secularization has been rejected by the people when they voted BJP to power at the centre. This party stands for a united India but no party has explicitly disowned the concept of nation. The world over, there are not many takers for the Marxist or the postmodern vision of disappearance of state. In fact, with the rise of terrorism in the name of religion, national boundaries have come to be strengthened. The talk of postnational does not appeal to all, as Ali Behdad points out (2005:71). A distinction is sought to be drawn between the notions of 'nation' and *rashtra*³ which the BJP ide-

ology upholds. However, there is a growing cacophony of voices representing different interests based on caste, ethnicity, religion, language, region, etc., which is hallmark of a postmodern state. Politics in literature is a recurrent theme and we find this in the context of Indian English literature in many writers from Nayantara Sahgal and Manohar Malgonkar to Shashi Tharoor and Salman Rushdie. In conclusion, let me quote Zygmunt Bauman:

The main feature ascribed to 'postmodernity' is thus the permanent and irreducible *pluralism* of cultures, communal traditions, ideologies, 'forms of life' or 'language games' (choice of items which are 'plural' varies with theoretical allegiance); or the awareness and recognition of such pluralism. Things which are plural in the postmodern world cannot be arranged in an evolutionary time-sequence, seen as each other's inferior or superior stages; neither can they be classified as 'right' or 'wrong' solutions to common problems. No knowledge can be assessed outside the context of culture, tradition, languages games etc. which makes it possible and endows it with meaning. (Seidman 194-95)

The epistemologies and cultures of the non-west are a part of our assessment of the postmodern world. The multifarious and often contradictory symptoms of postmodernism form what I call a postmodern *mélange*—a kind of chaotic combination that the postmodernists would celebrate rather than be nervous about trying to find orderliness. Boudrillard quips somewhere that the world is unintelligible and that we should resist attempts to make it intelligible. Maybe, some future generation scholars, provided with the benefit of distant hindsight, will be able to define our times better and be able to assign another nomenclature that would be more appropriate than the term 'postmodern.'

NOTES

1. Emma Dawson Verughese and many others announce the end of the postcolonial with post-postcolonial, on the plea that the term

'postcolonial' has outlived its relevance. Now, we live in post-postcolonial times in which the literature is more concerned about the native culture rather than being obsessed with the wrongs of the colonial period. Verughese lays stress on the growing use of words from native languages in literature. Now, language indeed is a decisive marker of a culture but not the only one that could subsume all disparate strands of culture. There is the lifestyle pattern and the philosophy of life and a worldview which are decidedly of more import. In fact, Couze Venn widens the net when he states: "They [fields of study] overlap on the terrain of cultural theory, itself an eclectic bundle of concepts and theories from semiotics, literary studies, philosophy, ethnography, sociology, history, psychoanalysis assembled in opposition to conventional or authoritative protocols for describing the socio-cultural world" (6)

2. Hayden White, speaking at a seminar, remarked, "many postmodernists believe that a specifically postmodernist idea of "history" provides the only basis for the kind of knowledge required by an emerging global society and the new cultural media that have made it possible. However, this postmodernist 'history' has little in common with that posited as the basis for modern, scientific historical research. In fact, it is much closer to pre-modern conceptions of history understood as a reserve of exempla to be drawn on for practical (political, pedagogical, ideological) purposes and as a discourse rather than a discipline."
3. The Bhartiya Janata Party or the BJP does not treat concepts like 'nation' or 'religion' as resonating the 'Indian' notions. M.S. Golwalkar, the late top leader of RSS, the mentor of BJP, notes in *Vichar Navneet* (English version titled *Bunch of Thoughts*) that the consciousness of *rashtra* has been there on the subcontinent since ancient times. The rough boundaries of Bharatvarsha, as it is known in native languages, cover almost the whole of the subcontinent.

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CREATIVE WRITING

Chappal (The Slippers)

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For the umpteenth time she woke up thinking not of her migraine attack, not of her dead husband, not even of her arthritis, but of the need to buy new curtains. Thick new curtains. Instinctively her hand shot up to keep the intrusive light . . . and then, as thought trails go, the idea of replacing his curtains, things chosen by him pricked her sensibility of loss and she stowed away the idea for the next morning.

Gingerly she turned to her right and reached out for the medicines. Her eye wavered on the frayed rug where her slippers rested together. How do these inanimate things understand the idea of a pair so well. She remembered the article about the Wailing Wall of lonely socks . . . his voice, raspy after the treatment, but brimming with delight at the ingenious marriage of ideas as he read aloud.

The absence of that little ritual of reading out from the newspaper is, perhaps, the worst part of her mornings now. They would pick out their favourite pieces and then broadcast them across the glass table, the three cups of tea and the fluorescent pamphlets. Then they would leisurely consume the crossword together, morsel by morsel.

She heard the milkman's arrival. The noise of his cans generally jangled on her nerves but these days she welcomed any