

Kunapipi

Volume 19 | Issue 1

Article 16

1997

Caste in Indian English Fiction: More Oppression?

Tabish Khair

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Khair, Tabish, Caste in Indian English Fiction: More Oppression?, *Kunapipi*, 19(1), 1997.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol19/iss1/16>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Caste in Indian English Fiction: More Oppression?

Abstract

Rephrasing Toni Morrison' one may claim that the imaginative and historical terrain upon which most Indian English writers journey is in a large measure shaped by the obscured presence of the 'castial'² other. Statements to the contrary,³ insisting on the meaninglessness of caste to the modern Indian identity, are themselves full of meaning. The world, Morrison has stated, does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. Similarly, India will not become casteless or unstratified on caste lines merely by assertion. However, the Indian English writer's attitude to caste is exactly that- assertive and evasive; and, sometimes, pitying or derisive. In that way it is slightly different from the white American attitude to the racial 'other' as examined by Morrison. The Indian upper caste attitude is more one of dismissal than of subdued confrontation. This is in keeping with the history of casteist exploitation in India, as this exploitation has been based on religion, apathy and a stable social order and, unlike Western slavery-based racism, not on direct force or confrontation.

TABISH KHAIR

Caste in Indian English Fiction: More Oppression?

Rephrasing Toni Morrison¹ one may claim that the imaginative and historical terrain upon which most Indian English writers journey is in a large measure shaped by the obscured presence of the 'castial'² other. Statements to the contrary,³ insisting on the meaninglessness of caste to the modern Indian identity, are themselves full of meaning. The world, Morrison has stated, does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. Similarly, India will not become casteless or unstratified on caste lines merely by assertion. However, the Indian English writer's attitude to caste is exactly that – assertive and evasive; and, sometimes, pitying or derisive. In that way it is slightly different from the white American attitude to the racial 'other' as examined by Morrison. The Indian upper caste attitude is more one of dismissal than of subdued confrontation. This is in keeping with the history of casteist exploitation in India, as this exploitation has been based on religion, apathy and a stable social order and, unlike Western slavery-based racism, not on direct force or confrontation. However, the danger inherent in the presence of this consciously overlooked and underwritten 'other' is felt by many Indian English writers – and forces the more traditional of them to favour a static world order which gets reflected in the settings of their books, their plots, their brand of humour and their selection of characters.

The overwhelming concentration of the Indian English gaze on the middle and upper classes is a valid starting point of analysis. C.D. Narasimhaiah⁴ has remarked upon the fact that Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* might be the only authentic village-based novel in English by an Indian. Even if one notes other important novels based in villages (by Khushwant Singh, Kamela Markandaya and Sudhin Ghose, for example), one can not deny that the Indian-English gaze is concentrated upon the urban classes or the rural middle class. Add to this the fact – noted by Meenakshi Mukherjee⁵ – that Indian English writers tend towards the 'universal' and the 'pan-Indian' in a bid to address a readership which is thinly smeared across the length and breadth of multicultural India, and it becomes evident that the 'universal' and the 'pan-Indian' is being defined from a certain standpoint which might not be either 'universal' or even 'pan-Indian'.

As Chinua Achebe has suggested,⁶ on the world scene 'universalism' is a loaded term, fraught with colonialist undertones. Much of what passes for universalism, notes Achebe, is merely a species of Eurocentricism – the Euro-American values and images being particularly well-situated and equipped to propagate their own stereotype. It is pertinent to suggest that, in the Indian context, 'universal' is fraught with 'casteist' or upper caste significance. By defining the 'universal' and the 'pan-Indian' in largely middle class and (rural or urban) upper caste terms, the Indian English novelist denies the existence of the Indian 'other' which is neither middle-class nor upper caste. The fact that this 'other' constitutes the actual majority in India makes the denial even more significant. However, it is the middle class, upper caste reality which is passed off as 'universalism' or 'pan-Indian' by virtue of the class/caste affiliation or background of the author and the fact that these values or images dominate contemporary literate Indian perceptions.

It may be pointed out that some Indian English writers have dealt with lower caste characters. However, with the partial exception of Mulk Raj Anand,⁷ the lower caste character has been described from an upper caste perspective. A typical example is Javni – the low caste servant in Raja Rao's⁸ story of the same name in *The Cow of the Barricades* – who in spite of many tribulations remains constant in her loyalty not only to the village goddess but also to the upper caste family which employs her. Her thankfulness towards her 'betters' is reminiscent of portrayals of the 'faithful black servant' in much of nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature. Again, Bhedia, the low caste idiot in Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat*, simply desires to be a 'good servant'. And the 'simple Negro' of earlier Euro-American literature is once again called to mind when Rao (or his narrator – the two appearing interchangeable in this book) describes Bhedia: 'He is so lovable, is Bhedia, you would have to create him like Brahma himself if he did not be. For him all things are so real, so simple'.⁹ It is not that the castial 'other' is completely ignored in Indian English fiction, but that his/her presence – in most cases – has been subsumed, rewritten and marginalised. This is in keeping with the larger socio-political reality in India, at least until recently. An interesting metaphor can be drawn from Sudhin Ghose's *The Flame of the Forest*. In Ghose's novel, a low caste boy is killed and his spirit is 'tantrically' transferred to the body of an upper caste boy, who had died earlier. Thus, the upper caste boy is restored to life – for our purposes 'reincarnating' and obscuring the spirit of the low caste youth.

In other cases, one can also note the presence of low caste characters as a device to reinforce the status quo. In *The Cradle of the Clouds*, for example, Ghose clearly shows his preference for the forces of tradition

and 'stability' over the forces of change and 'modernism'. We have three 'traditionalist' characters in *The Cradle of the Clouds* – a Brahmin, a Christian and a low caste Hindu. However, the presence of the 'other' (two 'others', if one counts the Christian) is nullified by the fact that all three characters signify the same thing. They represent tradition – which, as defined by Ghose and most other Indian English writers – is always middle class and upper caste (if not outright Brahmanical). The 'castial other', then, is used as a filler, maybe even a symbol – but almost never as a flesh-and-blood character who might see reality differently from his creator-master-author. Raja Rao's Patel Rangè Gowda in *Kanthapura* is a familiar case. Ostensibly he is a lower caste character as he belongs to the potter caste. But, on the other hand, the potter caste is nowhere near the bottom of the caste hierarchy and Rangè Gowda is a Patel, a leader of his community, a rich man, the owner of a 'nine-beamed house' and a person who has clearly imbibed middle class, largely upper caste values. It must be said that a number of Indian English authors – including Rao – stress the emancipation of the lower caste. But, significantly, the impetus to emancipation almost always comes from some upper caste character (such as Moorthy in *Kanthapura*) and the narration is from a middle class/upper caste viewpoint. There is an almost complete lack of independent lower caste characters in Indian English fiction – characters who have their own motivations and who are analogous, so to say, to the real-life (largely low caste) servants who collaborate in violent robberies in the 'liberal and kind' middle class and upper caste Delhi households that employ them.

We can also find the denial of the 'other' in the suspicion with which a number of Indian English authors look at change. Ghose's case is evident in *The Cradle of the Clouds*, and R.K. Narayan's novels¹⁰ always show a return to normalcy (which is almost always the previous status quo). This has been remarked upon by other critics: 'In a way which is perhaps traditionally Indian, Narayan sees any sudden change not for what it produces, for what new possibilities it brings into existence, in other words, not as a positive factor of being, but much more negatively as a play of shadows'.¹¹ Similar in a way is Raja Rao's preoccupation with the philosophical and the universal, his penchant for characters who prefer a life of renunciation (Moorthy in *Kanthapura*) and characters who are recluses (the vast majority in *On the Ganga Ghat*, Ramaswamy at the end of *The Serpent and the Rope*) – while these tendencies can be described as being Indian, they are also a backward-looking device on the part of the characters, if not the author. There are some authors, like Rushdie, who have an ambiguous attitude to change. But these authors – once again like Rushdie – are often themselves from sections of the obscured 'other'. Rushdie, for instance, comes from a Muslim background and, as such, would be perpetually outside the Hindu caste structure in spite of

belonging to the upper class. However, it may be noted here that the post-1947 generation is generally more willing to confront change without condemning it outright or by implication.

Of course, not every pre-1947 generation Indian English novelist is or has been opposed to change. Mulk Raj Anand is an obvious exception – thanks to his staunch socialist convictions which might spoil his novels in places but do make him more aware of the 'other'. Then there are exceptions who turn out to be the rule when examined closely. Authors like the very 'pucca sahib' Manohar Malgonkar and the, well, more or less pucca sahib, V.S. Naipaul. Both have had no or little sympathy with traditions – though Naipaul has had a softer corner for Brahmanical traditions than non-Brahmanical ones as his travel books often demonstrate. But both of them are 'shaped' by the obscured and largely-detested presence of the 'castial other' in a roundabout way.

In their separate ways, Naipaul and Malgonkar belong to that part of Indian English literature which has been written by a secure, privileged 'us' about an 'other' that can be pitied for its inability or laughed at for its clumsy efforts to ape the rituals and rites of the new Eurocentric 'Brahmins'. The earlier casteist division between the touchables and the untouchables has been replaced by the modern division between the properly (completely) Westernised and all the rest. No other writer brings this out as clearly as V.S. Naipaul, with his *Mimic Men* and similar 'characters'. Malgonkar, on the other hand, uses the absence of a British 'public school code' to define the 'castial other'. It is interesting in both their cases to note that they stress the stock colonialist images of the simple or unreliable, Janus-faced native, the 'mimic' and confused 'half-native' and the patient, reforming colonialist in their own ways. Their novels can be read in a different and revealing way if one bears in mind the following lines by Achebe:

To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: 'I know my natives', a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand – understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding ... Meanwhile a new situation was slowly developing as a handful of natives began to acquire European education and then to challenge Europe's presence and position in their native land ... To deal with this phenomenal presumption the colonialist devised two contradictory arguments. He created the 'man of two worlds' theory to prove that no matter how much the native was exposed to European influences he could never truly absorb them; like Pester John he would always discard the mask of civilization when the crucial hour came and reveal his true face. Now, did this mean that the educated native was no different at all from his brothers in the bush? Oh, no! He was different; he was worse. His abortive effort at education and culture though leaving him totally unredeemed and unregenerated had none the less done something to him – it had deprived him of his links with his own people whom he no longer even understood and who certainly wanted none of his dissatisfaction or pretensions¹²

Put in different combinations, these two views of 'native' characters form the basis of characterization (and, often, humour) in most of the novels of Naipaul and Malgonkar and in two very different novels by Aubrey Menen.

The use of myth is another interesting case in point. Meenakshi Mukherjee¹³ has noted that Indian English authors prefer myths drawn from *The Ramayana* to those drawn from the other great epic of India, *The Mahabharata*. Though Mukherjee wrote her book about two decades ago, her observation holds good even today.¹⁴ Mukherjee has traced this tendency to other Indian literatures as well. She reasons that the Indian mind, which tends to idealize, finds it easier to accept the ideal characters of *The Ramayana* rather than the ambiguous, complicated characters of *The Mahabharata*. While agreeing with her, one also needs to point out that *The Ramayana* – and not *The Mahabharata* – is the epitome of upper caste, largely-Brahmanical value systems in India. Rama, the hero-god of *The Ramayana*, is *maryada purushottam* (ideal man) – and not any of the characters from *The Mahabharata*, including the god Krishna. It is not insignificant that Hindu revivalist and reactionary parties (with a predominantly upper caste base) have selected Rama as the central figure and the rallying cry in their on-going bid for power. This selection of myths once again places a number of Indian English authors firmly on the side of the status quo – which remains largely middle class, upper caste. The myths selected reinforce the upper caste image-making that has been internalized by most middle class Indians. For example, the widespread perception of the Indian woman as 'chaste' and economically-dependent on the husband/father does not take into consideration the sexual and economic freedom enjoyed by many low-caste, especially tribal, women. A rather obvious example is that of smoking. The 'Indian woman' is not supposed to smoke a cigarette: it is usually very westernised women who do so in Indian English (or other Indian) novels. This perception, however, does not take into account the fact that the vast majority of scheduled (low) caste women smoke like chimneys, and can be seen doing so on any Indian street.

The specific myth of Karna deserves special mention. Karna is one of the two figures from *The Mahabharata* who occasionally graces the stage of Indian English fiction. He is supposed to embody the outsider. But – as Meenakshi Mukherjee also notes – Karna is not an outsider in the full sense of the term. He is a dispossessed 'kshatriya' (the upper/warrior caste), fully aware of both his dispossession and his heritage; and his role as an 'outsider' in Indian English literature is clearly cosmetic. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that the 'Karna' myth enables Indian English and other Indian writers to use the interesting 'outsider' figure without having to actually confront the painful and disruptive dialectic of belonging and not-belonging.

It is also interesting to note that the closed worlds of some of these

novelists – particularly R.K. Narayan – are a mirror image of the closed social circles imposed by the earlier system of caste. From this point of view, the meat-eating taxidermist, Vasu,¹⁵ is as much a symbol of alien-casteist forces as he is a symbol of rampant power and a modern Faustian attitude. His destruction is inevitable to preserve the closed caste-like structure of Nataraj's Malgudi. In fact, in all of Narayan's novels, the essential Malgudi is preserved with very minor changes: an attitude to life which can be linked to the institution of caste and its centuries-old ability to preserve a largely 'stable' social system in India.

Having noted the ways in which many Indian English authors deny or obscure the presence of the 'castial other', it is pertinent to note that their worldview and art is itself shaped by the obscured presence of the 'castial other'. The act of slotting the inconvenient 'other' into a traditional and convenient pigeonhole imposes certain restrictions on not only the reality portrayed but also the way it is portrayed, on – so to say – the art of the novelist. It is not sophistry to view Rao's philosophical concerns and universalism, Narayan's unchanging world, Malgonkar's heroic code, Ghose's 'fantasy', Naipaul's westernised 'rootlessness' and humour as consequences of the obscured presence of the 'castial other'. If these authors did not adopt their distinctive postures, they would be forced to deal with the reality of the 'castial other' on unfamiliar grounds. But to adopt these postures, they have to give a certain distinctive shape to their art. For example, we can say that the devices which go into the creation of Rao's universalism – that is, his language, the type of narrator, etc. – are shaped by Rao's (sub-conscious) desire to keep the 'other' under control. But this very effort to deal with the 'other' on one's own terms – whether that involves distortion or evasion – ensures that the 'castial other' effects the art of the novelist concerned.

The 'castial other' – though rewritten, obscured or denied by these authors (none of whom would personally condone casteist discrimination, it must be noted) – is still a presence in Indian English fiction. But it is a presence that, so to say, is twice removed from reality.

NOTES

1. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (Cambridge, USA: Picador, 1992), p. 46.
2. As 'casteist' has the same pejorative connotation as 'racist' and 'the caste other' sounds odd and resembles the 'other caste', I have been forced to coin the word 'castial' (based on 'racial').
3. Read, for example, V.S. Naipaul's views on caste, contemporary India, the Dalit movement and Brahmins in *A Million Mutinies Now* (London: Penguin, 1990).
4. C.D. Narasimhaiah, *Raja Rao* (Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann India, no dt.).
5. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction* (Delhi: Heinemann, 1971).
6. Chinua Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism' in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).
7. Anand is an exception in more ways than one in his attitude to social realities and

- his clear determination to take the side of the underdog even at the cost of artistic achievement.
8. Raja Rao, while sticking to a consciously or sub-consciously upper-caste/middle-class perspective, is one of the few Indian English authors who seems fully aware of the subtle ramifications of caste in contemporary India.
 9. Raja Rao, *On the Ganga Ghat* (Delhi: Orient, 1993), p. 48.
 10. With the exception of *The Guide*, as pointed out by Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Twice Born Fiction*.
 11. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction*.
 12. Chinua Achebe, 'Colonialist Criticism', pp. 58-9.
 13. Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice Born Fiction*.
 14. With the exception of one major book: Shashi Tharoor's, *The Great Indian Novel* (Delhi: Penguin, 1989).
 15. R.K. Narayan, *The Maneater of Malgudi* ([1962] Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1968).