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India Told and Exposed: A Reading of the Indian Booker Heavyweights

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Abstract

It's always very dicey to speak anything about a multifarious country like India for sure. And from literature one must never expect a Kodak-camera realism. In little over a decade, three Indian writers bagged the prestigious Booker-prize, a tradition that the fiction giant Rushdie started in 1981. Here I intentionally drop V.S. Naipaul as he is of Indian ancestry and not of Indian origin. The works of all the four Indian Booker- prize winners depict a picture of the country that annoys many of the intellectuals and laymen as well. These novels have been received with considerable antagonism in India. In place of telling India, these novelists have been charged of selling India, keeping the western audience in their minds. They have been charged of tarnishing the image of the country.

Keywords- Culture, Expose, Representation, Multifarious

Rushdie in his *The Midnight's Children* presents almost the whole history of the twentieth century. "[It's an] interpretation of a period of about seventy years of India's modern history dealing with the events leading to the partition and beyond". Arundhati Roy in her novel, *The God of Small Things* shows a grim picture of South India of 1960s which is deeply caste-ridden and exposes the false claims of Marxism. Desai in her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* presents a picture of North-east India of 1980s. And the most recent of these is Adiga's *The White Tiger* which strips away the veneer of India shining and lays bare before us. All the four novelists seem to have studied Indian culture brilliantly in their respective novels. All the four novels touch upon, more or less, some similar issues and offer a wonderful variety of experiences about India. This paper endeavours to bring forth the image/images of India and various aspects of her people as shown by the four Indian Booker heavyweights and tries to prove the authenticity of their representation.

India is a country of great diversity. Every country has its flaws and merits. So does India have. But it does not mean that it is only a basket of flaws, it is also something otherwise. The whole idea of Indianness is its plurality. "Any truism about India can be immediately contradicted by another truism about India". (*The Elephant, the Tiger and the*

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Cellphone: 11) And the Booker heavyweights pained themselves to paint a grim and nebulous picture of India. People may frown at this presentation and create a furore over it, but out of many truths about India they have shown one bitter truth – the darker side of India. The job of a novelist is to create a reality in which we may discover ourselves. And to this purpose a novelist must never hesitate to tell some untold aspects. Like social reformers the Indian Booker novelists have tried very artistically to present fact behind fiction. All the four novels respectively – *The Midnight's Children*, *The God of Small Things*, *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The White Tiger*, raise some issues which are almost similar in their treatment of subject and tonality. They hold a mirror to realities which we deny to accept. Each of the aforementioned novelists captured the essence of India at his time. Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children* chronicled the social and political upheavals of the first thirty years of India- from independence and partition through the 1971 war with Pakistan and the rise of Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency. A blurb by the New York Times says about the novel: “[It] sounds like a continent finding its voice”. (*The Midnight's Children*’ cover page)

Rushdie's novel, *The Midnight's Children* deals with historical theme, commonly read as a national allegory giving imaginative form to India and her history. In writing this novel his avowed purpose was “...to relate private lives to public events and to explore the limits of individuality in a country as big, as populous, and culturally variegated as India. (*Modern Indian Novels in English:* 115) About the representation of India by Rushdie, Robin J. Lewis observes:

In a remarkably short period of time Rushdie had altered our vision of the Indian subcontinent to the extent that all the previous literary accounts of India such as those by Kipling, Forster, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan had been simultaneously subsumed into, and surpassed by, Rushdie's passionate evocation of the recent history of India and Pakistan.¹

Because of chronicling socio-political upheavals of the country he very significantly calls himself, “a fairly political animal”.² In the novel we see the representation of almost the whole history of 20th century India through the experiences of three generation of the Sinai family living in Srinagar, Amritsar and Agra and then in Bombay and finally migrating to Karachi. In the novel we find history and individuals closely connected. Each detail of Indian freedom struggle and oppression of the Britishers finds a good place in the novel. Before raising finger at the authenticity of the representation of India one must know the difference between a novelist and a historian. The novelist has liberty to mix fact with fiction while the historian is devoid of such liberties. All the incidents of freedom struggle like the Jalianwala Bagh tragedy, the Quit India Movement, the Cabinet Mission and the rise of Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency are presented as they took place. Jalianwala Bagh tragedy is painted very realistically in the novel,

The fifty-one men enter the compound and take up positions, twenty-five to Dyer's right and twenty-five to his left; and Aadam Aziz ceases to concentrate

on the events around him as the tickle mounts to unbearable intensities....They have fired a total of one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd. Of these, one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark, killing or wounding some person. 'Good shooting', Dyer says to his men, 'we have done a jolly good thing'. (p. 36).

The personal history of the Sinai family seems to be closely interconnected with the national history of twentieth century India. All the major events like language based division of India, the Indo-China war of 1961, description of the Emergency and even war between India and Pakistan find a life-like mention in the novel. To give Indian touch to the novel Rushdie has used myths from India's past. He has used myths from all the sects and religions.

Mujeebuddin Syed writes about the mythical pattern of the novel as:

The characters like Padma, Parvati, and Shiva who bear mythical names, provide a religious touch but they are delineated in modern terms. They lend a mythical dimension to the novel. They carry an allegorical and symbolic significance. Padma is referred to the "Dung Goddess", "Maha Laxmi" and "Goddess of wealth" etc. (p. 139). The myth of Shiva stands for the polluted atmosphere in social ethics, and political morality in the contemporary Indian situation. The myth of Parvati witch symbolizes in the novel, the secular values and Hindu-Muslim unity in a vast country like India, which is known and noted for unity in diversity. Parvati-the-witch becomes Parvati Laylah after her marriage with Saleem Sinai.³

Rushdie sometimes seems to be Eurocentric while describing India and her people. He has tried to show an India which exists in the westerners' minds. He writes in the novel:

I permit myself this one generalization; Americans have mastered the universe, but have no domination over their mouths; whereas India is impotent, but her children tend to have excellent teeth. (*The Midnight's Children*: 181)

At some different places in the novel we find some more negative descriptions of India like, "We are a nation of great forgetters." (p. 37) "We are not like Indians, always making battles." (p. 33). Here his description about India does not seem to be based on any valid ground. Though it will be unfair to level an allegation of deforming the image of India against Rushdie who has just discharged the duties of a novelist very well. Rushdie has tried to show the dirty politics of the day and deliberately presented Indian political leaders in a very derogatory manner. He refers to Indira Gandhi as "the widow" and Morarji Desai as "the urine-drinker" (p. 441).

Rushdie has also shown the condition of women especially Muslim women, how they are caught in the mechanism of patriarchy, confined within the domestic walls, never allowed to walk on the road without burqa and a male escort. In the very beginning of the novel we see the situation when a young doctor Aadam Aziz goes to examine a girl patient Naseem

Ghani. He is not permitted to see the patient and has to examine through a perforated sheet. That women perpetrate violence against women is also no exception to the novel. Naseem Aziz differentiates her own children according to their complexion. Alia and Emeralds are loved because of their fair complexion while Mumtaz gets a step-motherly treatment by her own mother. This feeling is corroborated in the novel "...Mumtaz, whose dark skin stood between her and the affection of her mother. (p. 53).

Almost all the female characters; Alia, Mumtaz, Emerald, Pia Aziz, Jamila Singer the daughter of Amina and Ahmed Sinai, suffer in their lives in one way or the other.

To show Indianness in the novel Rushdie has made great experiments with language. His use of Hindustani and Urdu vocabulary like *ek dum*, *angrez*, *phuta-a-phut*, *nasbandi*, *dhoban*, *feringhee*, *bap-re-bap*, *sab kuch tick-tack hai*, *bas*, *chi-chi*, *yaar*, *gora*, *pyar kea to darna kya*, *ooper-necchay*, *sarpanch* etc. proves it. Rushdie seems to have conquered English language and has refashioned it according to his suitability.

And this tradition of Rushdie has been followed by the successive Booker winner Indian novelists like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, though Adiga seems to be less influenced by Rushdie in his style and technique. Except Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children* rest of the three respective novels seem to be closely interlinked in their tonality. Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) which brought the Booker to the country is a polysemic novel about several things. It is a forceful plea for the upliftment of the marginalized and those who have been sidelined from the main stream of Indian society. It is about forbidden love, family discontent, conjugal discord, irrelevant male chauvinism, and at the core, it is about the deeply-rooted caste chains of our society. Though the setting of the novel is South-India, Ayemenem, a small village from Kerala, it seems to tell the story of whole India. The novel focuses on the ups and downs in the life of the four generations of the Ipe family, stressing the second and the third. The star-crossed lovers Ammu and Velutha belong to the second generation of the Ipe family. Indian society is ridden with caste system and the whole mechanism of Indian society is based on the high and the low, the men with "big-Bellies" and the men with "small-Bellies". The novel tells us the tragic love story of the untouchable Velutha and the high caste Ammu a divorcee. Both are victims. Velutha is the victim of a caste-bound society and Ammu that of patriarchy. Velutha, who can be called the hero of the novel is a Paravan by caste, an untouchable caste, who is expected to crawl backwards with a broom to delete his foot-prints. As in the novel Mammachi told the dizygotic twins Estha and Rahel that she could remember a time, in her girlhood, when,

Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their foot prints, so that Brahmins of Syrian Christian would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprints. (p.74)

Velutha suffers humiliation at the hand of caste Hindus and caste Christian. Velutha the young rebel in the novel was an expert carpenter. He was a mechanic and artisan like a little magician, a master craftsman with German sensibility. Like God he created all the little

things only to be consumed and enjoyed by the upper caste rich people. Though no society defines love as a sin yet he is punished for committing this sin. He is punished for transgressing the codes of society. A jack of all trades and master of all trades but the trade of love ditches him. He disrupts the hierarchy of society by touching the forbidden fruit, Ammu. He was a quasi-engineer with the stigma of being an untouchable. Besides being an accomplished carpenter, he had a way with machines and Mammachi often said that "...If he had not been a Paravan, he might have become an engineer". (p.75) And it is for this professional expertise that Baby Kochamma goes to the extent of saying him "Dr. Velutha". The hypocrisy and sham lives lived by the upper-class people are well exposed through the members of the Ipe family in Ayemenem where the mere touch of untouchables is avoided, they make use of things made by Velutha the Paravan. In the novel untouchability is connected with money. When Mammachi hired Velutha as the factory carpenter other high caste factory workers did not like the idea as according to them:

Paravans were not meant to be carpenters. And certainly prodigal Paravans were not meant to be rehired. (p.77)

Aravind Adiga also has raised the issue of caste and religion in his Booker winning novel; *The White Tiger*. In this novel the protagonist Balram Halwai is scoffed at by the old Sikh driver:

'Sweet makers', the old driver said, shaking his head. 'That is what you people do. You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?' '...Muslims, Rajputs, Sikhs – they are fighters, they can become drivers'.(p.56)

Like Balram Halwai Velutha's caste is his destiny. When the illicit love-affair between Velutha and Ammu is discovered, everything goes topsy-turvy. Baby Kochamma who earlier referred to him as Dr. Velutha reacted as:

She said (among other things)-'how could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed? They have a particular smell, these Parvans? ...She preferred an Irish – Jesuit smell to a particular Parvan's smell. (p. 257).

On hearing her daughter's relation with a Paravan, Mammachi lost her control and spat on Velutha. The novel also exposes the rot in the Police machinery and phony claims of Marxism. When Velutha, a card holding member of the Communist party goes to comrade Pillai, who talks of a classless society, for help he answered:

But comrade you should know that party was not constituted to support workers indiscipline in their private life. (p. 287).

Even the police who are the servant of the state were biased and acted as the agent of high caste people. The police took interest in the whole affair as the supporters of the upper class. As they themselves belonged to the upper class society, they were busy defending their social order. Even inspector Thomas Mathew was biased and far from being impartial. He does not do his duty well because he belongs to a high caste. The novelist writes about this in the novel,

Later when the real story reached Inspector Thomas Mathew, the fact that what the Paravan had taken from the touchable kingdom had not been snatched but given, concerned deeply. So after Sophie Mol's funeral when Ammu went to him with the twins to tell him that a mistake had been made and he tapped her breasts with his baton, it was not a policeman's spontaneous brutishness on his part. (p. 260).

Another incident in the novel makes the point more clear. Before Velutha was beaten to death in the lock up, a touchable policeman who could not digest the whole affair is presented in the novel somewhat like this:

One of them flicked at his penis with his stick. 'Come on, show us your special secret. Show us how big it gets when you blow it up (p. 311).

Vijay Nair aptly observes:

The police station could very well be the same one Balram Halwai may have found himself in, if he had been caught after murdering his employer and no doubt inspector Thomas Mathew would have beaten him to death just like the unfortunate Velutha when Balram was, "Not old. Not young. But a viable die-able age." (Courtesy: The Times of India, Jan 4, 2009, p.2)

The novel also touches upon other issues of the day including condition of women, notion of superiority and inferiority, cross-cultural relations, neglect of children in Indian families, the crooked politicians etc. The novel never fails to depict the dual standard and hypocrisy of an Indian caste-bound society.

Next to Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai created literary history by being the youngest ever woman to win the prestigious Booker at the age of thirty-five. Desai depicts global disconnect and has shown how the old world is clashing with the new one. She shows us the dilemma of the Indian migrants in foreign lands in the age of globalization. Through the help of *The Inheritance of Loss* she has tried to show "the inheritance of class", to use the phrase of Dr. Sarvajeet Mukherji, in India. The story is set in North-East India, a Himalayan town by the foot of mount Kanchenjunga. The novel tells the story of a disenchanted retired judge living in Kalimpong, a hill station and his relationship with his granddaughter Sai. Desai like Adiga mainly talks of two classes: Anglicized upper middle class and the lower strata of our society. The novel depicts at its fullest the colonial and colonized psyche of the characters, racial discrimination, immigrants' bitter experiences, impact of globalization and cultural alienation of characters, Krishna Singh observes: "Kiran Desai is deeply interested in India – the India of 1980s – honestly the mixed image of India".⁵

The entire novel is set against the backdrop of insurgency of 1980s when the separatist movements were all pervasive. "The novel opens and ends with insurgency. In the opening chapter Jemu's house is besieged and a hunting rifle is plundered; Chapter fifty-two ends with Biju robbed by Gurkha mercenaries and chased by dogs in the jungle". (*The Inheritance of Loss*)

The novel depicts several aspects of India. An anglophile retired judge, a poverty-stricken math-tutor Gyan who undertakes a long walk in the cold for a petty amount of money, a cook who lives in American paradise as his son lives in America though illegally. Poverty is the root cause of resentment in Gyan against Jemubhai, “People lived here (Cho Oyu) in this enormous house and property, taking hot baths, sleeping alone in spacious rooms ...cutlets and peas dinner...(162).

It is poverty that forces Biju to migrate and his father to bear the brunts at Cho Oyu from the anglophile judge. The cook is kicked and humiliated while Jemu’s bitch Mutt is loved and adored. What an Irony? A dog is loved while a human being is relegated and misbehaved who is tangled in “false consciousness”. During her journey from Dehradun to Darjeeling Sai notices different shades of Indian life. We find here a very photographic description:

Women walked by with firewood on their heads, too poor for blouses under their saris...It was early in the morning and the railway tracks were lined with the rows of bare bottoms ...defecating on to the tracks, rinsing their bottoms with water from a can (p.30).

Jemu Bhai Patel who is culturally alienated originally belongs to Piphit, a Cambridge educated Indian who is selected in I.C.S. and becomes a judge, adopts the western mannerisms. He even changes his wife’s name from Bela to Nimi by being influenced by the western ways of living. Gyan scoffs at: “you (Jemu and sai) are like slaves that’s what you are, running after the West, embarrassing yourself” (p.163).

The Inheritance of Loss has been decried as a “Rusdiesque novel”, because of its representation of India. The novel touches upon some prominent issues to make the novel Indian both by content and form. The novel also deals with diasporic experiences of the characters both by the rich like Jemu, Sai, Pixie etc. and by the poor like Biju, Saeed, Harish, Harry, Saran, Jeev, Rishi etc. Ever-widening economic disparity, multiculturalism and inter-racial relationships find some good mention in the novel. The sense of loss and the sense of exile seem to be the integral part of the novel. The novel seems to be a saga of losses. Krishna Singh observes:

The novel is essentially a study of losses – loss of culture, loss of identity, loss of human relations, loss of emotional binding, loss of human values, loss of rationality, loss of peace and harmony, loss of human beings’ faith in each, etc. (Krishna Singh)

Influenced by Rushdie, Desai uses popular slangs and dialectic words to provide Indian colour to the novel. We can have many examples like *Jalebi, Samosa, Chapatis, nakhara, pakora, huzoor Pitaji, Mithai, chhang, Angreji Khana, Kamaal hai, Baap Re ! laddoos, Namaste, Dhanyabad, murga-murgi, rasta roko, chappals* etc. are only to name a few. Some full length expressions also find mention in the novel like “Humara Kya hoga, hai hai, humara kya hoga” (p.8) “Jai Gorakha” (p.7) “Angrez ke tarah. Angerz Jaise” (p.105) etc.

At another place in the novel the derogatory image of India has been portrayed as: “India is a sinking ship ...the doors won’t stay open forever...” (p.47) Thus, this novel also does not fail to capture the essence of India of 1980s.

Lastly and the most recent of the booker winning novels is *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga which arrests our attention both by its narrative technique and by the narrative itself. The novel shows the rotten face of India, the darker side of the country at a crucial time when we claim of being the “software guru”. *The White Tiger* which has been charged of being a “Booker’s book” shows us the rot in the three pillars of the twenty-first century India- democracy, enterprise and justice. It represents an India where corruption has become rampant, where elections are sold and bought routinely for political mileage. It also shows the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor, mocks at the education system and the greatest democracy of the world.

The novel represents a fictional world in which the image of India is formed with four fictional settings – of Laxmangarh, of Dhanbad, of Delhi and its ambient areas and of Banglore. Adiga in disgruntled tone narrates the story only to expose the dark aspects of the country. The protagonist Balram Halwai by travelling at these four places experiences the corruption and several social injustices which the country is rife with.

The story begins from Laxmangarh of Bihar whose patron god is Hanuman, a symbol of unconditional servitude and absolute devotion. Adiga’s attack on such aspects of servitude is because he wants to underscore the loss on the part of an individual in such tradition of service. His protagonist denies such traditions and breaks the “rooster-coop” by slitting the throat of his “second father”. It is Laxmangarh which is a village, and ironically called “village paradise” by the protagonist, the feudal mode of life exists even in the twenty-first century. The landlords control the means of production and the villagers are forced to sell their labour as per landlords’ interest. Adiga intentionally awards them bestial identity like the Mongoose, the Stork, the Buffalo, the Raven etc. only because of their brutality. Ashok’s brother and father who live in Dhanbad are black as the coal they dig up .The only challenging force for the landlords present in the village is that of the Naxlites. However, they enjoy the feudal privileges. This picture of India, in fact, is a slap on the face of the country that claims to be the most democratic. The villagers are shown having no interest in democracy. For them an election is “Like eunuchs discussing kamsutra”. Adiga is of the view “...that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of darkness.” (p.114) Adiga unfolds fact after fact about India. His description of the holy river Ganga offends the sentiments of Indian people. We can see it in the novel,

One fact about India is that you can take almost anything you hear about the country from the prime minister and turn it upside down and you will have the truth about that thing. Now you have heard the Ganga called the river of emancipation, and hundreds of American tourists came each year to take

photographs of naked *sadhus* at Hardwar or Benaras, and our prime minister will no doubt describe it that way to you, and urge you to take a dip in it.

No! – Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion and seven different kinds of industrial acids. (p. 15)

In Dhanbad the said feudal mode of life exists where the caste system is deep rooted. Ram Persad (actually Mohammad Mohammad) the driver of Honda City car before Balram Halwai has to hide his identity only to get a job. One of the landlords before appointing Balram as a driver confirms his caste. Balram's embittered remark "That's my caste – my destiny" (p. 63) still clings to Indian society.

Communalism is deep rooted in India. This incident also finds a mention in the novel. The rift between the Hindu and the Muslim is whetted by the landlords when the Stork orders his grandson: "Call yourself Gavaskar. Azharuddin is a Muslim." (p.70) Another incident of communalism is seen when Ashok's marriage with a Christian lady Pinky is discovered, it creates an implicit turmoil in his family.

The novelist hammers at the education system of the country and calls the story "The autobiography of half-baked Indians" (p.10). In Delhi to monitor the smooth functioning of their luxurious life the landlord's son has to grease the palms of the crooked politicians. Ashok who is caught in political currents wanders with bribe keeping in his red bag. In Bangalore the police machinery is silenced by the help of brown envelopes stuffed with hush money.

The White Tiger raises the burning issues of our time like master-servant relationship, education system, game of dirty politics, economic disparity and condition of Indian villages etc. That Adiga has presented the distorted image of India is being racked up.

After a careful perusal it is quite evident that all the four novels in the collection display the grim but very true picture of India in her different time phases. We cannot be disagree with Gurucharan Das himself an author of great renown that,

A book should not be judged on the basis of whether it creates a negative or positive picture of a country. It should be seen as a work of art and judged on its literary merits, if it is a good book, it's a good book and it deserves an award. (Courtesy: The Times of India, Oct. 19, 2008. P. 12)

The aim of literature is to produce a reality in which we discover ourselves. Similarly Vijay Nair Remarks:

If the aim of literature is to help us understand the world we live in and lead more meaningful lives then undoubtedly all the recent Indian books that have won the coveted prize have achieved this admirable objective. There would always be critics who carp that these writers were self-serving and wrote for personal glory. But their works will outlive the pockets of distress they

continue to create and endure as classics. (Courtesy: The Hindu, Literary Review, Jan 4, 2009. P. 2)

End Notes-

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4. Krishna Singh. "Representation of India in Kiran Desai's Inheritance of Loss", ed. Sunita Sinha and Bryan Remonds, *Critical Responses to Kiran Desai*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2009. p.51.
5. Ibid p. 52.

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