

Postcolonial assertion of identity: The case of Indian Literature and its 'other'

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Abstract:

When it comes to a sense of a collective identity in India, it is basically a combination and juxtaposition of multitudes of identities, which surround it and finally produce the very concept of 'Indianness'. It is this sense of collectivity that started in British India and went on to form the basis of a collective national consciousness in anti-colonial movements as well as postcolonial assertion of a distinct identity in later time. My paper deals with the intertwined and often interdependent trajectories of development and maturation of the idea of Indian literature and Indian national identity that went through similar developmental milestones during and after

the British era. Indian literatures, both Indian writing in English as well as Indian regional writings, commonly called *Bhasa* writings, shaped and in turn were shaped by, the idea of nationhood in India. Moreover, these two bodies of writing went on to create two dimensions of national or collective consciousness, namely the public or outer domain and the private or inner domain of Indian national identity respectively. This essential difference between these two groups representing and thereby creating India also contributed towards making nationality a gendered phenomenon thereby further problematizing the identity of 'mother' India.

Keywords: identity, post colonial, intertwined, Indian literatures

When we study the phenomenon of the rise and development of a collective sense of native identity in British India, we find that, it was basically a combination and juxtaposition of multitudes of identities, often apparently contradictory to each other, that converged and finally produced the very concept of 'Indianness'. It is this sense of collectivity that went on to form

The basis of a united national consciousness in anti-colonial movements as well as postcolonial assertion of a distinct identity in later time. Literature of a nation discourses the nation by creating an image of it in the mind of its readers as well as by being a mirror image of the existing picture in public psyche. This paper traces the intertwined and often interdependent trajectories of the idea of Indian literature and Indian national identity that went through similar developmental milestones in India before reaching maturation. Indian literatures, both Indian writing in English as well as Indian regional writings, commonly called *Bhasa* writings, shaped and in turn were shaped by, the idea of nationhood in

India. Moreover, these two bodies of writing, with English on the one side and *Bhasas* on the other, as medium of their expression, went on to create two dimensions of national or collective consciousness, namely the public or outer domain and the private or inner domain of Indian national identity respectively. This essential difference between these two groups representing and creating 'India' also contributed towards making nationality a gendered phenomenon thereby further solidifying the identity of 'mother' India.

When it comes to the terms, India and Indian identity, they are quite difficult to define. The problematics of Indian-ness and the politics of identity are too multi-layered, multidimensional and even too oxymoronic at times to have a unidirectional teleology. So while talking about Indian identity, I will not try to define it, but will only plunge into the ocean of the endless dynamics of different markers of it to point out some of them, and I will do that with relation to Indian literature.

As it is well known, during the Victorian period many important things happened in British India, one of them being English Education act; a legislative act by the council of India in 1835 by William Bentinck. The act made English as a medium of higher education in India and as a result a new English educated elite class of Indians was born. These people were exposed to the Western and English value systems and culture and literature through the English language and literature taught to them, specially the genre of novel which Indians were not much familiar with earlier. They started to read novels and they

started to attempt writing novels as well. This one change of things or events caused a foray of changes and implications which, with their consequences and counter actions were powerful enough to create strong and far reaching waves in the already vast oceans of identity markers.

Indians started to write novels in their own languages, the *Bhasas*. Writing novels in languages which Maculay proudly dismissed as mere 'dialects', was in itself an act of assertion of one's own existence. Authors of different Indian languages not only wrote novels but also there were reviews and discussions on them in literary magazines and periodicals. All these taken together, created a strong region-based and language-based literary culture. Starting with Marathi and Bangla there were soon novels written in Gujrati Malayalam Tamil and Hindi. These novels were even translated in other Indian languages. Few examples of some earliest novels in India can be given:

1. *Yamuna Paryatan*, one of the earliest novels in India, was written in Marathi by Baba Padamji (1857). It narrates the story of Yamuna, a Hindu Brahmin widow and her sorrows and ends with Yamuna's conversion to Christianity

2. *Durgeshnandini* was written in Bangla by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee(1865). It was a novel that was set in the backdrop of historical Pathan-Mughal conflict with a love story of Jagat Singh and Tilottama

3. *PrathapaMudaliarCharitram* was written in Tamil(1879) by Samuel V Pillai. It tells the story of a naïve but good hearted Prathapa and his wife who dresses

as a man and becomes a king for a short time.

4. *Saraswatichandra* was written in Gujrati by Govardhanram Tripathi (1887-1901) It was written in four volumes over the period of 15 years telling an epic story of the protagonist Saraswatichandra who was an English educated person but when faced with the different trials of life, he was finally saved by *sadhus* and *sadhvis*.

5. *Chadrakanta* was written in Hindi by Devaki Nandan Khatri (1888). It gives us a romantic fantasy about two lovers belonging to two rival kingdoms. Even if we don't get into what Benedict Anderson said about role that novel, as a genre, plays in imagining a community by creating a 'simultaneous calendrical' time, we can say that these literary activities, simply by their very existence, created not only different regional sense of identities but also a sense of pan Indian awareness and belongingness, however thinly, by their act of mutual translations and all. This can be said for these novels even when they did not directly take up the job of consolidating a sense of national identity and unity. On the other hand, there are those novels that have directly taken up that job, namely Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath*, (1882) which is fairly known to posterity, mainly for the song 'Vandemataram'. This novel is set in a backdrop of famine and the story is that of a couple Mahindra and Kalyani as well as a band of monks revolting against imperial rule. The monks actually showed three goddesses as the three faces of Bharat Maata: goddess Jagadhatri as what Bharat Maata was; goddess Kali as what she is like now; and

goddess Durga as what she will be in future. So this novel's role in taking a big step towards discoursing the nation by creating an image of the nation in the mind of its people, as an essential Feminine Hindu icon can hardly be overstated.

Even when novels are not directly calling for nationalistic upsurges like *Anandamath* did, they did draw the attention of their country-people to the need of reformation in their society in many ways which too is one step towards consolidating and perfecting one's sense of self. *Indulekha* (1889) in Malayalam by O Chandu Menon was one such text that took up the issue of right to education and emancipation of Nair women in particular and Indian women in general. Though it is humanly impossible to give and even get the entire picture of the whole gamut of regional writings in India due to its vastness, this is a brief sketch of development of novel and its role in a collective identity formation of Indians.

On the other side of the picture there were scores of Indian novels written in English as well. The British English literature of the Romantic era with a passion for liberty and equality was a major influence on both Indian writers in English and *Bhasa* writers because both these sections of people were educated and being educated meant more or less being English educated to a great extent at that time. But unlike their *Bhasa* counterparts, the Indian writers in English were often deemed to be anxious to prove their loyalty to the English masters primarily because, owing to the language used, they were potential readers for their texts and it was more likely to get

their attention. Any consolidation of Indian identity was generally overshadowed by a more generalized sense of universal humanity. So since the very inception of Indian novels, the 'language of liberation' seemed to have planted a seed of division as well. Examples can be given of texts as follow:

1. *The Times of Yore* (1885) was written by Soshee Chandra Dutt. It was the first Indian historical fiction that deals with Indian history from Alexander to the battle of Panipat. But in doing so his focus was more on making these historical tales look romantic and adventurous rather than to assert the self of the nation through history.

In slightly later time

2. *Sanjogita or the Princess of Aryavarta* (1903) was written by K K Sinha. It showed a tendency to thank whom he called 'our noble foreign masters for kindness and sympathy' (p 267). He also wrote that it was the British who rescued us from a chaotic society.

3. Taru Dutt's unfinished novel *Bianca* (1878) is set in 19th century England with a Spanish heroine.

4. Sharat K Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny: The New Krishna* (1909) talks about a bond between India and Britain in a partnership

Having said that, I should hurry to add that this tendency was never an unproblematic and linear one. Ambivalence of some kind between what can be called servility to British and asserting the civilizational essence of the nation was visible since the beginning. For example the same Sharat k Ghosh has written in the same text: "When Rome was not built, when Tyre and Carthage were yet

unbegotten, the house of Bharat reigned supreme over India". (p 20) Also the Spanish Maiden Bianca in Taru Dutt's text, in her looks and attitudes emulates a figure that is more Indian than European.

While Indian writings in English were apparently or allegedly indifferent to the consolidation of a collective national identity, their role in creating a literary culture and space just like their *Bhasa* counterpart cannot be denied. There were novels in English that made strong case for social reformation as well

5. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) that talks about the suffering of a middle class Hindu wife at the hands of her indifferent husband urges for social reform.

6. Shevantibai M Nikambe's *Ratanbai* (1895) is also a plea for female education.

In fact in case of English novels, the appeal is understandably stronger because of the use of a common language which was more readily understood without translation by educated people across India and thereby was equally important, if not more, for the creation of the ethos of Indian-ness across the land. In such a situation texts that had taken up the job of actually promoting armed revolution against the imperial power, had no less impact than *Bhasa* texts like *Anandmath* towards the creation and assertion of anti-colonial national identity. An example can be given as the following:

5. Kylash Chandra Dutt wrote *A Journal of 48 Hours in the year 1945* (1835). It is a story of about 5000 words told in a unique manner. Although it tells the story pertaining to its own time the narrative is

teleported to a future time 1945 only two years short of the actual independence year of the country. The author fantasises a violent uprising among the middle class English educated young Indians under the leadership of one Bhuban Mohan. The antagonists were presented by symbolic and obvious names like Gen. Lord Fell Butcher and Col. John Blood Thirsty etc. While it will be absurd to say that short novellas like this one can actually inspire people for armed resistance, sentences like this can surely work towards creating one sense of unified national identity:

“while the other nations of the earth are rising high in the scale of civilization, the people of Indostant [sic] are sinking to the level of beast. Consider for a moment my friends and countrymen”. (p 16)

So when it comes to judging the trend of writing novels in English with respect to discoursing of the nation, it is neither possible nor desirable to chart a simplified and unitary movement in the ever crisscrossed arena of Indian English Fiction without seriously misidentifying its different traits.

In such a picture of Indian national identity as well as Indian literature developing almost hand in hand, one very ironical thing draws our attention. When English works were more far reaching than regional languages of India because of being the common language, it was severely limited to a thin layer of English educated people only across the country. On the other hand *Bhasa* writings that were more deeply rooted in their own social milieu took longer in reaching people of

the other regions. So it is interesting to see that when the *Bhasa* as well as the English texts were working more or less towards the same directions there were an underlying opposition of currents. This opposition is mainly due to the choice of language. Once Bankim Chandra in the first issue of his periodical *Bangadarshan* mentioned that one serious problem about writing in Bengali is that educated Bengalees don't read Bangla. This sense of distance that one has from his own soil due to the choice of language was imbued within the authors themselves as well. An example of Michel Madhusudan Dutta, even though he was not a novelist and was mainly a poet and dramatist, will be apt here. Michel Madhusudan is known for his infatuation with English language at first but then came back to his native tongue to write successfully. Even then his anxiety about losing touch with his own soil was visible in a letter that he wrote to his friend Gourdas in madras as is mentioned in *Madhusudan Rachanabali* edited by Kshetra Gupta.

“Can't you send me a copy of the Bengali translation of Mahabharata by Cassidos as well as a ditto of the Ramayana...I am losing my Bengali faster than I can mention. Won't you oblige me old friend, eh..? (p xvi)

Ironically a letter asking for a Bangla text is written in English. This bilingualism causing some amount of anxiety can be seen in the work of GovardhanramTripathi as well who wrote such a huge novel as *Saraswatichandra* in Gujrati but maintained a private notebook where he did his homework for the novel in

English. It was almost like he was writing two novels simultaneously. And was constantly in a sense of ambivalence and lurch between these two.

And why this sense of opposition or ambivalence is important for us is, it gives us another major thing about the consolidation of national identity, namely the gendering of the nation. As Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book *Perishable Empire* has mentioned that the early novelists of India writing in English as well as *Bhasas* came roughly from the same social segment. That is the upper class urban Hindu male educated in English. Barring a few like Sarojini Naidu or Taru Dutt, for a large population of women in both urban and rural parts of India, contemporary Indian English fiction was inaccessible, and it was the women, along with a section of under privileged men, who constituted the readership of Indian *Bhasa* literature. This deep divide between men and women and their respective literary worlds, can be understood in terms of a divide between the Eurocentric outer world of commerce and materialism and the traditional Indian inner world rooted in its soil. Rabindra Nath Tagore's *Nashtaneer* (1901) provides an interesting example of this phenomenon. In this novel we see an estranged couple. The husband Bhupati, an urban English educated man is estranged from not only his wife Charulata, but also from his own linguistic and cultural heritage. On the other hand it is his wife who lives rooted in them. While Bhupati starts an English newspaper and remains busy with it, Charulatha, who knows no English, ventures successfully

into the literary world of Bangla with her short pieces published in Bengali newspapers. At the end a distraught Bhupati tries to reconnect with Charu as well as his own soil and find his own self but fails.

Such depiction of Indian *Bhasas* as the natural repository of cultural self identity and assertion; and women as the carriers of that identity is very important link to understand the Indian concept of national identity as Partha Chatterjee has explained in his book *Nation and its Fragments*.

While making a distinction between a political nationalism and civic nationalism, Chatterjee argued that nations like India differ from the Western nations in terms of their way to identify with their nation. Indian sense of nationhood was made up of two domains of nationalism: an outer domain of nationhood comprising of things like economic military and political aspects of a community and an inner domain comprising of the socio-cultural practices; spiritual and familial aspect of the community. And it is the inner domain which, according to Chatterjee, is the soul or the core of the sense of collectivity called nation in Indian context. To quote him, the European powers:

“had failed to colonize the inner essential identity of the east which is in its distinctive and superior spiritual culture. Here the East was un-dominated sovereign master of its own fate.” (p 121)

So it is the inner domain of ‘Banga Janani’ or ‘kannada Matha’ or ‘Kairali’ merged into the core of ‘Bharat Maata’ and made it what it is today.

Coming towards the end of my paper I would say that the inside outside dichotomy

which influenced Indian literature as much as it was influenced by it, left Indian nation as a strongly gendered concept. Women who became repository of cultural national identity were literally responsible for the biological reproduction of the nation. The iconography of an essential Indian woman was indispensable to nationalist discourse back then and is still holding strong. And that has problematized, to a great extent, the relationship between women and nation. One can see a clearly divided society at the time of the anti-colonial struggle. The India of men that is often found to be anglicized in language, customs, religions etc. and the India of women rooted or forced into the language, culture and religion or spirituality of the land. Though I should hurry to add that this is the picture of that part of society that is not directly connected to the anti-colonial struggle. In some parts we have seen men and women struggling side by side against colonial oppression. But as P.K Nayar has pointed out that it was only for the brief period of the actual struggle. Once the battle was over, these ladies were asked to 'drop the gun and pick the babies' and join their clan in the society. For them boundaries are clearly set by society and system which cannot be said to be totally different from nation. As, with change of time, women have started to move out of those boundaries, number of 'nationalists' claiming that such women are ruining Indian culture and thereby making India lose its identity, is also increasing. This scenario has lead to a curious conflict between two ideological positions dedicated to the same vocation of asserting long suppressed voices and identity formation,

namely, nationalism and feminism. The convoluted paths of their major and minor collisions as well as possible way outs from them deserve detail and full attention in themselves and remain as a scope of further study for the time being. I would conclude my paper by stating the ironical fact that women of the mother figure in the centre of the nationalist discourse, who were designed to 'otherize' the others, often end up in a place where they find themselves in the periphery of that same discourse.

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