

## CASTE IN INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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*Caste has been an integral part of Indian social system since ancient times. Over the centuries caste has continued to regulate the Hindu society. According to Louis Dumont in "Homo Hierarchicus"- Indian society was structured on a firm notion of hierarchy that was based on the relationship between the pure and the impure. It is more of a religious than political or economic notion. He also points out the prevalence of traditional hierarchy which was based on "varnas" or colours, whereby people were divided into four categories namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras; and untouchables are outside the classification.*

—Louis Dumont

The present study brings out the idea of caste as represented in Indian English fiction. There are certain instances where caste is entirely absent. The study intends to bring out several ways through which caste is represented and it also looks at those absences and gaps where caste is represented in minimal fashion or where caste representation is in a way problematic. So primarily two novels will be looked into for these concerns: one is **Untouchable** by Mulk Raj Anand and the other is **The God of Small Things** by Arundhati Roy (the Booker Prize winning novel). The objective is to set the stage or set the context for these novels which are said to be predominant about caste. There are a number of critical works locating those two works within the diameter of Indian caste system but at the same time there are certain lapses, certain limitations and challenges within which those works are fraught as well. So this study needs to be seen in those contexts trying to open up those avenues for further discussion in terms of the relationship of cast with Indian English fiction and vice versa.

Indian English fiction claims to narrate its Nation and its many inhabitants. It is a body of writing which claims to completely understand and to completely represent what India is about and we have seen it in multiple ways and in different novels. But this study aims to talk about a certain kind of irony which is present here and this irony gets more highlighted. It's possible to accentuate

the nature of that irony especially when one begins to talk about certain problematic areas such as caste or gender and quite rightfully this study is situated in the context of this scenario.

There are three major areas of tension: caste, class and gender as far as the narrator world of Indian English fiction is concerned. The study goes on to argue that being problematic areas or being problematic concepts, there is a certain kind of redundancy with which these themes and these ideas are treated. The study examines in detail the treatment of caste especially in Indian English fiction.

There is this much talked about visible connection between caste and English language to be specific and there appear apparently four reasons for inhibiting privileged circumstances and privileged habitats. The Indian English authors are also able to distance themselves away from certain realities such as caste which is mostly relegated as an unmodern thing and which is mostly seen as a backward thing that the modern secular citizen would rather not wish to see. In Khair words, Here if English-education, of a Cosmopolitan proficiency is seen as a culturally empowering and economically encashable factor, the group of English-speaking-and writing Babus can be almost solely located within the upper castes and classes, forming a sort of intellectual and cultural cream in secular fields.

—Tabish Khair

This obvious connection that Khair begins between English language and those who inhabit those worlds empowered by English language. It is not a novel idea. Many sociologists had already spoken about it. There are a lot of historical and sociological concurrences and evidences to this. But to be able to see this in the context of the Indian English fiction is altogether a different thing. Here he is referring to the Cosmopolitan habitats that are familiarized and frequented by the Indian English authors. Herein lies the problem to begin with.

With a few introductory statement on the status of caste and having explain how caste could be understood in the modern context and how 'jhati' is different from the modern understanding of caste

and having provided a certain sociological sense of how caste operates in modern India, it is the right time to talk about the overwhelming concentration of the Indian English gaze on the middle and upper classes in novels like **Kanthapura** (1938), a novel which presents a microcosmic idea of a nation and there is also seen that the author Raja Rao claims to have a very authentic kind of an information on the depiction of a typical Indian village which is entirely fascinated at the new emergent National politics in the leadership of Gandhi. There the character Moorthy and a number of other characters are being presented from the perspective of an upper caste narrator who is present within the novel and the novel is in itself authored by an upper caste author. Having stated these things, there are the other novels that are based in Indian villages and have tendencies to look at and represent the rural middle class and upper class and that have to be seen to be presented as 'pan Indian' (Vallampati Venkata Subbaiah). The problem lies not in the talking of the upper caste presence but the problem lies when the authors begin to present this limited narrative as being pan-Indian and there is also a tendency that presume that perhaps there is that Pan-Indian caste in an Indian village, a Pan-Indian caste in the urban area where it is minimised or where it is presented in a minimal way to such an extent where it becomes impossible to see through the mini-complexities within which caste operates. The study also alerts to certain kinds of depictions which are rare exceptions in the context of Indian English fiction.

There is the depiction of a character Bakha in the novel **Untouchable** by Mulk Raj Anand but the character is also described from an upper caste perspective. So there is his presence but the problem lies in the way in which he is presented- "it is not that the caste other is completely ignored... .. but that his/her presence-in most cases- has been subsumed, rewritten and marginalized"

— Bhabani Bhattacharya

One would argue otherwise presenting different contexts in Indian English fiction but the study aims at presenting a series of stories where pan-Indian caste is being talked about but there are no actual references, no indicators as to how caste operates in a very complex manner and this reference and depiction is either of the middle upper class which is seen as pan-Indian or there is a way in which the lower caste characters also get incorporated into the narrator fold but that basically is from an upper caste perspective and

there he talks about the presence of a lower caste character with the character is used mostly as a device to reinforce a shaken status quo e.g. Ghose's **The Cradle of the Clouds** with a lower caste Hindu is used to represent tradition-along with a Brahmin and a Christian. The question here is whether the lower caste characters are manipulated in such a way so as to highlight or present the important aspects of tradition.

There is another interesting aspect that arises where can talk about that there is the imperus to emancipation- almost always from the upper caste character for example Moorthy in **Kanthapura** where Moorthy stands apart from other Kanthapurians and he becomes a mini-Gandhi and Moorthy gets elevated to this status and he becomes someone who uplifts the villagers from the boundaries of caste and religion, whether it is the question of an upper caste character Achakka or the policeman Bade Khan who is a muslim and perhaps the only villainous character in the novel. Drawing from these examples from contemporary Indian English fiction, this is an attempt to drive home the idea that there is a problematic lack of independent lower caste characters. He tries to identify certain reasons for it and presents factors such as class positioning, cultural heritage, urbanization and geographical location of Indian English authors which surprisingly. He reminds that most Indian English writers are removed from spheres of active caste-based prejudices, let alone conflicts which contemporary India is also ridden with.

It is a deliberate attempt on part of these Indian English authors to ignore caste and to deliberately move away from caste ridden areas. Incidentally it happens that almost all Indian English writers seem to be inhabiting a certain kind of class privilege and they are also seen to be a part of the growing Cosmopolitan set of Orders which are far remote from the centres of class based conflicts or any region based differences. This is actually a realistic portrayal for a majority of the Indian English authors because they are used to remain occupied with these realities or where they never have seen the actual picture behind all these so-called realities.

Amidst these realities of Indian English authors, there are certain 'brave' authors also with their significant 'brave' attempt. There are younger writers who have moved away from a Rao-like knowledge of the caste. Rohinton Mistry's **A Fine Balance** and Arundhati Roy's **The God of Small Things**, both have used lowercase characters. In Arundhati Roy, there is a character Lolita who is

almost as significant as the protagonist and there are two very important Dalit characters who occupy a prominent place throughout the novel. The presentation of lower caste characters in these two novels are not without lapses. When it is seen that there is "almost and anxiety on Mistry's part" where the realistic past of Dina who belongs to a Parsi family is narrated and how the stories of the Dalit characters- Ishwar and Omprakash- are narrated. In comparison to the realistic portrayal of the character of Dina, the portrayal of Ishwar and Omprakash is filled with elements of fantasy and fairy tales. The realistic mode used for the portrayal of the character of Dina cannot be used for the portrayal of Ishwar and Omprakash because their worlds are entirely different. This is in one sense right because certain different, different genres are necessary to form and complete the story. So these are certain lapses on part of these contemporary 'brave' attempts.

While there are many lapses in the depiction of these lower caste characters but there is also the idea of a cultural change specifically in a certain number of younger post-Rushdie writers where they are seen to be more open to the idea of certain kind of social-cultural change than the Rao-Anand-Narayan generation. This may be because of their own Cosmopolitan class positioning. The absence of the complexities of caste is not a proof of the irrelevance of caste. In this context Spivak argues, "we have not yet seen an Indo-English fiction writer of tribal origin". Khair points out that, "by leaving unaddressed the complex historical and dialectical development of the

structures of caste-based exploitation, one fails to provide a plan of action to tackle it in the present." Whenever cast gets talked about in the context of Indian English fiction either incidentally or to show that prejudices caste will be extremely delimiting in the long run. Towards the end, there arise several questions as to how these different Indian English authors are preoccupied with the Indianness of their Cosmopolitan societies. Most urban landscapes are organised more in terms of class and less in terms of caste. There are certain ways in which the concepts of caste are wrought up in the Indian English fiction. Whether they are 'twice removed from reality' or completely obscure but nonetheless they establish their inherent presence in the Indian English fiction.

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