

On Writing the Literary History of Indian Fiction in English

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I

Way back in the forties of the last century, Rene Wellek raised a pertinent question which has set the minds of literary historians thinking: "Is it possible to write literary history, that is, to write that which will be both literary and a history." The present article proposes some directions in which such an attempt could go. Let us realise that literary histories get written again and again; there cannot be just one literary history of a nation or a period. The extreme view would be that we need no literary history since its objects are always present, echoing Eliot's well-known dictum that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. They are eternal and so do not have a history in the usual sense. Such a view ignores the simple concept of literary evolution in arts though it may sound abstract. The real problem is how to provide a framework for such a literary history.

Literary history is an independent province of scholarship. It is not textual analysis, though a historian's literary sensibilities have to be sharp and keen enough to explain the relationship among works. It is not literary criticism though the historian has to evaluate works and establish causal relationships among works which will form the data for his account. In short, though he is involved in the problems of historiography, the historian cannot be blind to problems in

theory, methods of analysis and evaluation and explication of texts.

II

To begin with let us for a while turn our attention to a few noted and noteworthy literary histories. Most of the existing literary histories that we know can be classified as 'philological' where texts are studied in terms of 'the means of composition' or 'dialectical' where all works are assumed to be a kind of discourse and discussed in terms of a predetermined set of principles. Both these kinds take into account either the 'pre' or the 'post' constructional elements, ignoring the constructional elements of a work which are the only relevant ones. Again the principles with which these studies have been organised are either 'atomistic' because the transition from one author to another is not established and the studies remain isolated or 'organic' where the connecting factor of the authors is, in most cases, some analogue drawn from life. Such an analogical, integral framework obscures the artistic particularity of the works in consideration. The reason for which such literary histories need to be rejected can be understood if we subject a few histories for a brief review. These may, and in some cases, do achieve a good deal of freedom and flexibility but they need to be discarded as being tendentious since they are committed to a 'thesis.'

Probably the earliest literary history that we have known, Hippolyte

Taine's *History of English Literature* (4 vols) is a learned treatise but it is dogmatic and deterministic in that it organises and discusses literature deductively with respect to its three causes: 'race,' milieu,' and 'epoch.Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian's *A History of English Literature*, another early work, usually referred to as authoritative by those of us of the earlier generation, views the history from the Renaissance up to the twentieth century as a pendulous swing with the spontaneity of Romanticism set against the controlled structure of Classicism. The history becomes a dialectical contrast between these two forces. A.O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* is a profoundly sensitive intellectual history on the lines of Leslie Stephen's *History of English Thought in the 18th century*, and Irving Babbitt's *Rousseau and Romanticism*. Lovejoy dissects and analysis what he calls 'unit ideas' such as God, Nature, Evolution and determines how these have embodied the collective thought of a large group of persons. He makes a rigorously searching investigation into works to see how the 'unit ideas' have been "at work in the most various regions of history of human thought and feeling." Ideas--not men--rule the world. Works of literature exist for him, not as products of human activity, but as philosophical documents which have an unbroken ideational continuity. His is a historical construct with a particular bias. Concepts of 'plenitude,' 'continuity,' and 'gradation' are seen to be operating in literature from Plato to the 19th century and these make up the great chain. The most striking negative consequence of this history is that there is a flattening out of all personalities and even fourth raters are as important as first raters. Plato, Aristotle and Augustine get reduced to just links of this heavy and cumbrous chain. What more, historically minor poets who attempt something new tentatively grow mightily important.

V. Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* is analogous to Lovejoy's; only his point of view is the economist's, and the doctrine that provides his common ground is the dialectical opposition between conservatism and liberalism. He is so obsessed with economic theories that there is a scant treatment of such literary figures as Poe and Henry James. He finds cause in important *historical* events for his *literary* history. Robert Spiller in his *The Cycle of American Literature* believes that such a rational view is inadequate and the key concept for him is the 'symbol.' He finds symbolic meaning in the way the frontier operates in American history in two cyclic levels. The first frontier is the course of American literature from the earliest religious tract and intellectual writings to the culmination in the most exalted forms of American renaissance represented by such writers as Thoreau, Emerson, Melville and Whitman. The second frontier is the movement across the Midwest to the far west culminating in the second renaissance, in Faulkner, Dreiser and Eliot. Analogically forcing the life of an individual into a national movement and the geographical movement into literary is what makes this otherwise brilliant history 'organic.'

Many other works bearing affiliation with this method can be cited as examples. Eric Auerbach sets up, in his *Mimesis*, a trailblazer in mid-twentieth century, a large outer structure of history in which individual works are seen to exist in obedience to a predetermined scheme. The scheme is not worked out inductively from the works themselves. The notion that the artist is responsible for his art is ignored by Auerbach and we have a feeling that writers have no control over the history which determines their works. Northrop Frye sets up a quasi-scientific structure using the analogy of the biological sciences and expects works to be reduced to his 'archetype.' Kenneth

Burke's *Counter-Statement* studies literary texts on the basis of the effect they have on the audience. He too is concerned with the 'form' of works but in a different sense. It means the arousal and fulfilment of desires. A text achieves such a form in so far as one part of it leads the reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence. The value of works is determined by their rhetorical capacities for affecting the reader's emotions. In these instances we have previously worked out systems for interpreting individual works. W.J. Courthope's elaborate *History of English Poetry* which treats English poetry in relation to the English mind and its national consciousness, Oliver Elton's *Survey of English Literature* in six volumes which is an appreciation of works individually—the list could be extended indefinitely—are all either 'organic' or 'atomistic' histories in the sense in which we have used these terms. These do not treat the historical evolution of literature as art.

As against these, Ronald S. Crane in his *Critical and Historical Principles of Literary History* (1967) proposed a different method of organising literary works by their form or genre. He called it 'Narrative History of Forms.' For British and American literatures, there exist well-tried traditions of literary histories, however much they may fall short of our expectations in terms of the methods of organising works of literary art. What is more, general and period histories of the types of *Oxford History of English Literature* in 7 volumes and *Cambridge History of English and American Literature* in 18 volumes under specialist editors get written time and again, from different points of view and shifting perspectives. Among the countries of the third world, Australia and Canada have felt more than others the need for an authentic version of their literature. In India, however, though writing in English has more than a two hundred year old history, there are not

enough histories of literature linking up works with one another and establishing a literary continuum. However, mention must be made of two general literary histories that have served us well in the past. Both were written by exemplary scholars of eminence who have taught the subject Indian Writing to generations of students. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* revised and updated periodically for four decades and more now is his *magnum opus*. M.K. Naik's *A History of English Literature* (1982) is another pioneering effort which has helped to promote Indian Literature as a discipline worthy of higher study and research. Apart from these two standard works, we do not have full-length literary histories, but only partial studies such as Meenakshi Mukherjee's *Twice Born Fiction* (1971), C.D. Narasimhiah's *The Swan and the Eagle* (1969), K.S. Ramamurti's *The Rise of the Indian Novel in English* (1987) and collections of essays by diverse hands united by a single theme, such as "New Writings from India."

III

Under these circumstances, there is a dire need for a comprehensive literary history of Modern Indian Fiction. Fiction is the most dominant form of literature of our time. It is in fiction and individual's awareness of life encounters its fullest expression. Fictional craft has witnessed the most significant developments in the aesthetic and thematic ordering of fictional events. Here is a suggested proposal along the lines suggested by Ronald Crane in his *Principles* for writing a narrative literary history of Modern Indian Fiction. There are two functions involved here: (I) It is a study that concerns itself with the constructional elements, or the artistic principles which operate in the work, making it a united whole, its *gestalt* and, (ii) It is a narrative history in terms of the changes in artistic ends, materials, techniques, etc. The prospective historian has first to consider

what is the informing principle that makes a work a distinctive whole and how the requirements of this principle have helped to determine the conception of handling its parts. Then he has to establish a continuum for relating these studies. Causal narrations are some possibilities for the prospective historian, such as the development of plots from the simple to the complex, character portrayal and the motives governing them, shifting focus in narratology, etc.

It is commonplace that works of literature are often conditioned by time and spirit. The reciprocal relationship in terms of influences between works of literature and their time can be noticed in the context of Indian fiction too. In the novels of the post-independence period, the external world of social reality was stable and secure and the fortunes of the protagonist, who was at the centre, were shaped and controlled by such a world. *The Chronicles of Kedaram, The Serpent and the Rope, The Guide, Voices in the City, A Bend in the Ganges* are some random examples of this period. In the next decade the economic growth and consequent prosperity of our nation, along with the establishment of institutional awards by Sahitya Akademy, Sangeeth Natak Akademy, etc., had a direct and different impact on the growth of Indian fiction. It was also a decade of expanding reading public. The social milieu was sympathetically inclined to accommodate 'history' and 'politics' which had played vital roles in the lives of the masses. Historical and political novels, with special thematic emphasis on the national upheavals as the freedom struggle and partition were a welcome feature, hitherto unknown. *Azadi, Train to Pakistan, The Apprentice* may be cited as examples.

The long period of normalcy of Indian fiction suddenly received a jolt. An unprecedented change occurred in the eighties of the last century. News talents emerged; many voices came to be heard.

The most influential forbear of the pluralism of the eighties is Salman Rushdie, the highly gifted practitioner of the art of fiction. Fictional protagonists, drawn from different nationalities are obscure people anxiously sitting on the edge of the world, as it were. *Midnight's Children, The Golden Gate, The Circle of Reason, Antique World* come readily to one's mind by way of examples. The burgeoning forth of feminism affected the consciousness of women as can be seen in the novels of Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Arundathi Rai, Jhumpa Lahiri, etc. Powerful portrayal of female oppression has come to be reflected in feminist fiction.

As a literary phenomenon, fiction is not new to India; it is a living and evolving genre ever since the literary renaissance began in India in mid eighteenth century. It evolved as a subaltern consciousness, as a reaction to break away from colonial literature and attempts to portray India through Indian English. According to Amit Chaudhuri, the Indian novel is necessarily written in English and it is absurd to assume that any work in our vernaculars might be Indian since they do not claim to participate in the fiction of the 'postcolonial totality called India.' Rushdie too felt that the prose writing—both fiction and nonfiction—created by Indian writers working in English is a more important body of work than most of which had been produced in the vernacular languages during the same period.

In terms of narrative techniques, the impress of postmodernism is conspicuous. Contemporary novelists daringly experiment with the language of fiction. Raja Rao articulated this way a long while ago while writing *Kanthapura*. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit and sensibility that is one's own. One has to convey the shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that might look weird in an

alien language. The inventive vitality in the use of fantasy, science fiction, magic realism, syntactically dislocated language and word plays have substantially enriched the form of the Indian novel. The short span of four decades after independence bears witness to a scene of diaspora in Indian fiction. It is in excellent health, fully replenished, eagerly awaiting the arrival of a historian to narrate its story. There are myriad shifting possibilities: migrant writers, themes from contemporary socio-cultural situations, exploration of relationship between East and West, fictional reworking of mythology and history, man-woman relationship, the process of middle class urbanisation and the predicament of man, disinheritance from life as lived in the past.

An Outline Sketch for a Narrative Literary History of Modern Indian Fiction in English

1. Introduction: The situation after Independence – proliferation of the novel – causes – analyses and evaluation of major works
2. The pre-Rushdie era: fiction of the 60s and 70s – factors governing their composition – reception – treatment of themes – varieties of fiction – the impact of the Western experimental novel and modernism
3. The post-Rushdie era: prolific growth, the non-fiction novel, postmodernist modes
4. After Empire: postcolonialism and the Indian novel – bonds of commonalty among third world fiction – mutually enriching factors – hybridity and decolonisation
5. Indian fiction in translation: new projects – regional novels in English – an Indian phenomenon –

its challenging prospects – pastures new

6. Narratology: the absorption and transformation in terms of the art of composition – traditional perspectives – formal questions – the significant development in the rhetoric of the Indian novel
7. Conclusion: the future of Indian fiction – not at the crossroads – myriad possibilities for renewal and replenishment

IV

In recent times, there has been a rethinking on what constitutes literary history. This discipline which all along was confined to the area of writing a history of imaginative, literary compositions, that is works which are fictional, factual oral or written. Now its boundaries have broadened, extended so as to include not productions alone but also reception. The notion of literature is increasingly becoming non-normative. It includes many other categories of discourse drawn such other fields as anthropology, fine art, and music thereby increasing the number of texts to be examined in historical contexts. One cannot think of a monolithic construction of literary history which leads to a marginalisation of most other cultural traditions. After all 'nationhood' is an imagined community. So new methodological paradigms come into play in this idea of the move from the national to the new or comparative literary history which "seeks to recast literary works as historical 'events' within a dynamic context of reception and transmission." Such a history does not espouse a single ideology or framework, but canvasses a wide range of scholarly concerns. Hence there is a growing need for a more flexible and integrative concept.

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