

# Early Critics of Indo-English Novelists

Meenakshi Mukherjee and M.K. Naik

MEENAKSHI MUKHERJEE'S *The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English* (1971) is the first study by an Indian critic dealing with the Indo-English novel of the 20th century. Differing from M.E. Derrett who combined a social and historical approach with a critical evaluation of works under scrutiny in her



book *The Modern Indian Novel in English* (1966), Mukherjee's methodical approach, she says, is based on "strict international standards of literary criticism" (12); standards that include such categories as 'technique', 'point of view', 'consistency', 'structure', 'character' and 'plot'. References to the novels' historical context would be limited to short reflections upon trends in 20th century world literary history. Arguing that "any novel is best read as the novelist's reaction to his material" (38), the question remains to be answered what precisely is meant by "the novelist's reaction" and how 'literary value' can be accorded to those works that deserve to be called representative among the one hundred and fifty novels that were published during the last sixty to seventy years.

As her main criteria Mukherjee selects 'technique' and 'theme' in the sense Mark Schorer discussed them in his essay "Technique as Discovery" (1948). While I have no objection to Mukherjee's grouping of novels under topics such as 'The Making of a Nation' or 'East-West Encounter', her use of 'technique', which includes analytical categories like 'point of view', 'plot' and 'character', reduces her procedure to a formalist consideration of a literary work that neglects important contextual aspects like historical and cultural conditions of producing a novel, as well as possible influences from the Indian literary tradition. Also, the criterion 'point of view' may underplay the individual character of a particular work and mislead the critic to judge it more or less exclusively in terms of its technical

competence and excellence. Further, categories like ‘character’ and ‘plot’ applied irrespective of the novels’ Indian social and cultural context may lead to erroneous judgements since their meaning derives from Western perceptions.

Finally, Mukherjee’s methodical approach is no less relativistic than Derrett’s (which she had complained about). While formal criteria are applied to establish whether M.R. Anand succeeds with his characters (which according to Mukherjee he does not), ‘character’ is given a different meaning when applied to Raja Rao’s novels. Here historical and cultural considerations are included in order to appreciate Rao’s achievement. Such procedure does not merely reflect methodological inconsistency but also an ideological bias, since the critic’s negative verdict of Anand’s works relates to her doubt, if not rejection of this writer’s philosophical and social stance of a Western influenced humanist, while the positive judgement of Rao’s works suggests her closeness to Rao’s idealistic philosophy based on the school of Advaita Vedanta.

M.K. Naik’s *Raja Rao* (1972) is the first monograph on a writer who has, over forty years of literary activity, published three novels, a collection of short stories and several essays and sets out to explore why these few works have been acclaimed so highly. Suggesting that Rao is perhaps the most ‘Indian’ of all Indo-English writers, Naik examines what is meant by it. Two approaches can be distinguished. The first chapter deals with the biographical circumstances of Rao’s life and includes a discussion of probable or certain influences on the writer, while the main part of the book is devoted to a detailed analysis of his works according to their years of publication. Naik’s analysis is formalistic and informed by close reading. Categories such as ‘plot’, ‘narrative strategy’, ‘technique’, ‘blend of forms’ reveal the influence of Western critical scholarship, and though he also explores the author’s life, factors of influence and possible models, it remains unanswered whether ‘Indianness’ serves Naik as an historical or a literary category, even if historical and social aspects play a minor role. Thus, the relevance of the Advaita-Vedanta philosophy for Rao is only considered in the context of the structural and formal consequences it has on Rao’s works; the fact that it must be seen at the same time as the ideology of a small élite in India does not bear on the critical evaluation of the author’s novels. Compared with other Indian critics, Naik does not subscribe to the universality of literary norms and standards but prefers an ethnocentric point of view; yet he remains unaware of the fact that ‘Indianness’ also signifies an historical category, which in turn disables

him to recognize the 'ideological' character of Rao's writings. Rather, it seems to be more important to answer the question whether the author succeeded in synthesizing Western and Indian narrative elements and thereby established the genuine Indo-English novel.

Two examples illustrate the questionable assumptions of this view. Comparing Rao's *Kanthapura* with Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara* (1933), Naik points out their distinct differences — although there are thematic similarities — to demonstrate the 'Indian' character of the former novel, the message of which is defined as spiritual and cultural, while Silone's work is dismissed as being purely political. A second example is Naik's discussion of historical influences on Rao and their function in his novels. Mainly those influences are mentioned that have affected the 'Indian' side of Rao's character and psyche, for instance, the author's own strong interest in philosophical speculation and his fascination for women; in other words, the 'Indianness' of Rao's works is explained by the extraordinary 'Indianness' of the writer's psyche, proof of which can be seen in the way Indian culture has influenced him.

M.K. Naik's *Mulk Raj Anand* (1973) is the first comprehensive Indian study of the most productive and versatile Indo-English author. During a career spanning forty years he has written a dozen novels, about forty short stories, numerous essays, books on Indian history, art, and even cooking. This wealth of material, however, is not the only problem facing a critic of Anand's writings. No other Indo-English author has been dealt with more often and more narrow-mindedly by Indian critics because of his strong political and social convictions. Thus, Naik faces a double task. He has to assess Anand's achievement, and he has to deal with the premises of other critics, that is, among others, with methodological and epistemological aspects of literary criticism. Does Naik answer these questions by merely repeating often raised accusations against Anand as a propagandist and as a failed artist? Or does he tackle the problem of art and propaganda in a more basic manner?

Naik uses the same methodical and structural approach as he does in his *Raja Rao*. He starts with the thesis that Anand's writings are governed by the modern Indian writer's central theme: modernity versus tradition. The author's works will be investigated as to "the extent to which he [Anand] comprehends the nature of both and that of the confrontation." (7) No indication is given as to the premises a judgement will be based on, viz. whether Naik will apply only aesthetic criteria or also socio-literary or perhaps even psycho-literary ones. Rather unexpectedly and

fairly early in his assessment, he concludes that Anand's works are of an ambivalent nature — less so in his 'better' novels, but prominent in his weaker ones —, and proof of this, Naik argues, can be found both, in their content and form. The writer, a champion of modernity, is charged with professing an often one-sided view of Indian tradition and of playing down or even overlooking its more positive aspects. Formally speaking, he is criticised for his lack of artistic control due to his reformist zeal. This is noticeable when he interferes in his stories either by way of preaching or by sentimentalizing them. (24)

Naik takes great care to prove his point and, conceding the tenability of his conceptual premises, he presents a convincing and detailed study. For instance, he proceeds more painstakingly in his analyses of plot, character, narrative form and language than Meenakshi Mukherjee does in her book, and his approach is more comprehensive. By contrast with others critics, he arrives at discriminating judgements, for example in the chapters "Two Untouchables: Bakha and Bikhu" and "The Indian Peasant Goes West: The Lal Singh Trilogy". Besides, he follows Anand's dictum that the novel must have a "form which has its own integral pattern." (18) Critic and author also agree that philosophy has to be implicit in a novel while doctrinaire opinions must not be imposed upon it. (18)

Within the frame of reference applied by the critic and keeping in mind that Anand's artistic achievement is being measured by his own categories of the artistically successful novel, Naik's final judgement that the writer's works are characterized by a peculiar ambivalence (23) cannot altogether be refuted. Rather, it is suggested that the problems of Anand's socially committed novels should not be discussed exclusively from an aesthetic perspective but also as to their social function within the context of present day Indian society. This suggests that the meaning of 'tradition' and 'modernity', and exactly what these words stand for, should be examined more closely — which Naik, unfortunately, does not do. On the whole, he is content with referring to those institutionalized forms, patterns of behaviour and thinking that Anand employs to represent tradition and modernity, while the author's own thoughts about them are dealt with only marginally. Naik might argue that he discusses the writer's philosophy in the first chapter of his book calling it humanistic, even if it is eclectically presented. (16) Besides, he accepts the author's view that man's attempts to come close to the ideal of a humanism are faced with numerous barriers, stating that "forces that come in the way [...] are [...] the numerous forms of exploitation of man by man, such as capitalism, colonialism, fascism, feudalism, communalism, communism etc." (17) Still,

apart from the fact that communism is never called a form of exploitation in any of the novels, the barriers cited by Naik are not understood by him as interrelated historical stages. Though Anand may concentrate his stories on colonialism (*Two Leaves and a Bud*) or communalism (*Death of a Hero*), he relates these “forms of exploitation of man by man” to specific historical periods, economic conditions and political systems. Neglecting this point, Naik’s illustrations of modernity and tradition do not altogether convince. Had he understood them as shaping and determining Anand’s writings, his analysis of a single novel would have led him to a more precise understanding of tradition and modernity. To mention just one example. When Naik reproaches Anand for not showing “the inner development” of Munoo in *The Coolie* (45), he overlooks Anand’s intention to demonstrate how ruthlessly Indian caste-society destroys the sensitive psyche and the vitality of a ‘low-caste’ character by not offering him a chance to “develop.”

Naik’s method of treating social conflicts more or less formalistically stands in the way of his dealing overall fairly with Anand’s presentations of historically evolved patterns of social, economic and political suppression and exploitation that affect an individual’s life. Had he taken account of this aspect, Naik’s final view that Anand’s novels repeat and reproduce social and socio-religious conflicts, would have been proved wrong.

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