

Book Review

by

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Bhaduri, Seema. *A Dynamic Modernity: Adaptation and Parody in Six Twentieth Century Indian Novels*. Notion Press. 2022. Pages 477. Rs. 447/-

It is a widely accepted fact that Indian scholarship on the varied aspects of the stream of consciousness narrative mode and its applications in Indian literature, is relatively speaking, not upto the mark. Therefore Dr. Seema Bhaduri's book *A Dynamic Modernity – Adaptation and Parody in Six Twentieth Century Indian Novels* marks a welcome sign of positive change in this direction. The book clearly demonstrates Ms. Bhaduri's deep understanding of her subject. Her interpretation of six critically acclaimed novels from the Bengali, Hindi and Indian English literatures, provides ample evidence of her critical acumen and scholarly training. Very few Indian writers have so far, properly evaluated the significant contributions of the stream of consciousness technique to Indian fiction.

Ms. Bhaduri's book looks closely at the elaborate use of parody in the selected novels. Parody imitates and then critiques the characteristic features of a particular literary work. In this it becomes an inbuilt mirror – of - a - mirror critique of the aesthetic view of life and of its philosophy, as articulated in a given work of art. To a great extent parody works through a whole range of incongruous juxtapositions that end up questioning pertinent categories of literary – cultural assumptions underlying the artwork. The result is a complex intermingling of aesthetic effects that become a running commentary as it were, on the ever-changing dynamics within the given field of art. In the Indian stream of conscious novel, parody became an important tool by means of which authors brought in their regional socio-cultural and literary contexts while portraying the random flow of impressions in the individual characters' minds. In the process they also questioned several entrenched literary and cultural premises underlying Western stream of consciousness novels. Ms. Bhaduri's book thus highlights the numerous conflicts between Western and Indian traditions and literary

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practices that appeared both, in the mental flux within the characters of the Indian novels, and in the respective novelists' field of vision. It draws attention to the novelists' extensive use of psychoanalysis together with existential perceptions as they explored the contemporary Indian reality.

It may be argued that though these novelists employed stream of consciousness as a set of narrative tools, they did not explore the subtler aesthetic dimensions of this mode, as unlike their Western forerunners. This perhaps is because to them neither the intricacies of the mind, nor the artifices of the technique in itself, were the targeted ends. The novelists - Dhurjati Prasad Mukhoipadhyay, Mahasweta Devi, Sacchidanand Vatsyayan Agyeya, Mannu Bhandari, Raja Rao and Anita Desai rejected, for the purpose of avoiding the over-insistent authorial rhetoric, the use of extreme psychological realism to the exclusion of the larger social reality. Instead, they sought to evoke through their characters' subtle, subconscious thoughts and feelings, this larger reality.

The book's main thrust is quite specific - to draw out the range of discourses on tradition and modernity literary and cultural, in each novel. In diverse ways these novels reflect the ordeals of the reflexive consciousness in the individual and the increasing marginalization that such individuals face in a society which is losing hold over moral value systems. Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyay's *Antahsheela* and Mahasweta Devi Bhattacharya's *Baiskoper Baksho* evoke the psychological aspects of a vision and sensibility that characterized the rise of modernization in Bengal. Agyeya's *Shekhar Ek Jivani* Vol. 1 and Mannu Bhandari's *Aap ka Bunti* present the numerous conflicts between conventional society and the sentient individual in the Hindi speaking world. Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* and Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* bring out the many mutually conflicting dimensions of the Indian consciousness in contemporary history.

The Indian novels have been compared broadly with Virginia Woolf's *To the Light House* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, in order to highlight how the Indian novelists, even as they clearly borrowed features of theme, technique and style from these works, altered their content as well as its aesthetic perspective to project the Indian reality. In both sets of fiction, social and psychological realism are blended together largely through private thought processes, i.e., through moods, memories and reveries, dreams and imagination. In

her introductory chapter the writer has discussed the contribution of Sigmund Freud, Henri Louis Bergson, and Mikhail Bakhtin to the origins of this new style of writing in the West. These thinkers had focused on drawing out the conflicting multiplicities of time and reality in the individual's psyche, within the narratives. Indian novelists used these techniques to dramatize the changing modes of consciousness within the character, though they also positioned the character firmly in the larger regional context with all its traditional and historical multiplicities.

The book clearly states that the understanding of the modern is significantly at variance with the conventional conceptions of Western modernism especially in the field of art. Broadly, while the modern western vision emphasizes the individual's liberty from all socio - traditional constraints the Indian novels have emphasized the need within the individual, to attain liberty also from the shackles of subjectivity and memory that bind one to a limited view of truth. This gives to the Indian novels, a transcendental dimension.

The book is interdisciplinary in nature; it draws in both Indian and Western approaches to existence, psychology, history, and art. It throws light on the ontological dimensions of the Indian myths and traditions appearing in the novels. In these narratives the issue of identity - cognitive, moral and aesthetic, is seen to rise above all judgmental categories, to metamorphose as it were, onto a transcendental plane through a luminous force of perception. Their perceptions on human identity repeatedly parody the Western cult of individualism. There clearly appears among these writers, a degree of implicit consensus on the idea of modernity. This broad consensus is also reflected in their larger reception of the Western perceptions on man, art and society.

This book illustrates how these novelists had mastered the intricacies of the new technique and employed them with characteristic aplomb to explore and lay out for the first time in modern Indian literature, the subconscious world of the individual. With exacting technical scrutiny they produced works with the most satisfying content, thickness and resonance that reverberate with deepening layers of meaning. Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyay's autobiographical novel *Antasheela* analyzes its material – the subconscious conflicts within a highly learned Westernized Indian intellectual, rigorously. The value and the quality of the experiences that it depicts are not defined by any appended comment or moral epithet, but by the very texture of its style. In this it echoes Joyce's *A Portrait* where a

young artist's growing alienation from his environment is explored and evaluated through three different narrative styles, as Stephen Dedalus moves from childhood through boyhood into maturity. In Joyce's novel the opening pages resemble the stream of consciousness of his later work, *Ulysses*. The environment impinges directly on the consciousness of the infant and child, and the response is a strangely new, budding world of the mind which does not yet subject anything to questioning, selection, or judgment. This style changes very soon as the boy begins to explore his surroundings. As his sensuous experience of the world gathers strength it takes on heavier and heavier rhythms and a fuller and fuller body of sensuous detail, until it reaches a crescendo of romantic opulence in the emotional climaxes which mark Stephen's rejection of conventional values. What has happened to Stephen is of course, a progressive alienation from the life around him as he began to face it, and by the end of the novel the alienation is complete. In essence Stephen's alienation, like Khagenbabu's in the early pages of *Antahsheela*, is a denial of the human environment; it is a loss. The austere discourse of the final section, abstract and almost wholly without any sensuous detail or rhythm, tells us of that loss. It is a loss so great that the bare prose-like texture of the notation here suggests an emotional aridity.

Khagenbabu's thoughts and feelings represent the modernist Indian mind and sensibility which explores its own nature as closely as it does the world around. This world includes both Western and Indian traditions of thought, as well as their concrete social realities. Though he is obsessed with the ideal of total detachment from bodily wants and from society in his quest for wholeness and meaning, Khagenbabu's scrutinizing vision exposes the ironic conflicts between intellectual idealism and natural demands in his own character. Ultimately, he comes to realize that rather than repressive intellectuality, only a harmonious interrelation of one's higher and lower needs through art can lead to one's transformation. Based on this realization he evolves his personal theory of art. This theory is far more comprehensive in its vision and its range of applications than is Stephen's in *A Portrait*. Khagenbabu's character as well as his theory mark a remarkable point of achievement in modernist Indian aesthetics.

Khagenbabu and Stephen also share several character-traits. Both of them "are ambitious, idealistic, dreamy lovers of learning, but self-conscious, rather haughty, sensual on the subconscious plane." They are envious and disdainful with their lovers. Both reject the

calls of society, nation and religion in their pursuit of freedom and wholeness. Stephen moves away from family, society and nation to develop himself as an artist. Khagenbabu too moves away initially with the purpose of gaining independence, but when he realizes that art is all about building connections and harmony in life, he invites Romola the lady he loves, to join him in Kashi where he now lives, for a life of meaningful companionship rather than marriage. Stephen comes upon no such realization.

The second Bengali novel discussed in this book is Mahasweta Devi's *Baishkoper Baksho*. It portrays impressionistically the seven decades of socio-cultural and political turmoil during the independence struggle, that had deeply affected the world of an aristocratic community in Bengal. This long time span is captured within the narrative time of a few hours of an evening through the memories and reveries of some elderly characters. The central metaphor in this narrative is the cinematograph, an instrument used by Western Stream of Consciousness novelists to symbolize the way in which mind and memory work through the association of ideas. In the Bengali novel, all the memories coursing through the minds of the eight characters persons who had assembled at the evening's get-together appear 'like snapshots on a cinematographic film'. In the novel an old cinematograph which had been the now dead Neli's plaything, captures in the photographs that it contains, the many undercurrents of thought and feeling that make the memories. These memories, however, entrap the characters in their dead past. It is only Shelimashi the sixty-year-old beautiful protagonist who succeeds in transcending the blinding grip of her memories into the full awareness of present freedom, and to exercise her freewill.

The book brings out the host of similarities between Woolf's novels and Mahasweta Devi's work. Both novelists had used multiple perspectives to build their major characters. As a result, the different aspects of these characters continued to emerge in random ways through other characters' memories of them. This technique imbues the texts with a fluid texture, the characters keep evolving until the very end of the narratives. Again, Clarissa the protagonist in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Shelimashi, both are deeply obsessed with their past lovers whom each meets after a long-time span at the get-together or party that each one hosts. Shelimashi's lover Kapil had suddenly married her younger sister Beli, plunging the rest of the family into despair, and the two had gone away twenty years ago. It may be asserted that her range of experiences and feelings far surpass those of Woolf's Clarissa and Mrs. Ramsay.

These English protagonists suffer a spiritual void despite their unique social status and yearn for death. On the contrary Shelimashi who has suffered much more than they, is helped by Debasish the poor teacher and painter, to discover a new, transcendental vision of life in which the past is integrated meaningfully with the present in the “larger world of ethereal consciousness”.

Woolf’s ideas on art and the artistic perspective are reflected in Mahasweta Devi’s novel. Debasish like Woolf’s Lily Briscoe uses the creative imagination and the detached perspective to arrive upon the intuitive sense of balance that carries the vision of truth. In these texts clock time is replaced by the intuitive sense of duration as felt through moods, feelings and awareness which are infinitely elastic. Mahasweta Devi’s artistic blending of moods, memories and atmosphere, echoes Woolf’s. Both these novelists’ concerns with art and with time reflect a spiritual dimension that in these texts, blends the aesthetic with the holistic vision. Debasish’s vision of life and his applications of art parody those of Lily Briscoe whose character had obviously influenced his.

Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan Agyeya’s autobiographical novel *Shekhar: Ek Jeevani* had been a landmark in the history of the modern Hindi novel. He was the precursor of the modernist experimental movement, *Pryogvaad*. Following Agyeya, other eminent writers like Ilachandra Joshi, Jainendra Kumar and Mannu Bhandari had started the *Nayi Kahani* Movement. They had adapted cinematic and stream of consciousness techniques to effectively co-relate both present and past for unifying the thematic design of their narratives. *Shekhar Ek Jeevani* builds on Agyeya’s personal life, the rallying point of which was his experience of imprisonment in the Lahore Jail for seditionist activities against the British Government. The narrator-protagonist Shekhar revives his past by means of memories and reflections, looking for the essential “meaning of life from the casual point of view”. Even as child Shekhar had been a rebel and a visionary. To him, “rebels are born, not made”, and rebellion exposes the ugly truth of religious bigotry, hypocrisy and social evils. He attributes to his cousin Shashi who personally had rebelled against male dominion in matrimonial life, and had supported Shekhar’s own development, the subject-hood of his novel. This was a major act of subversion of the idea of subjectivity, of cloistered individualism, in Western fiction, particularly in its Stream of Consciousness novels.

Unlike Joyce's narrator in *A Portrait*, Agyeya "does not seek to control the narrative". Instead, he allows his character to evolve freely, and watches him grow much like Pirandello whose influence Agyeya acknowledges. Both the novels deal with issues of identity, political slavery and corruption. Both protagonists suffer from libidinal hungers, guilt and repression and the growing awareness of social hypocrisies. They are led to rebellion against conventional notions of art and beauty, morality and religion. But unlike Stephen, Shekhar is fired by the zeal to uplift society's downtrodden. Literature and aesthetics are not his concern. He wants to nurture the spirit to rebellion, to pass it on to future generations, to keep the flame of justice burning. In this zeal, he rejects the narcissistic subjectivity of Stephen's kind, opting instead for sheer self-command and the will to fight for social reformation.

Agyeya acknowledged that T.S. Eliot's concept of impersonality had shaped the thematic organization of his narrative. Pondering on his childhood, the narrator slowly arrives upon "self-understanding" and the apperception of the deep iniquities in society. Herein lay the roots of his modernist rebellion again convention in pursuit of an egalitarian social order. Ms. Bhaduri's penetrating observations on the novel, her approach to the complex issue of subjectivity, her elaborate discussion on the uniqueness with which the stream of conscious narrative techniques have been used here, as well as her style of presentation are not only scholarly, but they make a very impressive contribution to the study of Hindi literature as well.

The second Hindi novel to be taken up in this book is Mannu Bhandari's *Aap ka Bunt*. She belonged to the prominent group of Hindi novelists who were called "Metropolitan Intellectuals". While their fictional works focused on the subjective and reflective dimensions of life, they also experimented with fantasy to project the schizoid mindsets thriving in conventional society. Bhandari's radical views and innovative narrative techniques had made a significant contribution to the *Nayi Kahani* movement. The much-acclaimed *Aap Ka Bunt* deals with the agonizing dilemma of a nine-year-old boy traumatized by the marital differences between his parents. In her Foreword, the author introduces the social agenda of her narrative, highlighting the damaging impact of parental disharmony upon children. The proud and egotistic Bunt is torn in by the recurring sense of being "unwanted and rootless" in a breaking family. The tales of the ogress Sonal Rani who would change appearances and eat up her own children, become to him a metaphor for his

own mother who had been detaching him from herself. He fantasizes on thrilling imaginary experiences of cycling through bridges, valleys and hills to meet sadhus and with their magic flying scandals, go to his father. But his over-protective mother doesn't allow him even to go outside the garden-gate.

Bunty's desires reflect a Freudian angle. Pampered excessively by his lone mother, and not allowed to play with other boys, he carries strong oedipal traits and feels that he is the man of the house. But he deeply loves his father too. The narrative portrays impressionistically all his innocent, ambitious yet failing efforts to reconcile his parents. His mother's remarriage and the disturbing sexual sights in the new house aggravate his sense of alienation, plunging him increasingly, into despair. Ms. Bhaduri highlights the subtle concussion of the subconscious and unconscious forces of fear and loneliness, hope, guilt and repression, wrath, hate and libidinal desire in the child's mind. Ajay's taking the already unstable Bunty away with him to Calcutta, and then on to some children's hostel, are increasingly tragic moves pushing the once bright and spirited boy into schizophrenia.

Both Bunty and Joyce's Stephen are very close to their mothers. Both are infatuated with beauty, flowers and women. Craving for knowledge, and egotists by nature they live in private dreams and fantasies of hope, love, power, and fear too. Bunty is a remarkable painter; Stephen loves the visual magic of colours. But Stephen's world evolves through legendary characters of history and myth, through success and approbation; Bunty's talents are successively marred by indifferent circumstances which bring emotional insecurity, loneliness, disillusionment and ultimately, the loss of his dearly loved identity. It strikes the child that he is a mere toy being jostled between his estranged parents. Only, he wonders to whom exactly he belongs.

Mannu Bhandari uses the techniques of stream of consciousness superbly to portray Bunty's failing mental powers, and his agonizing awareness of it all. The pattern of the novel is textured with extreme delicacy, his past fused with his present through a variety of persuasive devices of narratology. The novelist paints verbally, the widening discord between mother and son. Neither of them is aware of what the other is feeling, and so the discord reaches snapping point. The reference in this book to William Faulkner's device of using symbols as "substitutes for rationally formulated ideas" is remarkable and pertinent, particularly regarding the bottles of cosmetics standing on Bunty's mother's dressing table.

The child attributes to them the pernicious magic with which his mother changes her appearances, like Sonal Rani. Full credit to Ms. Seema Bhaduri for her lucid analysis of the text. The style of her assessment is carefully cadenced and at times, almost poetic.

The fourth chapter of this book deals with two literary masterpieces in Indian Writing in English. Dr. Bhaduri's thesis is that the Indian writer in English can retain his identity only by transcreating the Indian ethos in an idiom independent of the Englishman's, by suffusing his creation with native colours and rhythms. *The Serpent and the Rope* is a classic metaphysical novel, a brilliant, artistic exposition of the Advaita of Sri Sankara in the context of present life. The protagonist Ramaswamy looks at both self and world in terms of the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta which denies that the dualism of the material world is reality. Rama's talks and reflections on the nature of reality comprise the content of the narrative. Rama tries to transcend the subjective divide between his self and the outer world by rising to the impersonal plane of experience. He dwells on the nature of the Supreme Self, on the mysteries of Creation, destiny, death, and Nirvana. He explains the dualistic character of bourgeois Puritanism, Buddhism and Marxism dwelling on their emphasis on the relative and the illusory. Only the Vedanta, he claims, explains the ultimate Reality.

While Rama's relations with his wife Madeleine cool off due to their basic cultural differences, Savithri becomes Rama's soulmate because the self-other divide that comprises Madelaine's worldview, does not exist in her view of things. Rama is in fact a slave to phenomenology. He has lent his soul to the worldly aspects of Madeleine and Savithri and all that they represent. Though a wanderer essentially, he is thus bonded to maya. Disenchanted in having failed both Madeleine and Savithri in different ways, he feels the severe pressure to transcend his shortcomings, the urgent need for a redeemer, a Guru who could lead him to liberation. He is looking for the ultimate Truth, the simple white rope of life that under influence of maya, appears to be the serpent of myriad qualities. The analogy of the serpent and the rope, derived from the Vedanta, illustrates how in ordinary life, the relative masks the Absolute, the illusion hides the Reality, the shadow appears for the Substance.

The Serpent and the Rope is a masterpiece of narration. Dramatic interest in the novel lies in the writer's building up of the psychology of the major characters through imagery, symbol, and myth, such that these characters come to acquire a transcendental dimension of

being. The narrative patterns and techniques are drawn from the puranas and from the stream of consciousness novels as well.

The next text in English, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, is about the young Maya's intense emotional suffering, her hallucinations and schizophrenia that have their origins in her childhood with its repressed passions and feelings. The memory of the dreadful astrologer who had predicted the death of one of the spouses in the fourth year of their marriage, had weakened her sensibilities. The neglect that she suffers at the hands of her elderly husband Gautama, and finally, the death of her dog Toto, her only companion so far, all go on to trigger a chain of morbid, volatile reactions to understand the origins of which she resorts to her usual practice of "furious pillow – beating" that tires her restless mind and body out, so that repressed memories emerge onto the planes of consciousness. This battle between the conscious and the subconscious impulses planes leads to dark, often unconscious desires surfacing on her mind. They begin to influence the lonely girl's thought and action. Macabre images of Toto's rotting corpse, of bodies bathing in warm blood, of nocturnal snakes, hounding drumbeats, nightly shrieks of peacocks, and of the sinister, watchful eye of the lizard on the wall, all reflect her growing neurosis. The ghastly colours of sky and vegetation appearing to her eyes remind one of similar colours into the Lighthouse where they indicate an overhanging sense of violence, death and decay. In both texts these images reveal the "irruptions from the preconscious".

The arrival of Gautama's mother and sister revives Maya's spirits. The old woman was "a pillar of support" in living, an anchor much unlike her son. But after they leave, Maya's subconscious intentions override her will; her killer instinct becomes stronger as she places all blame on Gautama and craves for liberation from him. Her schizoid furies are finally unleashed. She cajoles him to the roof top from where in maddening fury and glee she pushes him down the parapet wall.

The novel makes a marvelous use of the stream of conscious narrative devices to project the progressive subordination of rational impulses to subconscious promptings, ending in devastating consequences in a context that is clearly contemporary. Maya, like Mrs. Ramsay and Clarissa, has realized the "inadequacy of human relationships". Rich in emotion and in artistic tendencies, these fine ladies are incapable of abstract intellectual thinking. At the same time, Maya resembles Woolf's Septimus Smith who too is a highly sensitive person

and to whom nothing matters more than love, beauty and harmony. Their mental derangement stems from abusive external agencies. Both novels illustrate Woolf's view that life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged. Maya's neurotic condition may be likened to Woolf's idea of a semitransparent envelope surrounding her being from the beginning of the narrative to the end. Both novelists provide picturesque verbal and syntactical approximations of the mind in a state of flux, one which restlessly drives itself to emptiness and extinction. Both of them succeed in imposing a rigorous aesthetic order and form on this complex psychic content.

Criticism of the Indian novel in English could be said to have oscillated until very recently, between mere textual explication often exasperatingly banal, and the audacious advancing of ponderous claims with characteristic complacency. Explanations and clichés rather than scrutiny and critical acumen came to abound. The situation however is rapidly changing, owing mainly to the greater experimentation with new outlooks found in the Indian novel in English today. There is more of systematic survey of content, and of candid appraisal. This is reflected in the present book which in many ways counts as being a representative one. The author's meticulous treatment of themes and discourses in all of these novels exemplifies the essential nature of aesthetic evaluation.

While the overall usefulness of the book is un-deniable, its logic of being comprehensive is sustained by the criteria of her selection of the texts. Each one of these six novels represents as Dr. Bhaduri herself notes, some of the most pertinent concerns of modernist Indian writing. Well-researched, well-organized, and well-documented, this book throws light on certain very crucial and currently relevant aspects of Bengali, Hindi and Indian English novels in a manner that is both lucid and scholarly. I am sure it would make a valuable addition to the University and College libraries both in India and abroad.