AT THE RECEIVING END: ECONOMIC AND CASTE MARGINALISATIONS IN THE INDIAN MAN BOOKER NOVELS

SHAHNAZ MANSINGH
Research Scholar,
Lucknow University
E-Mail: shahnazmansingh@gmail.com

DR. FATIMA RIZVI
Associate Professor,
Lucknow University

ABSTRACT

Four Indian writers, (two of them debutawnt novelists) from a previously colonized country, took on the Western literary establishment on its own turf and wrested the Booker Prize from English writers writing in their own language. They were Salman Rushdie in 1981 with *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy in 1997 with *The God of Small Things*, Kiran Desai with *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006 and Aravind Adiga with *The White Tiger* in 2008.

The above writers have also strongly espoused the cause of the voiceless and the marginalized who are often victims of social taboos and gender constructs, wounded by the environment that has nurtured them. This paper examines how the texts treat economic and caste marginalisations at all levels in society and the exclusion/alienation of the powerless individual by an entrenched and hegemonic power structure.

It also considers the various social structures that impinge on the life of the individual at the social, global, colonial and familial level come under scrutiny with particular emphasis on how Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga espouse the cause of the marginalized and the powerless facing indescribable injustices, at the hands of a ruthless power construct and subvert dominant western perception through their innovative and inventive use of the language of the colonisers.

Keywords: Economic and caste marginalisation, Indian Recipients of the Booker Prize, social taboos, hegemonic power constructs.

AT THE RECEIVING END:

"Most people in the world are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female, Non-Christian and do not speak English." [1]

These words by Audre Lorde in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* could well be a metaphor for India as a microcosm of the world, where caste and class prevailed in the past (and still does) to the extent that the higher castes and classes, a fraction of the populace, dictate the appalling treatment of the lower castes who are indigent, ineffectual and increasingly marginalised.

In this paper, the various social structures that impinge on the life of the individual at the social, global, colonial and familial level come under scrutiny with particular emphasis on how Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga espouse the cause of the marginalized and the powerless facing indescribable injustices, at the hands of a ruthless power construct and subvert dominant western perception through their innovative and inventive use of the language of the colonisers.

The above writers could be said to have wrested the Booker Prize from English writers writing in their own language. Salman Rushdie received the Booker in 1981 for *Midnight's Children*, Arundhati Roy in 1997 for *The God of Small Things*, Kiran Desai for *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006 and Aravinda Adiga for *The White Tiger* in 2008.

These Indian recipients of the Man Booker have broken most paradigms set by other writers of Indian English literature. Their books are a reflection of life at its most real, a no holds barred glimpse into the existence of the people they write about. Nothing is taboo here. Whether it is the thoughts and prejudices of the characters under scrutiny, the places and the circumstances that give them shape or their interpersonal relationships. Power structures impinge on the individual at all levels, creating marginalised groups that are often ethnicity based in other lands or caste and religion based at the community stage, or the powerless and the insignificant at family level. Marginality is endemic and the authors in question champion the cause of the individual, brutalised and marginalised by power constructs. It could be low caste Velutha, the twins Rahel and Estha or even "divorced, after a love marriage", Ammu, Balram Halwai, or Panna Lal the cook and Biju his son. And they are all at the receiving end of society, bruised by an insensate system they are powerless to change. They live their small lives and die their small deaths, unmourned but not unnoticed as these writers provide a voice to the displaced groups silenced by privilege and the politics of power.

It is universally acknowledged that the hegemonic English literary canon continues to marginalise colonial and post colonial literatures even today, years after Coloniality and Postcoloniality have lost their relevance due to the dismantling of 'empire'. One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language, as the imperial education system installs a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm and marginalises all variants as inferior. "Language" then "becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established" write Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin [2]. Therefore, in order to perpetrate this standard indefinitely, the "English" Language was used by the colonisers as part of the civilizing process, to educate the 'noble savage' and became an instrument of oppression, as indigenous literatures perceived as inferior were suppressed and an entirely alien ethos thrust upon the natives.

In urban and rural India, language is the clearest marker of the difference between the socio-economic and class status among diverse population groups. In urban centers, speaking the language of the colonizers or not delineates one's standing in society. In rural areas the same principle applies to chaste Hindi or Urdu versus the regional dialects of that particular place. While the speakers and writers of Hindi and Urdu have had access to some sort of formal

education, those with little, irregular or no schooling at all are confined within the regional linguistic straightjacket.

In the social fabric that characterises India, where the novelists under study have based their works, despite the changes wrought by modernization and industrialization and the prolific burgeoning of English medium schools, the caste system today continues to be as entrenched and as impenetrable as ever, specially between the lowest castes (Shudras and untouchables) and the upper three castes where the boundaries may have blurred a little.

The texts we will discuss are rife with examples. So for every Chacko, Oxford-educated land-owner, dilettante Marxist, quoter of long texts without any apparent rhyme or reason, balsa aeroplane decimator , permitted excesses and eccentricities nobody else was, there is a Velutha, self-educated, talented, intelligent and extremely hard-working, but at the end of the day, first and foremost a Paravan with a "particular Paravan smell" [3]. Similarly Kiran Desai's judge, Jemubhai Patel, has his parallel, in the cook-- poor, hapless, barely educated and referred to throughout the book as just that.... "*the* cook". His name Panna Lal, crops up but incidentally. Indian History, before independence is replete with examples of illiterate Indian cooks, who made the most astounding and elaborate English repasts for their British Sahibs and Memsahibs in the most rudimentary kitchens without even being able to rightly pronounce the names of what they cooked. Panna Lal, in a similar trope rattles off the names of the English puddings that he makes in a meaningless litany without quite understanding what he is saying:

"Bananafritterpineapplefritterapplefritterapplesurpriseapplecharlotteapplebettybreadandbutter jamtartcaramelcustardtipsypuddingrumtumpuddingjamrolypoly . . . ." [4]

The colonizers imbued with a sense of their own superiority rarely stooped to learn the savage tongue while the colonized not only accepted the predominance of the alien tongue but also recognized colonial culture as superior. This is apparent in the cook's placid acceptance of the judge's ascendancy as his employer and master.

Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* focuses on the struggle of the marginal man trying to find his place in the history of the country, in the tumultuous years of Independence and the ensuing partition. In fact born in India, but living in Britain at the time the novel was written, Rushdie himself seems to embody the identity of the marginal man as he straddles two worlds. In his own words, "Our identity is at once plural and partial" [5]

His hero, Saleem whose fate is tied inextricably to the identity of the nation, since his birth at the stroke of midnight, at the exact time India attains Independence , has no choice in the matter. He is irretrievably bound, along with the 'One Thousand' others who share his destiny and are equally marginalized. Their lives reflect the turbulence their country will undergo and they are powerless to resist the "benighted moment [by which] he had been mysteriously hand-cuffed to history, [his] destinies indissolubly chained to those of [his] country" [6].

Ramram Seth's prophesies as regards Saleem mirror this and turn out to be completely accurate "' A son, Sahiba, who will never be older than his motherland. . . Friends mutilate him – blood will betray him! . . . . Spittoons will brain him – doctors will drain him – jungle will claim him – wizards reclaim him! . . . .' 'He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! *And he will die . . . before he is dead*'" [7].

Rushdie is one writer who constantly focuses on the economic and cultural disparity in India. However, he has come in for criticism because the other classes and castes appear rather fleetingly in his novels, [8] unless they are incarnated as lower-middle class women with whom the narrator is having an affair. Saleem in *Midnight's Children* finds his muse in Padma, an illiterate, poor, thick-waisted, 'hairy-of-forearm' superstitious pickle maker. Her name itself derives from what Saleem refers to as 'The one who Possesses Dung' [9]. She along with Tai, the boat man appears, to quote Khair, "as sort of polemic devices to justify the narrator's cosmopolitanism, never managing to annex the narrative". Padma is essentially a repository for his stories and though feisty, with interjections and opinions and demands, she is merely a foil to his intellectual prowess. Her advice goes unheeded, her demands never acceded to. She is one of the illiterate masses, with absurd biases and superstitions and no notion of history [10]. "She can't read ...and dislikes other people knowing anything she doesn't" [11]. She is one of the masses, to be glossed over, whose closeness and importance to the narrator, has no effect on the narrative.

In fact Saleem too, (embodying the fate of a crumbling, beleaguered nation, beset by the Emergency and the wars with neighbouring Pakistan), ends up as a marginalised figure in spite of his prodigious memory and enormous capacity for story-telling. But Saleem compares his linguistic abilities to elephantiasis because of the sheer volume of the verbiage he emits. This 'excess' is a 'tactic' of resistance [12] and Saleem's inordinate verbosity, is used as a means to resist the standard Metropolitan Language.

In the novel Rushdie's somewhat unusual devices like subverting History, peppering the text with unglossed Hindi and Urdu words , making deliberate factual errors, and a complete and spectacular disregard for every last 'writerly' convention make the very act of writing it an act of subversion. As Rushdie put it somewhat gleefully, "The Empire was writing back to the centre with a vengeance" [13]

"My aesthetic position is one of eternal confrontation", Arundhati Roy once averred while referring to her writings as "the conflict between power and powerlessness". This commitment to the marginal reflects perfectly in her Booker Prize winning novel. This is evident in the title of the book, *The God of Small Things*, as the writer bats for the "small" side, or the poor, the inarticulate, the insignificant and the oppressed. In the novel Roy makes the "Big Man the Laltain" and the "Small Man the Mombatti" [14].

In her revolutionary text she tackles head on the perils of globalization and its impact on older cultures and how it changes the very framework of society. The altered fabric of the Meenachal river, which once had the power to evoke fear, into 'unadulterated factory effluents', the conversion of the History House into an exotic hotel, with 'truncated Kathakali performances', these to Roy are "History and Literature enlisted by commerce" [15]. A symbolic, "Kurtz and Karl Marx joining palms to greet rich guests as they stepped off the

boat" [16], they become a trope for the exploitation of the marginal in a bid to promote the 'other' as a marketable tool for consumption by global hegemonies.
It is an abiding distress at these exclusions and a smoldering anger against the hegemonic institutions of power that has driven Roy on to write with enduring concern about the marginalized individual in his unequal fight against the traditional impositions of such authority. Ammu, the novel's protagonist, is the "very figure of the excluded other" [17]. "An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" [18]. Achingly vulnerable, ". . . a *divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage" . . . [19] tyrannised by a ruthlessly patriarchal father, Ammu dares to challenge and transgress the immutable 'Love Laws' at great personal cost. She has developed, ". . . a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big" [20].

The conflict in the novel is between the individual pitted against an ossified social power structure with the individual invariably at the receiving end. Mammachi, systematically abused by her husband, is casually dispossessed of her pickle factory, (that she has run as a profitable enterprise for years) by her son whose special "Man's Needs" she caters to unquestioningly. Quiescent and accepting of the patriarchal mind set, indeed a part of it, "Her tolerance for "Men's Needs" as far as her son was concerned. . . ." [21] is transformed into an immutable fury at her daughter's perceived transgressive sexual (mis)conduct.

The family, i.e. Pappachi, Mammachi, Chako, Baby Kochamma typify the restrictive social strictures that surround any individual (in this case Ammu, and by extension her two children Rahel and Estha) who attempts to break out of the mould of these stultifying social parameters. Of mixed parentage the twins are "Half-Hindu hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would ever marry" [22] and have no "Locusts Stand I". Pappachi who wears "khaki jodhpurs though he had never ridden a horse in his life", embodies in his "ivory handled crop carrying" [23] person, the colonial oppressor stereotype. The State in the novel is represented by Inspector Thomas Matthew, and 'old comrade' K.N.M. Pillai who were, ". . . men whom childhood had abandoned without a trace. Both in their own way truly, terrifyingly adult. They looked out into the world and never wondered how it worked, because they knew. *They* worked it" [24]. The feeble rebellion of Ammu and Velutha disintegrates when pitted against their wily, implacable ruthlessness, like waves on jagged rocks.

Primarily a study of diasporic writing Kiran Desai's novel *The Inheritance of Loss* engages with multifarious issues, not least taking up the cause of the marginalized oppressed by a system they are powerless to change. Traversing across states and countries Desai's book moves backwards and forth between time and space in seamless transition. It portrays with candid clarity the lives of two generations of a family and the people who touch their lives. But the story is essentially the study of loss. The losses that the marginalised are well aware of like the pain of losing loved ones, their country, their means of sustenance, their place in the scheme of things or saddest of all perhaps, their very sense of self and belonging.

Desai tackles expertly the lingering effects of colonialism on those who chose to leave India and on those who elected to remain behind. At one end of the spectrum among those who did leave (for a time) is the retired judge, Jemubhai Popatlal Patel. Cambridge educated, member of the august Indian Civil Service, but permanently scarred by his rejection in the country he held so dear, "the land of hope and glory", and by the very people he looked up to as icons. He exemplifies the racial hegemony of the conquering West for the colonial East and his unrequited Anglophilia has condemned him to a lifetime of loneliness and self-hatred. He continues to live in his crumbling old mountain home, built by a Scotsman, and struggles to maintain a suitably Anglicised lifestyle in the manner of those ". . . ridiculous Indians who couldn't get rid of what they had broken their souls to learn" [25]

At the other end of the spectrum from the judge is another of Desai's protagonists who chose to immigrate in the hope of a better future--- Biju, the cook's son. Living miserably In Manhattan as an illegal alien, treated abominably by successive employers, moving from one damp, rat-infested basement and one lowly job to another, he epitomises the marginal adrift in an alien country, an immigrant diminished and dispossessed of all he holds dear.
"Biju at the Le colonial for the authentic colonial experience.
On top, rich colonial, and down below, poor native. Colombian, Tunisian, Ecuadorian, Gambian [26].

Having already inherited a loss of mammoth proportions with the death of her parents, and she then loses Gyan to this unbridgeable alienation and the class difference between their families. Although her motifs are gentler than Roy's or Adiga's Desai has portrayed with amazing sensitivity the lives of the marginal across a varied spectrum, exiles in their own land, aliens abroad, strangers to their loved ones and sadly hardly familiar to their own selves. Adiga's The White Tiger is based in Dark India, and is a severe indictment of the way the rich treat the poor. With the use of the epistolary technique, Adiga uses the voice of the narrator to speak of the thousand besetting ills that plague the India of today, notwithstanding its dizzying, hurtling dash towards urbanization and modernity. He speaks of the obscenely wealthy, the excruciatingly poor, and the insuperable disparity between the two.

In fact Adiga's unrelenting focus in this almost subversive text is on the staggering reality of a nation in its unremitting march towards urbanization and progress and the startling dichotomy that confronts it as its rural face. This is the face of the 'other' India peopled by an increasingly marginalised class, facing incredible rural and urban poverty, an escalating disparity between them and their unfeeling wealthy compatriots and the deeply entrenched and trenchant caste system which works as a further tool for exploitation. Adiga makes it very clear in the beginning of the novel itself that, "India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of Darkness" [27].

This is the world then that nurtures Balram Halwai son of a T.B. infested rickshaw-puller straight from the 'heart of Darkness'. It is a pitiless nursery, where patients die from lack of

medical care, where teachers don't teach, where landlords and politicians brutalise the hapless in their usual exploitative way and the marginalised and poor get ever more destitute. Adiga uses the analogy of a Rooster Coop to illustrate the lives of the impoverished poor and their passive acceptance of the fate that their lords and masters have delineated for them. In the words of Balram Halwai, "The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers around them. They know they're next. Yet, they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop.The very same thing is done with human beings in this country" [28].

However the hero of novel, *The White Tiger*, aka Balram Halwai, uses his wits to not only get out of the coop, but claws his way to the top after murdering his employer Ashok. Things are changing in India-- that is what Adiga would have his reader know. So, the novel captures "something new" on the subcontinent, a stirring, a glimmer of the refusal by the poor to passively accept the fate their masters have ordained for them. Adiga's India is a vast dystopian entity lumbering about its business while just beneath the surface a sleeping giant, is slowly coming awake primed and ready for battle.

The four texts we have considered in the above chapter fulfill the above paradigms in their fierce advocacy of the marginal, not patronisingly as the exotified 'other', but as a challenge to the defining, predominant centre and as a nucleus of resistance to standard social norms and practices. As Michael Focault puts it, in his celebrated essay Rituals of Exclusion "My problem is essentially the definition of the implicit systems in which we find ourselves prisoners; what I would like to grasp is the system of limits and exclusion which we practice without knowing it; I would like to make the cultural unconscious apparent" [29].

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