

Metaphors of Dislocations: Renewal of Spirit Sought

J. K. VERMA

Abstract. This paper critically examines the trajectory of the post-Independence Indian English novel, arguing that while the genre has attained significant success in representing socio-political realities—such as gender, displacement, urban alienation, and postcolonial identity—it has largely neglected the deeper spiritual and metaphysical dimensions intrinsic to Indian literary tradition. Drawing upon the insights of Carl Jung, Sri Aurobindo, Irving Babbitt, Rabindranath Tagore, and T. S. Eliot, the study interrogates the predominance of surface realism and immediacy in contemporary fiction. It contends that although modern Indian novels effectively portray the “metaphors of dislocation,” they rarely offer a vision capable of spiritual renewal. By revisiting the indigenous paradigm of *sādhana*, wherein the writer functions as a seer, the paper proposes a reintegration of transcendental consciousness into literary practice. Such a reorientation is essential not only for aesthetic enrichment but also for addressing the ethical and existential crises of modern humanity. The paper ultimately advocates for a synthesis of the temporal and the transcendental as the defining feature of a truly “Indian” novel.

Keywords : *Sādhana*; dislocation, transcendentalism; ethical criticism; Indianness.

Psychologist Carl Jung once said that “the renewal of society depends upon the renewal of the spirit.” It foregrounds the central concern of this paper: the necessity of spiritual awakening in literary creation (Jung 112). It is not only the renewal that is needed but also an awakening. It is a tragedy that creators have lost their sensitivity to literature, especially the Post-Independence Indian English Novel, which still has to cover a distance that begins from where it becomes aware of religion as basic to a higher potential. It is the height of originality. The genre has still to

come out from the state of “triviality” of the immediate. If we look at works produced in the recent past, we can see a focus on simplicity, visibility, and true love. For real change, writers must approach a universal mission, an odyssey in the spiritual search. The true writer sees things organically and perceives a purpose to life. We will seldom find such a standard work in which the cultural traditions merge. Literature does not find an adequate response to human concerns, and the self remains alien. It takes time to live a life of dignity and inner strength to restore our values. The lack of depth, the thematic concerns, superficial treatment, and immediate concern pervade the texture of novels. Very few writers transcend these boundaries, having a mature vision for creative exploration in transcending the boundary of time and place, of physical or metaphysical, instead of romantic dreaming, which is supposed to offer answers and creative solutions to the complex challenges of living. It is hard to find a single Indian English novel today that is unique, ethically vibrant, and spiritually intensifying. We have become almost one-dimensional. Despite its thematic expansion and stylistic sophistication, it is still far away from this deeper imperative. The post-Independence Indian English novel, while vibrant in its engagement with social realities, often remains confined to what may be termed the “triviality of the immediate,” lacking the transcendental vision necessary for enduring artistic significance.

The paper tries to have a judicious survey of the current scenario of the Indian English novel and humbly appeals that if literature is life, if literature is society, then why does it fail to solve the psychic problems, the emotional stirrings of an individual? Why doesn't it go beyond the immediate? Why doesn't it strive for the apprehension of truth? The paper does not make a case that literature should be a religious text; the paper upholds that Indianness itself lies in religiosity, integration, completeness, union, and finally salvation. Through the medium of creative writing, the author is leaving the mark of authenticity through literary explorations so that the great themes for which India is known for ages, are not neglected.

The success of the modern Indian novel is celebrated with the articulation and assertion of feminism, exploration of socio-economic problems, delineation of urbanization, elucidation of displacement, description of political issues, effects of East-West encounters, etc. “These events,” to quote Prof. R. K. Gupta, “at first made a tentative appearance,

have acquired a new energy, a new shape and form, sometimes new content, and have become dominant” (Gupta 294).

A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the 1990s, producing novels that revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. These writers were born after Indian independence. They do not show a colonial touch in their use of the English language. Their work is marked by a natural impulse and an authentic presentation of contemporary India, with all its regional variations. They generally write about the urban middle class; the stratum of society they know best.

Many of these authors, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) use magic realism in their novels. Shashi Deshpande stands out for her use of fantasy and surrealism, and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) presents a chilling picture of an Indian dystopia in the twenty-first century. Other novels deal with various aspects of college life, such as Meena Alexander’s *Nampally House* (1991) and Rani Dharker’s *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997). Another theme to emerge is that of the lives of women during India’s struggle for independence, as seen, for example, in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* (1998).

Anita Desai, in her psychological novels, presents the image of a suffering woman preoccupied with her inner world, her silent frustration, and the storm within; the existential predicament of a woman in a male-dominated society. Through such characters, she makes a plea for a better way of life for women. Her novels have Indians as central characters, and she alternates between female-centred and male-centred narratives. Her later novels, written since she moved to the USA, reveal all the characteristics of diasporic fiction, that is, a concern with the fate of immigrants, and a growing distance from the reality of India, which is viewed from the outside.

Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* is a sensitive and realistic presentation of the married life of the narrator Jaya and her husband Mohan. Feminism remains one of the most significant developments in modern Indian fiction. The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female characters searching for identity. In contrast to earlier novels, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and

defy marriage and motherhood. Concurrently, the loneliness, the loss of communication, the feeling of alienation that pervasively afflicts modern city dwellers has also interested the novelist as a subject for literary exploration.

Political issues have become a rich and fertile source for literary exploration. Nayantara Sahgal's interest in politics is deep and abiding; each of her novels, more or less, reflects the political era we are passing through. *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor is a satirical novel. It is a fictional work that takes the story of the *Mahabharata*, the epic of Hindu mythology, and recasts and resets it in the context of the Indian Independence movement.

Midnight's Children, *A Fine Balance*, and *A Suitable Boy*—all three books—are concerned with the same theme: the state of Indian society in the wake of Independence and Partition. *Sacred Games* of Vikram Chandra is yet another attempt to excite and captivate, but never to attempt to explore the mysteries of life; for his protagonist Sartaj Singh seeks to solve the mysteries only through the internet. The narrative abounds in mediocrity. *The Shadow Lines* of Amitav Ghosh takes a view of the possibility of interpersonal relationships between East and West. For him, the national borders are shadow lines beyond which exist enormous possibilities for fruitful intercultural communication.

The gamut of these Indian novels indeed reveals the tension and strains of numerous dislocations of society with artistic honesty. These novels project the dislocations in the aftermath of independence; dislocations arising out of maladjustment; dislocations of human relationships; dislocations because of the particular society; dislocations because of the brazen influence of films on Indian society. The artists have no doubt succeeded in specifying the metaphors of dislocations. But the visions could not rise to an extent to repair the cracks of the spirit.

Literature is tethered to the tenets of temporal and transcendental. So far, the temporal aspect of the Indian novels has excelled because the context in the text is fully focused and well developed. Even stylistically, they are not far behind their Western counterparts. They have left indelible impressions in creating a sense of reality and intensity of Indian life in a foreign language. But the transcendental elements—the elements that stir the spirit, the elements required for renewal of society—are still missing.

With the steep reduction of human values, the artistic morality lies in making literature a statement for a spiritual mission.

A novel is a *sadhana* (Devotion) and a novelist is a *sadhaka* (Devotee) who transforms the physical experiences into a metaphysical quest, into spiritual awareness, and through the smithy of fiction makes it a rich creative work of art. As the *sadhaka* devotes himself to the quest for the ultimate knowledge that lies beneath the veils of appearance, a novelist also has to search for the essence of his existence. *Sadhana* ultimately transforms the entire being of the *sadhaka* and takes him to the state that is transcendental and real. According to Sri Aurobindo:

It is spiritually when you begin to become aware of another consciousness than the ego and begin to live in it or under its influence more and more. It is that consciousness, pure of ego etc., which is called spirit (self, *Brahman*, divine) (Aurobindo 45).

Once the state of omniscience is achieved either by meditation, self-control, or grace, which constitute different forms of *sadhana*, the need for communicating the charismatic experience of the ineffable vision arises. And thus is the creative writing born. A *sadhaka* thus becomes a seer. It is in this restlessness that a need has arisen to relocate, redefine, and reaccentuate the very purpose of writing an Indian novel, for the novels of the past 30 to 40 years fail to give what Irving Babbitt calls “the immortalizing touch”.

What is pre-eminent in Virgil, who gives the immortalizing touch to his work, is not the judgment he displays, but the quality of his imagination. It is no doubt inevitable, in speaking and writing, to divide man up into faculties and contrast judgment with imagination (Babbitt 189).

Our whole modern experiments in novels are threatened with breakdown for want of “humanized intensity- intensity on a background of calm”(193). In the Indian tradition, the words *Kavi* and *Rishi* are almost the same. The *rishi* is one who sees, and reads what already is there—

drishti, and the *kavi* is one who is a creator. So in the Indian tradition, the Vedas were written by sages. They were all *rishis* who wrote the Vedas. So, in the Indian tradition, the writer and the sage are not different. Rishi means the seer; the sage implies wisdom. Rishi might mean the sage, the seer, and the *kavi*. Ancient Indian sages like Valmiki and Vyasa, by their incessant *sadhana* and ceaseless *tapasya* (self-control, austerity, suffering), became capable of seeing the finest specimens of archetypes of human agony and the superhuman power of endurance in their epics, *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*. These texts embody what Jung calls “the collective unconscious, reflecting archetypal human experiences” (Jung 87).

Creative writings of a *sadhaka* or a seer are thus born out of archetypal myths and have become essential parts of the collective unconscious. Filled with universal content, they reflect the ethics and psyche of the Indian people; they are sources of inspiration to *sadhakas*. The ancient Indian epics are as literary as they are metaphysical. They inaugurate the Indian art of creative writing, which is not merely a poetic interpretation of the social enigma of the Indian people, but includes traditional lore, myths, and legends. The ancient Indian sages realized the great harmony between man’s spirit and the spirit of the world. Their aim was not to acquire but to realize, to enlarge their consciousness by growing with and growing into the surroundings. They felt that truth is all-comprehensive, that there is no such thing as absolute isolation in existence.

A literature born out of *sadhana* realizes its kinship with the world. Such literature gives a living and lasting presence to its readers, for its contact is more than a physical contact. The ancient Indian classical literature was born out of meditation and the cultivation of higher consciousness. It never separated what Tagore calls “bud” from the “blossom” (Tagore 54). The stamp of perfection is well evident in the blend of the “bud” and the “blossom”. The language of literature has always been wisdom. The subject-matter is intrinsically and internally resonant, polyphonic, multilayered, symmetrical, ultimately simple and unified. The literary experience has never been without value to humanity. In a crazy, ego-maniacal, divided, and self-destructive world of today, such literature is highly needed.

In his Nobel Lecture in 1977, Vicente Aleixandre, the Nobel Prize Winner in Literature (1977) said:

The poet, the truly determinative poet, is always a revealer; he is, essentially, a seer, a prophet. But his “prophecy” is of course not a prophecy about the future; for it may have to do with the past: it is a prophecy without time. Illuminator, aimer of light, chastiser of mankind, the poet is the possessor of a Sesame which in a mysterious way is, so to speak, the word of his destiny. To sum up, then, the poet is a man who was able to be more than a man: for he is in addition a poet. The poet is full of “wisdom”; but this he cannot pride himself on, for perhaps it is not his own. A power which cannot be explained, a spirit, speaks through his mouth: the spirit of his race, of his peculiar tradition. He stands with his feet firmly planted on the ground, but beneath the soles of his feet a mighty current gathers and is intensified, flowing through his body and finding its way out through his tongue...(43)

The idea is not to develop a spiritual novel; the idea is that the novelist can turn from the scrutiny of existence to contemplation of essence. T. S. Eliot similarly notes that “the common ground between religion and fiction is behaviour” (Eliot 97). A novelist has to dive deep to brace the novel with the applicational aspects of religion. The novelist is concerned more with the moral and ethical odyssey than with the picturesque details. The novel is, in this way, transformed into a transcendental entity, not a historically satisfying mode, but a way of responding to the eternal and the Absolute by encompassing the whole metaphysical status of man. The novel in the hands of a *sādhaka* arises out of the spatial arrangement of experience that is at once personal and universal, contemporaneous and timeless. The novelist, as a *sādhaka* like a self-conscious pilgrim, invites the reader to share with him a composite experience of human life that includes both the beautiful and the grotesque.

Fictional art in the hands of a *sādhaka* thus becomes a ritual or what James Joyce calls “epiphany”. The concept of “epiphany” defines literature “as a moment of sudden spiritual revelation” (Joyce 213), enabling the artist to have a deep insight into the lives of others by capturing some of the most delicate and evanescent moments. The artist-command does find a clue to the meaning of human life as a whole. The *sādhaka* cannot be content with telling the tale of human joys and travail. His novel, at first, becomes a medium of moral questioning and then a vehicle of a spiritual quest for the ultimate answer to the wretchedness of the modern individual. In the beginning of his *sādhana* he cannot ignore such feelings as related to physical levels, but gradually his wider, deeper spiritual outlook embraces them all and transcends them too. Through an intense spiritual exercise, the *sādhaka* ultimately attains the final vision of the beatitude. The novelistic craft and theme then become both creative and redemptive.

The novel, thus, is a revelation of truth; it becomes philosophical in stance and religious in effect. This does not mean that it does not cut much mark on the mundane; for it rises from the mundane. But the artistic meditation, the quality of imagination, the desire to seek the universal, make it a novel of initiation in spiritual awakening, a novel of enlightenment. It would not be wise to ignore or sidetrack such a piece of literature by calling it a complex or heavy treatise or un-global, for the whole serious Western tradition of fiction of Saul Bellow, Mann, Kafka, Sartre, Hemingway, and others is based on a philosophical exploration of reality and truth rather than mere strolling on the shining surface of appearance. For Martha C. Nussbaum, literature—especially the novel—is not merely aesthetic entertainment but a serious vehicle of moral knowledge. In *Love’s Knowledge* (1990), she says, “Certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist” (Nussbaum 5).

Thus, the novel is a microcosm of the macrocosm, the society, the milieu, the race, the universe. The characters, situations, and moments manifested in the texture of a work of art have a direct impact on the mind of the reader. The novel must detect the vibrations of the individual, must explore his secret movements, and follow his obscure preoccupations. The classical literature survives because of high seriousness; the Indian English Novel will survive because of renewal of

spirit, because of its linking cord between the earthly and the ethereal, and by retaining the original, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.

J. K. Verma

Department of English Studies

Dayalbagh Educational Institute (Deemed to be University)

Dayalbagh, Agra, Uttar Pradesh

Works Cited

- Aleixandre, Vicente. Nobel Lecture. 1977.
Aurobindo, Sri. *The Life Divine*. Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2005.
Babbitt, Irving. *Literature and the American College*. Houghton Mifflin, 1908.
Eliot, T. S. *Selected Essays*. Faber and Faber, 1951.
Gupta, R. K. *The Indian Novel in English: A Critical Study*. Atlantic Publishers, 2001.
Joyce, James. *Stephen Hero*. New Directions, 1963.
Jung, C. G. *The Undiscovered Self*. Princeton UP, 1957.
Nussbaum, Martha C. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford UP, 1990.
Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Religion of Man*. Macmillan, 1931.

