

# Representation of Cultural Values in Indian Fiction in English and The Rise of The Novel in India: An Introductory Survey

Jaideep Chauhan

## Abstract

It has been suggested by the great American anthropologist Alfred Kroeber (1876-1960) that culture cannot be reduced to matters of heredity or evolutionary stages, explained as expressions of the human psyche or correlated to social forms. In her 1934 best selling book *Patterns of Culture*, Ruth Benedict has argued that cultures are integrated according to central ideals or principles. Rather than a random assortment of isolated traits are functionally articulated by complementary purposes, cultures achieve a more or less successful attainment or integrated behaviour. Such values are encoded in distinctive world views and expressed in specific cultural practices resulting in a cultural configuration or pattern.

**Key Words:** colonialism; Culture; Values; Indian Ethos; Western Culture; Indian Fiction; Indian Renaissance; Nationalism; Imperialism.

The legacy of colonialism and the very nature of representing cultural values in Indian fiction in English is a significant product of the Indian encounter with the British and the Indian ethos with the Western culture. Some critics are of the view that the early Indian novels written in English lacked merit as H.M. William puts it, “neither in the novel nor in drama did the Indians produce much English material worth preserving

until the 1920s”(4). However critics like K.S.Ramamurti systematically show that the early novels in English were experimental in nature and they have shown “a distinct awareness” of the problems connected with the art of novel writing. They have proved that they were “in greater or smaller degree, conscious experimenters not blind imitators” (20) who have lent a distinct identity to Indian fiction in English. They had the enough potential for subversion and resistance to dominate colonialist representations.

It is in this context that the rise of the Indian novel in English has to be analyzed and understood because it has coincided with the Indian experience of British colonialism and Indian renaissance. G.N. Devy has a point when he observes that the Indian renaissance and colonial rule were concurrent and colonialism “had taken away cultural freedom during the period of Indian renaissance, while the renaissance was opening up new possibilities of freedom within the context of colonialism.” He further argues:

They negated each other perfectly, and made the situation culturally non-productive. It is no surprise, then, that not a single major critical text was produced during the entire 19<sup>th</sup> century in India. This is, however, not to say that the society did not move at all during this period. (37)

The fact remains that the 19<sup>th</sup> century was indeed a dynamic period in Indian history and the complexity was socio-cultural dynamism which combined vast possibilities of expansion within an overall context of metamorphosis. It would be quite appropriate to consider 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian culture as a dynamic culture which according to Devy “witnessed and survived unprecedented cultural catastrophes and underwent an amazing metamorphosis in the process”(36).

Some critics like Devy hold the view that the British period is a “water shed” in Indian cultural history and this raises a perceptive question regarding the relevance of cultural vitality/cultural repressiveness and amnesia. Several aspects of Indian

culture did play a very vital role in structuring the literary imagination.

Before taking up this issue further it would be in the fitness of things to examine the relationship between culture and literature and the representation of cultural values in a literary work of art. The profound changes in the intellectual development of humanity were one of the causes for the growing awareness of culture as a significant component of society both during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Previously man and society, both in the East and in the West were perceived as a combination of two opposing factors: natural versus divine (or cosmic). Man was half animal, half angel. He was an instrument in the hands of the gods. Mankind was both a race and a *Karma*. Man and everything else on earth is presented either as the offspring or the component of the cosmological system in the cosmological mythology. This system represents the opposite of disorganized chaos. In many languages, the word 'world' among other things, defines a general unity, which includes man.

Only as enlightenment proceeded, man and society began to be viewed as the result of joint activity by mankind, which was determined both by circumstances and by material achievements and intellectual values. Man's plane of development was separated both from the natural world and from sacred values or the supreme law, superseding all social structures. Many scholars of repute used the term culture to define this plane, unique to mankind. Culture included everything inside and outside of man which did not exist independently in nature, but appeared due to human labour or his activities in the broadest sense. Broadly speaking, culture is considered to be a system of shared values, beliefs, norms and practices of the people of an identifiable geographical area. It reflects the externalized collective selves of the people. It is rooted deep down in the minds of people and conditions how they perceive themselves and relate to the external world that includes other people, the physical environment, work place, institution and so on. It goes without saying that culture is a unique human reality. It emanates from the unity of humankind in nature, but at the

same time it situates itself as a meta-natural reality. The fact of matter is that it is manifested in the technological, mental, moral, social, aesthetic and spiritual achievements of humankind. It gives meaning to our relationship with the other, as it also forms/modifies/determines the contours of our subjective identity. Raymond Williams has rightly observed that there is a great difficulty in defining the term culture because it is a complex term which has continued to designate a whole and distinctive way of life. He further argues that culture itself “ranges from a significantly total to a confidently partial dimension of reference”. Commenting on the various dimensions of culture Williams observes:

Meanwhile, in more general usage, there was a strong development of the sense of culture as the active cultivation of the mind, we can distinguish a range of meanings from (I) *a developed state of mind* – as in ‘person of culture’, ‘a cultured person’ to (II) *the processes of this development* – as in ‘cultural interests’, ‘cultural activities’ to (III) *the meaning of these processes* – as in culture as ‘the arts’ and ‘humane intellectual works’. In our own time (III) is the most common general meaning, though all are current. It co-exists, often uneasily, with the anthropological and extended sociological use to indicate the whole way of life of a distinct people or other social group. (11)

The sociology of culture, which deals with intellectual life as a social phenomenon, also examined the connection between the intellectual matters and other aspects of socio-cultural life of a community / society / nation. It explains the effect of cultural factors on political and economic activity, on various types of social organization and investigates the role of various classes and strata in the intellectual life of the society on the whole, as well as their cultural characteristics specifically.

These are certain basic problems which confront a

culturologist whose primary job is to provide a total sociological analysis of the given cultural phenomenon. These problems include :

- a) unveiling the essence of the system of cultural values and norms within a given society, both as a whole and taken in its separate groups and strata;
- b) establishing the unique characteristics of the intellectual elite, which is supposed to be the torch bearer of the highest level of cultural activity;
- c) demonstrating the interrelationship of various cultural groupings both large and small;
- d) determining the degree of acceptance by the people of religious ideas and values, as well as the concrete significance placed on fulfilling religious rituals;
- e) determining the influence of cultural values and orientations in the economic and social spheres, and also on the nature of expectations in mankind production or in politics;
- f) ascertaining the effects of the arts on the consciousness of the audience, which is classified according to social, ethnic or religious criteria;
- g) determining the nature of the cultural changes occurring in various social strata both within urban and rural communities as well as the effect of these changes on society as a whole.

The fact of the matter is that an artist/a sensitive novelist is also deeply concerned with these issues. He considers culture as a form of human activity.

On the other hand sociologists debate over the basic function of culture. For example, Max Weber emphasized the ties, be they positive or negative, between intellectual values and economic activity. Emile Durkheim, the eminent French sociologist did not agree with this view. He, in fact, perceived culture's main function as integrating society. Later, Talcott Parsons identified four basic imperatives of culture in any society, be it simple or complex:

1. determination of goals.
2. adaptation to the surroundings

3. the correlation and integration of all components in a system and
4. the continuity and stability of a society.

Parsons is of the view that the cycle of activity in a given society (or any social unit) begins with the definition of a goal and the mobilization of energy to achieve this goal. In his classic book *The Social Structure and Personality* (Macmillan, 1964), he observes that the activity will succeed only if the participants cooperate. At the same time adaptations must be made to the existing conditions and circumstances. Each cycle of activity entails constant repetition and the retention of the initial paradigm, even if somewhat modified.

It is a general view in the sociology of culture that culture has the following basic functions to perform:

1. The function of gathering, preserving, and transmitting of values, knowledge, and experience (i.e. informative).
2. The significative, or symbolic function (i.e. the expression) and entrenchment of meanings, knowledge and values within a system of symbols.
3. The communicative function (ensuring communication between people during the process of various activities and the promotion of unity and interrelations between the members of a given society).

Culture will serve society the more effectively, the more information is accumulated and the freer the access to it. This information must correctly reflect the characteristics of the given culture, as well as the features of the surrounding world. Modern art is primarily concerned with the theme of lost heritage and the loss of collective and individual memories. For instance, George Orwell in his novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* has depicted a society which practiced conscious distortion of history and turned it into a policy regressing in to the past. The authentic historical documents have long been destroyed. The people working in the enormous so-called “Ministry of Truth” are busy re-writing, re-drawing and re-photographing all printed materials from the past in order to make it conform to the prevalent opinions and reigning authorities.

In his famous novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, the Soviet novelist Chingiz Aitmatov describes the terrifying image of a *mankurt*, a man deprived of his memory. He was kidnapped by nomads as a child. In order to turn him into an obedient slave, they pulled a piece of fresh camel skin over his head. As it dried, it shrunk and pressed against his skull, leading to loss of memory, so that he even forgot his own name and did not recognize his own mother. Severed from his past, he was in essence dead, while still alive. Thus, it is clear that the intellectual well-being of a society depends on its ability to remember events from its own history. And it plays a very crucial role in laying the foundations of a sound culture as a given point of time in the life of a society/nation.

It is more than clear that culture, which an embodiment of intellectual production provides the framework for the accumulation, preservation and transmission of the values, information, and experience necessary for the functioning of all social structures. Culture, no doubt, provides an important form of contact between people and coordinates human activity within the framework of society on the whole.

It has also been printed by Daisaku Ikeda, the famous modern Japanese philosopher that culture exchanges between different countries have played a pivotal role in creating a peaceful atmosphere in the world. His famous book *A New Humanism* (1996) which consists of his famous university addresses underlines the importance of these cultural exchanges. In his speech delivered at the university of Bucharest, Romania (June 7, 1983), he observed:

Although nations and states constitute individual entities, they are not necessarily what I mean by “parts” of the whole. While we must respect them in accordance with the “Five Principles of Peace”, they are basically artificial units whose boundaries are political by nature. As such, they represent the product of modern nationalism, which first took shape in Western Europe a few centuries ago. Behind the concept of nation-state, however, lies infinitely varied human culture resting on thousands of years of history and tradition. Culture is passed from generation to generation in distinctive local forms stored in the hearts of people. (90)

What Daisaku Ikeda seems to suggest is that historical consciousness of cultural values combined with the intimate knowledge of local traditions has been used creatively by novelists/ artists in their own peculiar way. Any subversion of cultural values in views of history has created a world of confusion and anarchy and it is *this* crisis which has been foreseen by Friederich Nietsche:

We employ history for the sake of life and action; we do not use it for some easy secession from life and action, and we certainly do not employ it to dress up or disguise a life that is self-centered or actions that are cowardly or base (*The Collected Works of Nietsche* trans.. Yukiushi O Gura (Tokyo: Riso She Ltd., 1964, 2.99)

In order to understand the rise of the novel in India, it has been pointed out earlier that the cultural values did play a crucial role in determining the nature of Indian fiction which preserves the uncomplicated image of imperialism as the confrontation between the two ruling classes of India and Britain. The empire as well as the cultural attitudes contributed to the historiography of Indian nationalism which had a powerful impact on the modern novelists. The head on confrontation between the politics of imperialism and nationalism in India along with the cultural, historical and social reality contributed to the modernist canon which is reflected in Indian novel in English. The fact of the matter is that the nationalist movement in India was in one sense a cultural movement and it gave a new vision, a nationalist cultural vision.

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