

## Review

# Identity crisis- Indian English fiction of post 1980s

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Accepted 10 December, 2012

**Rapid developments in the fields of trade, market, commerce and telecommunication technologies, together with cultural confrontations at the global level are creating a paradigmatic shift in people's understanding of selfhood and identity. This paper makes a serious attempt to trace and map out the making of contemporary post-national identities within the sub continental cultural production of India and in its English fiction. One of the structural ventures of this study is that these newer identities, which are basically fragmented, ruptured, hyphenated in nature, require new descriptions and new elaborations within the field of creative literature and literary criticism. In order to pursue its research on these lines, the present work contrasts the notion of subject hood and identity with the earlier phases of Indian cultural imagination as represented in some of the pioneering works of Indian English fiction that have now attained a canonical status. By analyzing some of the predominant concerns that work as leitmotif in most of the Indian English novels, the paper brings together and reinterprets some problematic concepts such as history, culture, religion, nation and nationalism and creates a theoretical axis upon which it charts insightful and engaging aspects of selfhood and identity.**

**Key words:** Selfhood, identity, insight, crisis, hidden dimensions, quest, escape.

## INTRODUCTION

Identity is a multidimensional word. In psychology and sociology, identity is a person's conception and expression of their individuality or group affiliations (such as national identity and cultural identity). Identity may be defined as the distinctive characteristic belonging to any given individual, or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. The term comes from the French word *identité*, which finds its linguistic roots in the Latin noun *identitas*, -tatis, itself a derivation of the Latin adjective *idem* meaning "the same." However, the formation of one's identity occurs through one's identifications with significant others (primarily with parents and other individuals during one's biographical experiences, and also with 'groups' as they are perceived). These others may be benign such that one aspires to their characteristics, values and beliefs (a process of idealistic-identification), or malign when one wishes to dissociate from their characteristics (a process of defensive contra-identification) (Weinreich and Saunderson, 2003). Theorist Erik Erikson coined the term identity crisis and believed that it was one of the most important conflicts people face in development. According to Erikson (1970), an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. Erikson's interest in identity began in

childhood. Raised Jewish, Erikson appeared very Scandinavian and often felt that he was an outsider of both groups. His later studies of cultural life among the Yurok of northern California and the Sioux of South Dakota helped formalize Erikson's ideas about identity development and identity crisis. Erikson described identity as "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unself-conscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters" (Erikson, 1970).

## THE IDENTITY CRISIS IN INDO- ANGLICAN NOVELS

The crisis of identity has always enjoyed a defining significance in the thematic framework of the Indian

Anglican novels. The novels of R. K. Narayan, Mulkraj Anand and Raja Rao redesigned the techno-thematic fabric of Indian English fiction and laid the foundation of the new Indian English fiction. The post-colonial age represented by these three novelists was chiefly a quest for identity along different dimensions of socio-political and economic order of India. The novels of Mulkraj Anand explored the thick congested fabric of Indian life and structured his fiction with unquestionable authority. The crisis of identity plays vital role in the cast of the narrative of Anand. His novels like *The Untouchables* and *The Coolie* explore the hidden dimensions of human psyche along socio-economic and cultural dimensions. Barkha's dramatic reaction to the situation when the modesty of his sister is attempted by a Brahmin aptly illustrates the agony of identity crisis at a socio-cultural level; the man must have made indecent suggestions to her:

"I wonder what he did. Father of fathers, I could kill that man. I could kill that man (*The Untouchables*)."

Narayan (1935) explores the idea of the crisis of identity along various dimensions. Almost all his novels are based on the idea of the crisis of identity and the consequent efforts to locate them. His first novel, *Swami and Friends* (1935), has the seeds of the same theme manifest in form of children's pains and pangs. The other novels are also structured on the same idea explored along different dimensions. A reference to *The Dark Room* is obligatory as the crisis of identity plays a very important role. All the three major characters suffer the crisis of identity in their own ways. Ramani is torn apart between marriage and infatuation. Savitri endures all the pains and alienation of a conventional, male dominated family set-up. Shanti Bai is the new representation of identity crisis. She is 'married to an unscrupulous husband' but rejects identity with him and escapes to Madras'. It is, however, interesting to note that the identity crisis of Savitri continues to grow more and more piercing. The last scene of the narrative elucidates the perpetuity of the crisis of identity when she feels like calling her one time aid but realizes her helplessness and withdraws (Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001). It can easily be inferred that Savitri in the beginning is same as Savitri in the end (Narayan, 1958). *The Guide* is another major novel of Narayan. The East-west confrontation plays decisive role in the cast of the narrative and thus the crisis of identity owes its genesis to this ideological conflict. Both the major characters- Raju and Rosie- spend their life locating their identity, and the search remains an effort in vain. *The Vendor of Sweets* is the most poignant representation of the identity crisis that owes its genesis to the conflicting values of the east and west. In this stream a powerful entry is of Anita Desai who gave a new dimension to the search of identity. The

novels of Anita Desai mark a parallel stream in the history of Indian English fiction. It is however undeniable that her novels have been knit around the complex idea of identity crisis with a female character on the focus. Her first novel- *Cry the Peacock* published in 1964 is an important landmark in history of Indian English literature. Anita Desai added impetus to the feminist wave that came into critical notice since the advent of Nayantara Sehgal in the horizon of Indian English writings. She explored a world subsisting within the world and located the fragmentation of the protagonists' identity. The protagonist of her first novel- Maya is a wrecked soul who longs for her identity realized in terms of marital harmony but never succeeds. In her second novel- *Bye Bye Black Bird* the crisis of identity is born of the conflict between the spirit of place and the protagonist's soul. The incompatibility between these two dominant forces constitutes the dynamics of the action and the nature of the narrative. The crisis of identity and efforts to locate it along the finite dimensions of the narrative is the kernel of the techno-thematic frame work of her novels. In *Custody* (1984) and *Clear Light of the Day* (1980) - her most celebrated novels, have another revelation of the perennial quest for identity which is put to stake under the chafing pressures of the cultural forces and the efforts to relocate it becomes a painful enterprise. The spirit of eighties was spearheaded by Salman (2003, 2011) *Midnight's Children* published in 1980 and *Shame* published in 1983. Both these novels are knit around the idea of identity crisis which owes its birth and life to the direct collision between individual and history. *The Satanic Verses* published in 1988 (Salman, 2011) explores the religious identity of an Asian expatriate in England. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1991) by Salman (2010), he takes the identity of a writer on the focus of the thematic structure and knits the narrative. The success of these novels firmly established the prominence of identity crisis in the thematic set up of the Indian English fiction. The novels that hit the literary horizon capture our attention for the prominence of the theme of identity crisis. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* is another masterpiece published in the same decade. It also explores the identity of the protagonist against the backdrop of the Indian culture and heritage. *The Shadow Lines* is a story told by a nameless narrator in recollection. It is a non linear tale told as if putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in the memory of the narrator. This style of writing is both unique and captivating; unfolding ideas together as time and space coalesce and help the narrator understand his past better. It is a story of a middle class Indian family based in Calcutta. The boy narrator presents the views of the members of his immediate and extended family, thus, giving each a well defined character. However, Thamma, narrator's grandmother is the most realized character in the novel, giving a distinct idea of the idealism and the enthusiasm with which the people worked towards nation building just after independence. It is chiefly through her

character that Ghosh delivers the most powerful message of the novel; the vainness of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided.

The nineties were the natural extension of the thematic boldness and technical innovativeness. It is also the decade which marks the flowering of Githa Hariharan as novelist. She, along with Anita Desai, shares the diadem with another prominent figure of Indian English fiction-Arundhati (2002) who surprised the world with a unique first- *The God of Small Things* published in 1995 and was awarded Booker in 1996. *The God of Small Things* is also knit around the complex idea of the crisis of identity realized at the level of human relationship. It is clear from a close survey of Post 1980 Indian English literature that the crisis of identity forms pivotal aspect of the techno-thematic network of the Indian English fiction.

### **The age of post 1980s and identity**

The age of 1980s is undisputedly the most complex phase of the cultural history of India. There were quick transitions and subtle and unpredictable changes that redefined the identity of individual in general and of a woman in particular. The advent of the television and the consequent expansion of the news channels and entertainment channels is one most outstanding phenomenon that sped up the transitions. No transitional phase in the cultural history of India has been as forcefully accelerated as this. The spread of education is also a factor of great significance which took place during the last two decade. The education was not confined to make people literate but it had new functions to perform. The spread of technical education and management studies shaped the mind of common Indians with handsome participation of women in reshaping the cultural history of India. The spread of communication with easy access to information through cellular phones and internet are some other prominent features contributing to the new cultural identity of India. The simultaneous advent of so many decisive factors stirred the social set up of country with a number of new possibilities and probabilities rising up to meet the new challenges.

### **The birth of a new order and search for self**

It is however interesting to know that the changes that took place confronted the traditional values system that ruled over the Indian society with despotic authority. The concept of generation gap acquired new impetus and became more decisive compared to previous years. The birth of a new order and new system became obligatory. The advent of the multi- national companies is another very prominent feature responsible for the new shape of

the society. Education too had a new form and a new function by acquiring international order. Employment was also redefined. The limitations of times and spaces were reduced to non-existence and movements of the young aspirants became more free. The induction of new technology in the fields of computers paved way for the escape of Indian minds and women too became integral parts of this new wave. Thus it becomes clear that the society was changed and the women were no exception to it. The birth of a new woman in the old society practicing quaint orders and methods was the common phenomenon witnessed in all corners of the vast social set up. Anita Desai's fictions are generally existentialist studies of individuals and hence background, politicality, historicity, social settings, class, cross-cultural pluralities are all only incidental. But being incidental does not mean that they are essentially extraneous. The solitude that Desai depicts in her diasporic characters is a result of the inner psyche of the characters as also their external circumstances. Loneliness is a manifestation of both inner and outer conditions and hence, its sense can be evoked even in the middle of society. The Jew, Hugo Baumgartner in the novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* by Anita (1998) had spent his childhood in his native Germany with his parents. Even as a child a sense of loneliness gnaws at his being and is evoked at his crucial moments of triumph. On his first day at school when his mother comes to fetch him with a cone of bonbons for him, he holds up his prize for the others to see but already "the other children were vanishing down the street" and "no one saw his triumph". He accuses his mother for being late and complains: "You don't look like everyone else's mother". Hugo's loneliness as a child, in the midst of society comes because of the lack of identification. Even when he is not neglected he feels the same loneliness as is evident from the Christmas incident in the school when all his classmates were sent gifts by their parents to be distributed to them by their teacher. Hugo longs for the red glass globe that adorns the top of the Christmas tree. When the teacher makes it up as his gift he instinctively realizes that his parents have not sent any gift for him and he stubbornly declines from accepting it even though goaded by his classmates to take it. It is perhaps this sense of loneliness experienced by the Jewish community in Germany that helped Hitler fuel his Aryan myth and transform loneliness into fear. The Baumgartner family lives in fear in Nazi Germany and fear is an acute form of loneliness. Long before Hugo has a literal displacement after the suicide of his father, he has experienced a displacement whereby he has not literally moved but the world around him has moved or rather changed. So when Hugo has a physical displacement and migrates as a teenager to India, he already harbors the sense of loneliness. Thus it seems that the change in location is only incidental to his sense of solitariness. But the circumstantial changes also help to aggravate one's solitude and hence it is not merely

incidental and this fact is quite apt in consideration with the estrangement that Hugo suffers from his mother. That Hugo's mother stayed back in Nazi Germany and her highly censored letters only bear the curt statement that she was well and it provides no comfort to Baumgartner. The memory of his mother in Germany is a constant deterrent against stopping him from succumbing to a sense of loneliness.

Influences and counter-influences that mould one's perceptions govern human life. When the tension generated by these counter-acting influences rises to a critical level, human beings suffer. The molding gives rise to senses that off late were in a latent state. Thus Baumgartner's loneliness is also aroused from latency when in India he is in the loneliness-alleviating company of Lotte, a German cabaret singer. Hugo's relationship with Lotte is no doubt vital but acts only as a poor substitute for all the relationships he craves for. Just as Baumgartner keeps stray cats and cares for them in an attempt to give some purpose to his lonely existence, his relationship with Lotte can be thought to be in parallel to it. The relationship in itself is important but it is more important because it gives some purpose to Hugo's "Sisyphus-like" existence as explicated by Taneja (1991) in the essay "Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay: A Note". At the height of Second World War, Baumgartner is interned in a camp in British India because he carries a German passport. In the camp Baumgartner is among other Jews yet he stays aloof because he, unlike others, could find no way "to alleviate the burden, the tedium, the emptiness of the waiting days" (Baumgartner's Bombay). Even after the war, when he meets one of his camp-mates, he finds that he has changed his name from the "too Jewish" Julius to the "very English" Julian. If Julius deliberately dilutes his Jewish identity, Baumgartner unknowingly suffers from an identity crisis and to counter it, there arises in him a sense of non-belonging. The Second World War rendered the Jewish Diaspora nationless and hence identity crisis becomes inherent in the community. Baumgartner cannot go back to Germany because the Germany of his childhood no longer exists and hence his perennial sense of loneliness continues. The only time that Baumgartner tries to reconcile the Germany of his childhood with the present-day Germany by taking a stoned German youth, Kurt, to his apartment, he is robbed and murdered by him. It is perhaps the ultimate indictment that no reconciliation is possible and all attempts to wipe out the sense of diasporic loneliness are futile. The German, Kurt follows the typically decadent lifestyle of the hippies in India but another German, Sophie, from the novel *Journey to Ithaca* is most unlike in that regard. She has come to India following her Italian husband, Matteo, who is seeking spiritual love. Sophie cannot identify with Matteo's ideals and does not find the Mother as inspiring as Matteo does. She is left neglected and lonely in a foreign land. It is quite ironic when Sophie discovers that the Mother

herself is a seeker of divine love and is of Egyptian origin who has traveled all over the world until settling in India. But by the time she comes to make the revelation to Matteo, the Mother is already dead and Matteo has disappeared. She is left stranded bearing in her the sense of spiritual loneliness that has come out of the mysticism in the churning of differing cultures. The Diaspora of Indian community is also not exempted from being a victim of the sense of loneliness. Since Indian independence, UK has been a prime destination for migrant Indians. The earliest of such communities constituted either of "Anglophiles," whose purpose of migration has been to experience the pristine beauty of England, or of "Anglophobes," who migrate to take the proverbial "postcolonial revenge". In England both these types of migrant Indians are pressed together and marked as "the Others". This sense of otherness is sometimes due to blatant racism and sometimes it comes out from the individual's own inner needs. It is such a situation when both the Anglophobe and the Anglophile find themselves in the same boat that their distinctions diminish as their purposes dilute. Purposeless, they find themselves lonely. Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is about migrant Indians in the England of 1960s. Adit lives in London with his English wife, Sarah. Dev is a newly arrived immigrant from India. Adit has well adjusted himself in the country of his adoption and has allayed his sense of loneliness by being non-chalant to its various causes. Dev, on the other hand, is critical of Adit's attitude. He gets disturbed and angry when someone whispers the word "wog" behind his back. Obviously, Dev has more reasons to be lonely and thus when he ventures into the city he feels, "like a Kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a prison". Dev's loneliness eventually stops haunting him and he decides to stay in England. Adit, in the interim, suffers from a crisis of identity. He starts longing for the land and the people he has left behind. He feels depressed of "Mrs. Roscommon-James' sniffs and barks and Dev's angry sarcasm" as well as from the fact that Sarah "had shut him out, with a bang and a snap, from her childhood of one-eared pandas and large jigsaw puzzles". He finally decides to return to India with Sarah. What this proves is that the sense of loneliness is not a phenomenon of overpowering presence but rather of intermittent overpowering, guided by circumstances incidental and always in flux. Just as the United Kingdom, the United States of America has also attracted Indians as a destination of academic and economic prosperity.

## CONCLUSION

While taking the quest of selfhood and identity, the diasporic community of Indians matters a lot. The size of the Indian diaspora community in the US is gradually increasing in the post-globalization era. But it is quite

debatable to assert that globalization has solved the problems of the diaspora Indians. No doubt, problems like racism are no longer as headstrong as before, but the problems of the inner "human condition" still plague the diasporic community. Arun, from the novel *Fasting, Feasting* is a very good example of an Indian in the suburbs of Massachusetts, finding himself lonely and unable to adjust to a culture of freedom. He is not only bewildered by American college life but also by the ways of the Patton family, his host for the summer. He cannot understand the passion with which Mr. Patton himself barbecues red meat after coming home early only to find his son Rod and daughter Melanie absent from the ceremony. He finds it strange that Mrs. Patton keeps her refrigerator always stocked to the full, despite knowing that there are not many heads in her family to consume that food. Arun cannot even identify with Rod and Melanie. Though Arun takes up jogging like Rod, unlike him he simply cannot devote himself to such physical exercise. Arun is appalled to find Melanie's condition of bulimia amidst the plenty that America provides. All dysfunctional indulgences of Americans make Arun puzzled and from this puzzlement breeds his sense of loneliness. Faced with a seeming paradox of a new culture, he is lonely. An inviting doorway does not mean that the hearth inside can make one feel like home, especially when the idea of home and family differs from culture to culture. This difference is not fundamental; it is superficial. But so are all cross-cultural conflicts and paradoxes. The first encounter that any migrant has with his/her country of adoption is with superficialities. It definitely takes time to scratch this surface of superficiality and till then it is only loneliness for company. Arun tries to seep in through the surface for he knows that the meeting place for two cultures can only be some middle ground. To reach this middle ground he has to assuage the distance that he has to travel, for which he has to know the distance of the other extremity. Arun does so by delving deep into the core of a suburban American family and invariably he is shocked at his first encounter. He takes the first step in overcoming his state of shock by giving to Mrs. Patton as parting gifts, the parcels that have been sent to him by his parents from India.

Arun may travel that extra mile and transform himself into the like of Rakesh, another of Desai's character in the short story "Winterscape" from her collection, *Diamond Dust and Other Stories*. But Rakesh, so very Westernized, does not necessarily live without any sense of loneliness. What he has alienated himself from to become a Westerner gives rise to his sense of loneliness.

This not only proves that loneliness is an inherent character of diasporic life but also that the sense of loneliness acts as an umbilical cord attaching oneself to one's native place, irrespective of its existence, while living in a diaspora. It is perhaps consoling that loneliness is in this sense a necessity. Anita Desai deals with the social issues but she is basically a writer of individual values. A reader can see there is always a conflict between social values and individual values in her stories. In the expression of self there is a tension between individualistic urges and societal expectations. And her protagonists live in a nebulous borderland in search of coherence. Self hood is about freedom, choice, rights, equality, rationality and control of one's self. Her protagonists are poised between submission and resistance, passivity and action. The very instability of this subject contains within it the possibility of initiating a change. These narratives do have an interventionist potential. However, total revolutionary and constitutive transformation is a distant dream, only piecemeal changes in the society can be co-opted in the society and that too very gradually. Our journey from the 1980s to present is a step further in this direction.

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