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A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON NATIONAL FATES OF SELECTED INDIAN NOVELS

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A Comparative Study on National Fates of Selected Indian Novels

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Abstract – Indian English novelists have chronicled the history, socio-political consciousness, changing culture and traditions and socio-economic concerns of India, in the colonial, post-colonial and post-independence eras. While national events occupy centre-stage in some novels, they are merely used as a backdrop in others. At times, it is impossible to separate the fictional element from contemporary national history. The interaction between national events and private lives, as reflected in the Indian English novel, makes for a stimulating study. In this context, this thesis focuses on how the life and destiny of the individual and the life and destiny of the nation-state in post-independence India, are presented as being intertwined, in select Indian English novels.

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INTRODUCTION

The twelve selected novels have been published in and post-1990. Set in post-independence India, they span a period dating from 1947 to the present. These are - Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* (1990), Arun Joshi's *The City and The River* (1990), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Meher Pestonji's *Pervez-A Novel* (2002), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* (2006) and *Six Suspects* (2008), David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* (2007), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Manjula Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2008) and, Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins* (2009). The study of the aforementioned novels, attempts to address the following concerns:

- i. Defining 'personal destiny' in post-independence India.
- ii. Defining 'national destiny' in post-independence India.
- iii. Studying the inter-mingling and intertwining of the personal and the national in free India. This involves examining the mutual interaction between private lives on the one hand, and, major national events or the socio-political forces, mechanism and philosophy of the nation-state on the other hand. An attempt has been made to examine the novelists' views of the roles and interface of government and citizen.
- iv. Evaluating the fictional representation of post-independence national realities and thereby critiquing the selected novels as historical documents and post-colonial studies which chronicle India and her people in the post-independence era.

v. Assessing how the selected novels help in understanding a complex nation and exemplify the multi-dimensional role of literature in national life as interface between the private and the public.

FUNDAMENTALS OF THE STUDY

The core terms of the thesis-topic "*Personal and National destinies in Independent India: A Study of select Indian English Novels*", may be defined as follows. According to the Oxford Dictionary, '*personal*' means 'of, affecting, or belonging to a particular person'. The word '*national*' is defined as 'of, relating to or characteristic of a nation'. In this study '*national*' is used in the sense of 'nation-state', that is, a group of people, an organized political community, with the same culture, language and history who have formed an independent country and live in a particular area under one government. The term '*destiny*', refers to 'the events that will necessarily happen to a particular person in the future - the hidden power believed to control this - fate'. Thus, the thesis deals with those specific instances wherein the life-histories of the individual and the nation-state are woven together. The aim is to examine how recent Indian English fiction has highlighted this process of intertwining. Such an examination is based on certain fundamentals such as - human life and politics, nation, state, government, citizen, and civil society.

HUMAN LIFE AND POLITICS

Individual life is inevitably related to politics. The word 'politics' is derived from the Greek 'polis' which literally means 'city-state'. In his *Politics*, Aristotle declared that 'man is by nature a political animal' and human beings can live the good life and attain a just society only within a political community. Politics is

the art of government and social control through the making and enforcement of collective decisions.

THE NATION

The nation is a central principle of political organization. Nations are cultural entities of people bound together by shared values and traditions, common language, race and culture, religion and history, and usually occupying the same geographical area. Benedict Anderson called the nation an 'imagined community' created by the spread of printed literature and mass media, while Anthony Smith views nationhood as a mythical symbol which resolves modern rootlessness by offering a collective heritage and identity (Ray 525-534). While the nation is an enigmatic, indefinable idea, nationalism is one of the oldest and most powerful ideologies. It can be harnessed positively as in anti-colonial struggles or employed destructively as in the world wars. The ideal conception of the nation is building a just and free society.

THE STATE

Closely related to the idea of the nation is the concept of the state. In political theory, the 'state' technically implies a human association having four essential elements- population, territory, government and sovereignty. The state has changed its form over time from the Greek city-state, ancient and medieval kingdoms, monarchies, to the liberal democracies, military dictatorships and communist states of today. There are various theories relating to the origin, nature and objectives of the state. The Social Contract theory assumes that the state is the result of a voluntary covenant for social security on the part of primitive men emerging from a state of nature. The Liberal theory believes that the state is created by free individuals and its power is subject to protecting the rights of citizens. The Marxist theory holds that the state is an instrument of class domination and will disappear when classes disappear. The Welfare State theory focuses on the duty of the state to ensure social justice, especially for the marginalized.

The term 'nation' is often used as a synonym for state. But the nation is an idea which can exist even without being contained within a state.

THE GOVERNMENT

The state cannot function without a government which exercises sovereign powers and is charged with the maintenance of peace and security. The government machinery consists of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. According to political thinker I.M.D. Little, the people constitute the sovereign state and governments must be accountable to them in accordance with the Constitution. Governments are merely agents of the state (Jalan 232).

THE CITIZEN

At the centre of the concepts of nation and state stands the citizen. A citizen is a member of a political community entitled to its rights and encumbered with its duties. The Republican model based on the views of Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli and Rousseau considers citizenship to be an office wherein law-making and administration in the interests of the highest public good is the primary business of the citizen. The Liberal ideology describes citizenship as legal identity, a set of rights passively enjoyed by the citizen whose primary business is private. In modern democratic states, citizenship is exercised both actively and passively, though high levels of involvement or public-spiritedness are unusual. Modern history proves that the health of a democracy depends on the ethics of its citizens. However, the fullest expression of citizenship also requires a liberal, democratic welfare state structure.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society is a vital mediating structure between government and citizens, especially in a democratic state. These non-government initiatives challenge abuse of power, cultivate patriotism, and empower individuals and communities to help the government in ensuring public welfare. As B.N. Ray puts it, "...the civil society debate is...about...civic virtue and civic engagement, about what role the ordinary occupations and pre-occupations of citizens play in the public sphere and in building the good society, about the function and place of the associations that make up modern societies. A...vibrant civil society gives the state moral depth and political vitality, even as a justly constituted state creates the conditions in which all its citizens can build a rich world of networks and associations" (Ray 421,437).

An examination of all the above concepts demonstrates that the 'political' and the 'personal' are closely intertwined. Yet, people often feel threatened by the idea of political forces intruding into personal life. However it is now established that participation of all citizens in public life is the essence of freedom, through which the state can be bound to the common good.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

A critique of the interface between personal and national destinies as seen in national literature, is basically an attempt to document history from the perspective of the masses, departing from conventional elitist versions. The need for such a study, especially in these times of global turbulence, vast inequalities and deep conflicts, wherein the ideal of democratic nationhood is under serious threat, is attested to by several significant facts.

Historians are unanimous about the paucity of comprehensive studies on the history of post-independence India. Ramchandra Guha observes, "...the history of independent India has remained a

field mostly untitled. If history is 'formally constituted knowledge of the past', then for the period since 1947, this knowledge practically does not exist" (Guha xxiii, xxiv). A proper reading of modern Indian history may be the panacea to massive inequalities, degenerating polity, regional, religious and casteist divisions and an absence of rapid growth.

Secondly, in present times, the destinies of the individual and of the nation-state are increasingly and inevitably intertwined. As in other developing countries, the dual responsibilities of maintaining order and promoting development have led to a highly interventionist role for the state in India. Thus, establishing a separation between the public and private spheres becomes difficult. Hence, the role of the individual in public life assumes greater significance. The Indian Constitution names the people as the source of all power. But, the concentration of power in the hands of the ruling elite, rising levels of political mobilization and the vast gap between the commitments and the capabilities of the state, lead to conflict between state sovereignty and popular sovereignty. A truly democratic order can emerge only when power conflicts are worked out with the active intervention of the masses and not through social engineering from above. An analysis of the interface between citizens and public institutions as also of the role of civil society, highlights factors responsible for the poor performance of the state machinery and the areas in which citizens and governments can collaborate to bridge the gap between the formal theory and actual practice of democracy.

Finally, despite much scepticism, the role of literature in national life must be emphasized. The Indian novel in English has always been a faithful mirror of changing individual and national lives and sensibilities. The dilemma of the contemporary writer is captured poignantly by author and activist Arundhati Roy who writes, "Isn't it true...that there are times in the life of a people or a nation when the political climate demands that we – even the most sophisticated of us – overtly take sides?...I believe that in the coming years, intellectuals and artists will be called upon to take sides, and this time, unlike the struggle for Independence, we won't have the luxury of fighting a 'colonising enemy'. We'll be fighting ourselves. We will be forced to ask ourselves some very uncomfortable questions about our values and traditions, our vision for the future, our responsibilities as citizens, the legitimacy of our 'democratic institutions', the role of the state, the police, the army, the judiciary and the intellectual community" (Roy 197-198). Again, to quote Justice Markandey Katju, "Today India thirsts for good literature...Art and literature must serve the people. Writers and artists must have genuine sympathy for the people and depict their sufferings...they must inspire people to struggle for a better life...to create a better world, free of injustice. Only then will people respect them" (Katju, *The Hindu*). The novels selected

for this study, which critique the individual and the nation in tandem can offer a vital roadmap for the future, especially in these troubled times. Historian Sunil Khilnani writes, "...the history of independent India appears as the third moment in the great democratic experiment launched at the end of the eighteenth century by the American and French revolutions....The Indian experiment is still in its early stages, and its outcome may well turn out to be the most significant of them all....India's experience reveals the ordinariness of democracy – untidy, massively complex, unsatisfying but vital to the sense of a human life today" (Khilnani 4,8-9,207). Therefore, it become crucial to understand the causes of the swings in India's fortunes, the simultaneous adulation and condemnation her democracy attracts and explore why she has failed to fully realize her potential.

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