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REVIEW ARTICLE

AN ANALYSIS ON NATIONAL DESTINIES OF SELECTED INDIAN NOVELS

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An Analysis on National Destinies of Selected Indian Novels

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INTRODUCTION

Gurcharan Das' *A Fine Family* is the great Indian middle class novel built around the birth and maturation of the Indian nation-state. The negatives and positives of British rule, the drama of the valiant freedom struggle, the trauma of the Partition of India, the highs and lows of the nation-building enterprise of the sixties, and, the battle for democracy and the creation of a progressive India by a new generation in the turbulent seventies - are all seen from the hitherto neglected perspective of commoners. Gurcharan Das attaches great significance to the middle-class family as a basic unit of the nation-state. He reiterates the role of Partition refugees and middle-class entrepreneurs in nation-building. A student of philosophy who combines Vedanta with modern liberalism, he strives to reconcile conflicting ideas of spirituality and worldliness in the mind of the modern Indian citizen. In an interview with this researcher, Das emphasized the need for citizens to follow the path of dharma or duty or right action at the right time, to be responsive to societal problems in their immediate neighbourhoods. He lamented the loss of the moral core in national life and opined that the role of the writer is to disturb the conscience of the nation. Nevertheless, he foresees India becoming a great middle-class economy and reposes faith in the Indian entrepreneur and the strong Indian society that has grown despite the weak state. At the same time, he calls for a strong state that would swiftly curb corruption and encourage institutional reforms (Das, Telephone interview).

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a strongly political and satirical novel which attains universal appeal through its moving depiction of the marginalised. In his portrait of India from the 1940s to the 1980s, Mistry focuses on the National Emergency declared by the Indira Gandhi government between 1975 and 1977, from the perspective of the poor, Dalits, minorities and lower middle class. He renders a detailed account of the atrocities committed

during those dark days when the decay in the polity had culminated in the suspension of fundamental

rights causing irreparable damage to private lives. Several other issues overshadowing the seventies and eighties are also dealt with – the struggle of the oppressed castes for their constitutional rights, destruction of the rural economy, the ecological crisis caused by elitist development policies, separatist movements threatening the Balkanisation of India, the assassination of Premier Indira Gandhi, the anti-Sikh riots and economic crisis leading to widespread emigration. Rohinton Mistry scathingly attacks governmental and societal tyranny. He visualises an unredeemably corrupt, omnipotent system against which individuals can only struggle in vain.

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the socio-politically volatile Kerala of the sixties and seventies becomes a microcosm of the larger national scene marked by conflicting political ideologies, deep class divides, famine, agricultural and industrial stagnation, unemployment and above all caste and gender discrimination. In her depiction of the subaltern crushed by mighty societal and governmental forces, the novelist rewrites conventional history from the perspective of women and lower castes. Arundhati Roy's documentation of the politics of Communist Kerala and Marxist-Naxalite movements of the sixties and seventies when peasants, labourers, Dalits and unemployed youth were raging against economic inequalities, social injustice and feudalism, analyses how on a national scale, political ideologies disappointed commoners by allying with social orthodoxy and government repression. In both subject and style, the novel overthrows hierarchies by placing the marginalised untouchables and women at the centre. A firebrand social activist, Arundhati Roy supports movements of tribals, Maoists and other disadvantaged groups against the onslaught of a plutocratic state and corporate globalization. She explores new strategies of resistance in an era of massive injustice, capitalist greed and governmental tyranny.

Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* is set in the remote north-east against the backdrop of the bloody Gorkha insurgency. It mirrors the regional secessionisms of the 1960s-1980s which threatened

the idea of an integrated India and traces them to developmental disparities and class-conflicts chiefly caused by administrative failures. The novel also deals with the often painful process of emigration to the West in the 1980s in search of better prospects. On the one hand, Kiran Desai portrays the decadent colonial legacy that has left behind a soulless Anglicised class and has sown the seeds for territorial disputes. On the other hand, as a diasporic writer, she castigates the grand neo-colonial project of corporate globalization which forces Third World immigrants to earn their livelihood in the First World suffering deprivation, insult and crises of identity. She sensitively handles the tormented psyche and undying spirit of ordinary citizens caught between violent regional or ethnic conflicts and tortuous post-colonial dilemmas. Desai makes an admirable effort to canonize all those marginalized by the abuse of power, knowledge and wealth, cutting across temporal and spatial boundaries. By centering subaltern narratives and the conveniently glossed over ugly realities of the twenty-first century world, she seeks justice for the voiceless.

Meher Pestonji's *Pervez-A Novel* offers a comprehensive analysis of India in the nineties- caste and communal politics, the plight of innocent victims of religious riots, the paradoxical co-existence of economic liberalisation and narrow-minded communalism. While documenting the impact of the Ram Temple-Babri Mosque religious conflagration on Bombay, Pestonji exposes the divisive and opportunistic stance taken by politicians and elites which breeds religious intolerance. She also underlines the role of civil society in preserving secularism and her heroine Pervez exemplifies how both individual and nation are transformed by mutual involvement. As she wrote to this researcher, "Destinies (of individuals and the nation) change direction...in periods of upheaval....it is Pervez' own sense of justice misplaced that drives her so that her personal destiny gets enmeshed with national issues. Following the upheaval in the years immediately after the demolition of Babri Masjid thousands...became far more socially conscious...For Pervez it was a wake-up call to identify with groups placing reason and humanity over fanaticism and bigotedness....becoming an agent for social change." While acknowledging the power and beauty of literature, social activist Meher Pestonji believes that more than literature, it is people who can bring about change. She notes that sixty years after freedom, Indians have finally begun to assert themselves as citizens of a democracy, taking responsibility for local governance and forcing those in power to become accountable (Pestonji, E-mail interview).

David Davidar's *The Solitude of Emperors* narrates the journey of a young newspaper journalist in the momentous 1990s marked by economic revolution and communal strife. While depicting the tragedy of riots and lauding those committed to secularism, he indicts politicians, media, bureaucracy, police and elites. The novel innovatively includes a textbook which is meant

to educate youth about secularism. The need to mould the young into responsible citizens, the crucial role of socio-economic injustice in fuelling religious fanaticism, the failure of civil society to oppose communal politicians and the need for India to have a plural and tolerant culture are major themes in the novel. In his interview to this researcher David Davidar observed, "... the very nature of being the citizen of any country demands that we engage with social and political issues...It could be something as 'small' as refusing to pay a bribe or as large as the contributions made by...great political figures like Mahatma Gandhi. It would be great if literature was able to provide a tangible interface between the state and citizens but I think this is not often the case...most often it is because governments simply don't care about what writers are saying...if they prove to be an inconvenience, in democracies they are attacked or threatened...and in dictatorships they are shot or tortured or imprisoned. None of this should discourage writers...because I strongly believe that one of the roles that writers fulfill is that they can hold up a mirror to the sins of omission and commission of the powerful" (Davidar, E-mail interview).

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* undertakes a shocking journey into twenty-first century India with its new rules of success. The journey of the penniless rural protagonist to become a business tycoon after slaying his rich master reveals an India gridlocked in corruption, greed, inhumanity and every form of economic, social and political inequality. Adiga's novel constantly compares the two Indias of astounding plenty and appalling poverty. It takes apart the grand narrative of Indian democracy, the facade of the Indian village paradise, the glittering power of the metropolis of New Delhi and the software miracle in Bangalore. Aravind Adiga is cynical, disillusioned and sardonic about India today. He fires a salvo on behalf of those who are 'invisible' in the conventional national discourse, the large mass of have-nots who are conveniently eluded from India's growth story. He warns of a civil war-like situation born out of the rage of the subaltern. He challenges the nation to cast aside its self-deception and initiate a process of self-examination.

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