

Indian Fiction in English
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Lecture – 12
Indian Fiction in English: 1950s and 1960s

Yeah when we look you know the history of Indian writing in English chronologically there is this period 1950s and 1960s. And whichever literary history that you take a look at we do not find anyone labeling that period. 1950s and 1960s it is usually just called by the years that they signify 1950s and 1960s. Because until the 1940s there is a way in which you know nationalist movement has been invoked.

And by 1970s it is seen again it is seen as the decade which sort of the almost silent decades before the major the second coming of Indian writing in English happens in 1980s. So, about 1950s and 1960s there are a lot of these surveys and the generally the the the decades have been talked about. And so quickly take a look at and let some of the major writers who are being talked about in 1950s and 60s.

And it is also difficult to club them together under any any particular theme. Yeah and here we also need to keep in mind it is waiting for the Mahatma and it is also published in 1955 and 1950s. Yeah but it does not that is not a text which is discussed along with this discussion of the writers of the 1950s and 1960s. The discussions on waiting for the Mahatma happens in continuation with the 1930s, 1940s discussions.

So, there is a convenient kind of slotting of these writers and novels that we begin to see and coming to the novelists of 1950s and 1960s.

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Recommended readings

- 0 "Novelists of the 1950s and 1960s" from *Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra
- 0 "Family matters, domesticity and gender in the novel" in *The Indian English Novel* by Priyamvada Gopal

There is an entire chapter devoted in Mehrotra illustrated history which I also asked you to take a look at there is a limited preview in google books I think only two pages are missing in that. So, it is written by Shyamala Narayanan and John Milne sort of a review of the two decades 1950s and 196s they are also like leading critics, writers of Indian novels in English. So this and this survey kind of essay they begin by talking about you know.

Again invoking the linguistic difficulties which were prevalent and also how it was seen as unpatriotic when one chooses to write in English and also refers to the Narayans Novel which won the Sahitya Academy Award also indicating the kind of acceptance that English or writing in English was gaining in the institutional academic circus and it also then talks about the dominant concern of the literature of the period 1950s and 60s.

Though it is difficult to club all the writers of this period under one rubric here they begin talking about the dominant concern being said the character development psychological depth about the sense of the alienated individual who is dissatisfied with the modern life. Yeah so those are some of the modern concerns which they talk about and there are also certain works which talk about some of the you know events of national importance.

But narrowing down to the domestic familial circles that a lot of women writers who come apart during this time as well. And this period is also seen as the period in which the women writers begin to gain more visibility and this essay Narayanan and Milne they talk about how these set of

writers they do not to form any particular school and but their emergence is a striking period. Because the women writers also cannot be clubbed together under the same set of discussion.

And some of the important writers they begin to mention Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver, Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and these are also the writers who also enjoyed international readership. So, their reputation was not limited to the to this country a lot and then he introduces us to a set of male writers who have also enjoyed a significant reputation within India and abroad.

He begins by talking about Khushwant Singh have you read any of the worked by Khushwant Singh. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yeah trained Pakistan and he has also been seen as a controversial writer and there is a leaner when it comes to Khushwant Singh he is not really seen among one of the leading Indian English un novelist there is a different way in which he is incorporated into the discussion like an IPOD.

And because you know maybe you know the frameworks within which he writes critiques which are uncomfortable to be situated within the conventional critical framework and he is also you know someone who began to very openly talk about man woman relationships about aspects related to sex yeah so many of the things which were considered taboo within the not just within Indian writing in English.

But within the on the cultural scheme of things itself he begins to talk about those things he is continued to enjoy a controversial reputation as well. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** Then there is Ruskin Bond who his career is also it spans like almost 3 to 4 decades yeah and he was mostly you know a master storyteller and again we find that if you look at the critical body of writings about Ruskin Bond.

He has also been you know appropriated into this childrens literature yeah that sort of up writing mostly now and also about you know the enduring way in which he tells stories about certain local realities which are within again we do not find any kind of definite attention being given to the writers in 50s and 60s compared to Raja Rao, Narayana and Mulk Raj Anand yeah who were

writing in the previous decade.

Yeah and it is also like in Ruskin Bonds you know again this is attention to the provincial towns a life of you know the non-urban India. So, those are the things which are being highlighted mostly then there is Arun Joshi how many of you have read any of the novels by Arun Joshi **“Professor - student conversation starts”** (()) (6:29) yeah, yeah that was seen as a different kind of a novel and it was also won the Sahitya academy award.

But after this in fact you know Arun Joshi's novel could not really get the kind of attention that he deserved. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** that also many feel because soon after that Rushdie happens and then there is not all critical space available at all to look at any of the other kinds of writings other than the nation dominated narratives. Yeah so again you know Arun Joshi's works he also about the tribal community a different kind of in India.

But the difference that he seems to sort of foreground yeah that is not really being taken up in the critical space as much as you know many would have liked. So, anyway we will not talk much about Joshi because we will be having an entire presentation and discussion on that. And then there are also in a number of women writers who began to emerge during this period can you begin to name some of them I did the same thing in the beginning of the class.

Just repeat **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Jhabvala I am also grateful to the ones who are presenting on Jhabvala because that is the only one we get to hear out Jhabvala how many of you have read her otherwise. She is a **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** and also you know we could have included Attia Hosain.

Yeah heard about her Attia Hosain is the most well-known worker sunlight on a broken collar a 1960s novel again that is also a different kind of novel like Jhabvala's Heat and Dust. But compared to the critical attention that the others have received she has also not received much attention usually when we talk about women writers it is about Nayantra Sahgal, it is about Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya.

There a set of writers whom we always you know fall back on and what were the dominant themes if you have read 1 or 2 you would be able to say what are the dominant themes they talk about Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya any Anita Desai any Anita Desai **“Professor - student conversation starts”** (()) (09:01) Yeah **Professor - student conversation ends.** “in 1950s and 1960s.

When we talked about women writers writing in English we realized there are women writing in English there are female protagonists. But suddenly the focus shifts from the outside to the inside. It is a domestic space which is getting foregrounded it is about home, it is about relationships, it is about a family, it is about how the tradition modernity tussle is getting enacted within these private spheres.

And some of the novels are also autobiographical in nature. So, suddenly we find we are not really talking about the novels essay. But the way the critical our tradition has been talking about the set of knowledge suddenly the 1950s and 1960s it is as if you know these women who have been entrusted with the task of taking care of the domestic space. Yeah men will take care of the nation men will address the larger issues which are connected with politics.

About you know nationalism about the post coloniality which is you know which the nation is also experiencing. Yeah but the women on the other hand will also talk about how this is getting enacted within these private domestic spaces by telling their own stories. Yeah so it is not as if you know women telling their own story was a big deal I mean across the cultures if you see in the western tradition.

There was a point of time you know from the 17 18 centuries onwards women started writing their own stories talking about themselves talking about the domestic affairs. How you know about relationships how you know this is a constant tussle between the private and the public but when it comes to India it was certainly a big deal because otherwise there was no tradition of women telling their own stories.

Womens lives had to be kept private there was no public telling public articulation of their

experiences and their stories. So, in that sense it did make a market difference in the way women beginning to write about their own stories. About their own experiences not that they would old radical enough in any way but nevertheless that was a big moment to be reckoned. But and the same time were not before I can.

I also want you to want to draw your attention to the conclusion of this essay before we go any further. Take a look at the last paragraph which I asked you to read what does it say since the 1950s and 1960s were not the period of great innovation for Indian writing in English. Although they witness the foundation of writing careers that have lasted over and over several decades and which is specially for women writers brought international acclaim.

Yeah many of the novels seen is highly skeptical of the dominant forms of Indian culture and society choosing to find out more authentic idea of India and the landscape, the provincial town or traditional village life. Yeah and towards the end again the woman writers whose emergence provides the student with one of the few distinctive feature raised the conflict in relation to the condition of women.

But emancipation in novels often figured in terms of personal beliefs into what seems a very literary realm of transcendence and the final paragraph a very short paragraph of two sentences it talks about how these novels is also where they began to acquire a very dominant command. Over the novel writing except they began to achieve you know a sort of a command over the genre itself.

Yeah this is how Shyamala Narayanan and John Milne in their essay and in between they talk about these women writers. So, I want you to listen to this keeping in mind that this is the conclusion that they have also reached that though there are women writers emerging this is not a significant period because they were no major innovation happening so why is this sort of a presentation being made about the women writers.

Though there is a way in which their emergence is celebrated but at the same time they are not being given much of a significance apart from you know the limited ways in which they engage

with themselves about women lives how would the political resonance which was also inherent in these works in different certain ways. Or do these critics and many others who followed suit have chosen the convenient are critical route of not being to the not paying attention.

To the politics which operates outside you know the nation nationalist post-colonial frameworks. How about the politics of gender we find very limited scholarly attention being paid to these women writers apart from the fact that you know they enjoyed some visibility into the international scenario and also you know to a great extent we can also say that even these women were a part of the nationalist project.

In that sense it is not that they were constructing women characters who were entirely an antithesis to the nationalist construction of womanhood. But nevertheless we find that there is an inability to perhaps include certain writers such as you know the work that we would listen and listen about in the next class Heat and Dust by Ruth Jhabvala or Attia Hosain yeah there is an inability to include them as part of the major critical discussion.

Yeah they are only being mentioned as you know certain different kinds of articulation yeah they are not being seen as the center like certain writers mostly like male writers were seen as the center in each decade. So, since we do not find any major male writers emerging in the 1950s and 60s yeah. So, one cannot be entirely wrong in assuming in wondering whether that is that there is also a reason for not giving enough merit enough recognition to these 2 decades.

1950s and 1960 because you know later also when we look at the kind of works which begin to come out in the 1990s. There are lot of anthologies of women writers who begin to come out that also we get the sense that women began to enjoy a certain kind of visibility from the 1950s and 1960s onwards. But it is not seen as a major face yeah and later even in the post 1980s again we find that the role the recognition which is given to the women writers.

It is very limited it is almost like a side dish. There are major male writers dealing with very important aspects of the nation and that are a number of writers. So, we will quickly take a look at how Nayanthara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai have been presented and I am

going to signal in fact to know who is Nayanthara Sahgal of course she is a writer **“Professor - student conversation starts.”**

Nehrus niece who is her mother, whose niece Jawaharlal Nehru, yeah who is her mother Vijayalakshmi yeah right she is Vijayalakshmi Pandits daughter nehrus niece **“Professor - student conversation ends.”** but what makes her very distinctive is that we do not find her like toeing the line and doing exactly replicating the celebration of the national story. She is in fact you know one of her novels it talks about a critic of the emergency period.

Yeah a novel which was published in the 1980s and even that is also not a very well discussed novel but also you know one of the important emergency novel written from this Indian writing in English and this novel is called rich like it also had won an academy award sahitya academy award yeah rich like is even today seen as one of the important intervention in terms of the emergency novel which are which were written.

Okay and Kamala Markandaya Kamala Markandaya works handful of rice, the golden honeycomb and the most important one nectar in a sip. Yeah there are these women who are also victims in most of her novels and that has been you worked, reworked in the Indian critical tradition and these are also in a Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai these are also writers on whom a lot of work has been done but within a similar kind of a framework.

“Professor - student conversation starts” (()) (17:40) Yes, yeah in fact, you know Gandhi, Tagore and Aurobindo most of the national speakers also believe that whatever happens in home is going to be reflection of what happens at the nation front which is why i don not know if you are familiar with this essay by Partha Chatterjee the nationalist resolution of the womens question **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

Yeah that was also you know if you look at the nationalist concern by the major reform leaders yeah the gender question more than the gender questions the question of women, the uplift of women the rescue of women that was always there either it is antithesis rhetoric or about remarriage yeah or whatever it is like making them part of the nation building after the moment

of independence.

So, there is nationalist concern was always there about the women's question. Yeah Partha Chatterjee talks about how this it was also about dissolving the gender question in such a way that there is a very definite separation you know of dichotomy of the public and the private. There are certain realms which you know women need to take it of yeah we are building the nation yeah save the families.

Yeah because you know we should be able to say even save the traditional values because women are also seen as the seat of culture and the other ones who are supposed to preserve the purity of what so ever the traditions, the value system everything. So, just as the reformers the nationalist's leaders are preserving the nation politically from being used up by a foreign power in the same way.

The family has also had responsibly to preserve all the traditional pristine aspects of Indian culture quote unquote yeah. So, all in that way in all there are some of them who also feel that maybe these women were also in a certain way participating in that project yeah knowingly may be advertently yeah by talking about certain female characters of course they are not saying women have to repressed and they should remain you know traditional throughout.

But they are talking the way in which they begin to talk about the female characters also gives the impression that yes you can have a certain kind of an articulation, a certain kind of freedom but also confined to a certain limit. So, this is again you know the same sort of thing that many of the nationalist leaders also endorsed yeah and again when we are talking about them were necessarily not talking about the personalities of these women.

We were talking about the kind of novels that they were writing the kind of figures that the female figures the female characters which may be presented through these novels yeah. And coming to Anita Desai her most famous work would be you know *Bye Bye Black Bird* and she has always had a very successful long career and in her work we find westernized educated women emerging yeah.

But a thing is that when we begin to talk about either Kamala Markandaya or Anita Desai there is the novels are inward looking. The criticism is also very inward looking and one also begins to wonder whether that is again a certain exotic way through which the novels is presenting a certain kind of India to of western audience to a predominantly western audience because even the 1960s and 1970s.

There is again we see a heightened sense of language debates and all of those things happening and one is not too short of the solid readership that these writers enjoyed within the country and if you compare the feminist writings which were emerging from the other parts of India. Yeah so we do not find the Indian women writers in English being able to replicate to sort of things yeah so coming back to this and saying.

Now we come to Ruth Praver Jhabvala and about her you know even her identity is very contested by that she is Indian or not. There are lot of you know papers or so you would find about the contested identities but the same sort of arguments we find are not being used against many of the male writers who rose to fame after the 1980s. Starting from Rushdie onwards the identity becomes a contested notion mostly.

When it is a female writer and otherwise you know most of those things are even they are glossed over pretty much shoved under the carpet. And there is this observation about Ruth Praver Chabvala that she should not be considered Indian writers but most of those European writers who have written about India. Now so these are also some of the things perhaps we will talk about when we talk about the works.

So, coming again you know this essay you know apart from the survey sort of an approach that takes in documenting the writers of 1960s and 1950s and 1960s this essay by Shyamala Narayanan and John Milne does not make any major telling argument except for the fact that towards the end they say this was not a major period of experimentation as far as Indian writing in English.

But we did see the emergence of a few women writers yeah so talking about the presence of women writers in general in Indian literature we are not just talking about Indian writing in English even otherwise can you name this seminal work which was published in the 1990s yeah which was you know huge volume and anthology of women writers from 600BC onwards. Heard of you know this voluminous to volume work.

Women writing in India edited by Susie Taru and K Lalita that was a major intervention this was published in 1990-1991 So, in fact it dug up a number of forgotten writers, neglected writers, women writers from 600 BC onwards which is an interesting work that you can take a look at as well. So, there also she points attention points attention to the minimal visibility of women writers throughout history throughout Indias literary history.

Earlier you know may be during the nationalist face if you could think about it with a nationalist women writers during that phase? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Sarojini Naidu, Sarojini Naidu yeah Toru Dutt yeah just occasional names other than that do not find much of a visibility being accorded to women yeah and it is only in the 1950s and 1960s that is something you know that we need to give recognition to these writers.

“Professor - student conversation ends.” Who started writing in English its only in the 1950s and 1960s that we begin to see that women writers begin to get any real kind of recognition and reputation even in the regional literary history. If you take up a list of all of those early novels yeah it is mostly a set of male writers that we are being introduced to yeah may be female protagonists but we do not have many many female authors to talk about.

Yeah there are couple of you know early Malayalam novels which came out which are being attributed to female authors. But again they were really Indian authors they were mostly you know wives of missionaries who are deciding in India and they also learn the language and written. Yeah so that is a different case altogether so it is from the 1950s and 60s that we begin to notice any kind of visibility being accorded to women writers in the Indian writing scenario.

Not just in English but generally in the Indian writing scenario. And these writers particularly the

same ones that we spoke about they are the ones who repeatedly being mentioned Nayanthara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande. Their novels were also seen as being maybe autobiographical in nature because they drew extensively from the from their personal experiences. Yeah there were ways in which you know that the nation also played a role in terms of the say the events, the backdrop etc.

Otherwise the stories were always drawn from the personal experiences and you also find that these women also challenge certain conventions. In terms of you know bringing out at least partially strong feminist characters. They also talk about daily lives about personal conflicts here we find that family and home the moment the women writers begin to gain certain visibility family home domestic relations they all begin to assume a central role.

And so it is a very different set of things that we talk about when we talk about women writers. And also about you know way in which family gets highlighted in multiple ways we see in most of these novels and this is again a very telling nationalist rhetoric as well about you know the family being the strong hold and the need to preserve the family against the onslaught of the western traditions.

But it is only at a later point of time that with the intervention of the feminist movements. With the intervention of feminist critique that we can to point out that family can also be a space where one can experience an utter loss of individual freedom yeah it may not be always the source of strength yeah it could also be the it could also be a stifling space which does not allow many kinds of personal and political articulations.

Yeah so when you talk about these women writers and time and again. You know when we are forced to talk about only of the domestic sphere only of the family, only of the private, only about the home how does it politically resonate? is there a politics in this or not or do they do you think these women writers all steered cleared away from actively engaging in any sort of from actively taking any political position or engaging with any sort of political position.

So, then we will begin listening to some of these women writers I also want you to think about

these questions asked as and when you familiarize yourself with the novel, the background that the novel talks about etc. Yeah and there are certain things that some of the post-colonial critics heard of Harish Trivedi he talks about the women writers of the 1950s and 1960s in a very different way he says.

Maybe the gender consciousness and the interest towards gendered or the presentation of the female characters all of those things were easily diverted in the interest of the nation state and its social imaginary. Nation state and social imaginary the need to preserve all of those you know as strongholds. Because we are still a young nation when we think about the 1950s and 1960s yeah. So, the major interests of the nation are diverted towards this.

Yeah so only a very partial sort of a very marginal kind of an attention is being given to issues of gender consciousness yeah. And about the interests of women and also about how women themselves begin to feel that they have to you know present themselves and also present characters who could be appropriated very well appropriated by the nationalist patriarchal ideology yeah.

Maybe it is also like oh no reading too much into this but again when we see the way in which all of these women who did not even emerge as part of one central school of women writing in English. We find we all repeatedly talk only about their private lives, only about home, only about the domestic affairs and there is a complete refusal to deal with the outside. Yeah outside is important but only in the ways in which it informs the functioning of the inside yeah.

And about you know one of the example that Harish Trivedi talks about is Kamala Markandaya female characters how in her novel even when we come across a number of female characters which is again a good thing to begin with. But the country as a whole in India is projected as an exotic and as a land of romance, as the land of mystery yeah. So, again there is this Western Euro centric reader who is imagined by the author.

And also about you know the emphasis on the exotic romantic values of duty, devotion, sacrifice sublime love all of these things are being seen as very feminine emotions and also part of an

extension of the Indian Culture, Indian tradition how this is the way Indian culture can be sort of you know commodified in the space of fiction and exotically shown to the rest of the world. Also they begin to wonder.

This is again Harish Trivedi talking begins to wonder whether there is again a stereotypical projection of women which we begin to see in these novels. Yeah though in the conventional criticism they have also been celebrated as being you know giving a lot of space to female characters and because you know in most of these novels we do not have the time to go through them.

May be during the presentation we will again you know dwell upon those things how these female characters their intense sacrificial potential. These are the things you know which are being highlighted in most of the novels especially in Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai yeah he also makes this comment maybe these women they are serving the twin purpose of fulfilling a commitment as well as ensuring the sale ability of their books.

Yeah the commitment towards the nation yeah and also ensuring that the books sell you know the commitment towards the nation in the sense of participating in this nation building activity by maybe inadvertently draw a dwelling upon the nationalist approach towards a gender question and at the same time ensuring that the novels sell well in the sense that the Indian writers writing in English until the 1980s they were not really sure about the domestic market.

Yeah who is going to publish these novels which are being written in English and who are the readers. There were too many distributors who are willing to take them up yeah so one always had to write for the western audience that was the inevitable inevitability of the market condition. We also find that the ones who were not writing for the market the ones who were not getting their novels published abroad they were not getting that kind of visibility either.

In fact, even recently in one of his interviews Alan Sealy talks about how maybe you know he made this terrible decision about not having chosen his publishers wisely yeah. Now because the canonical position the visibility of your novel is also dependent on the ways in which it is

positioned in the market. It is also about you know projecting this is a view shared by Harish Trivedi and Susie Tharu.

This is also about way in which women are also equipped as not just like you know people who equipped with the literately potential but as people who can issue dire warnings against those who reject or break the sacrosanct a traditional idea of woman. Yeah Susie Tharu talks about this not in the context of Indian writing in English she talks about this in her introduction to you know women writing India.

She says it becomes all the more dangerous when women themselves you know they take it upon themselves to sort of execute this patriarchal ideology and they think that you know as strong woman they should ensure that the family is preserved as a sacrosanct space. The tradition is preserved yeah so at some level Harish Trivedi is also telling is that maybe these women the women characters who are portrayed in the writers.

It is mostly Kamala Markandaya, Deshpande, Anita Desai maybe they were also unconsciously creating female characters who would uphold this tradition and also present an exotic image to the west. Yeah because in terms of the readership it is again you know very limited readership that they enjoyed within their within the Homefront as compared to the readership abroad and Priyamvada Gopal when she talks about the women writers of this period.

In fact, there is an entire chapter in the way she positions them is very interesting, Priyamvada Gopals work the subtitle of this work titled the Indian English will win this nation history and narration and when she talks about that women writers there is an entire chapter to them devoted to the women writers and we cannot find the nation figuring in this work at all. Though the subtitle is nation history and narration yeah.

So, the chapter in which she talks about the women writers the title is family matters domesticity and gender in the novel. So, it is always always about certain things which happen in the private realms yeah and here you know she also makes this very powerful observation about most of these female authors they also are positioned in a way that you know the author functions as a

native informant.

Yeah she is using the orientalist rhetoric for that yeah these authors these female these women writers they position themselves as a native informant for the assumed European or the American reader. So, they fail to rise beyond those sort of an expectations and we find this sort of this pattern being at least being broken when it comes to Arundhati Roy and her fiction. That is again you know post 90s,

But then again it comes to 1950s and 60s it is not as of those kind of fiction were not getting written because Attia Hosain work and her heat and dust that we will be listening to in the next session those are examples that these patterns were also being broken these patterns were also being challenged yeah they were not part of the critical tradition in a very center and there is also a minor way in which some of these writers yeah they continue to say the same.

Narrate the same sort of stories by using the characters the minority characters yeah because even in the post 1980s whenever the inside story the private stories are being narrated it is mostly you know either the Parsi story there is a Parsi family there is a Muslim family. Yeah so it is as if you know if the private stories have to be told yeah they have to be told in such a way that you know it also has some kind of an exotic value abroad.

It is not in the way in which the regional writers engage with the private realm not in that radical way in which the regional writers engage with the private realm. So, may be you know in the next class when Rani tells about Heat and Dust yeah we will also discuss this further about you know how the politics operate in that and what this so essentially problematic about Indian writing in English that unless we talk about the nation.

We do not seem to be talking about you know important things yeah the feminist concerns are very very limited. There are feminist concerns but it fails to engage with the larger feminist politics that is in place. Again you know 1950, 60, 70 those are also the decades that saw the rise of number of womens movements from across the world and these women writers they also had a lot of international exposure.

It is not as if they did not know what was happening in the feminine within the feminist domain of feminist politics. But still there is a refusal to engage with that I am not saying that they should necessarily engage with the the western packaged form of feminism. But even then we do not find a bunch of an engagement with the gender as a political category. And if we talk about other kinds of absences about caste.

Yeah about only a certain kind of women getting represented those are again you know things that we should can perhaps come back to discuss it at a later point. Shall we wrap up?