

ANALYSING THE MATRIX IN SOCIAL FICTION FOR ITS RELEVANCE TO LITERATURE: A STUDY OF SELECT NOVELS

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Received: 21 Sep 2022

Accepted: 22 Sep 2022

Published: 11 Oct 2022

ABSTRACT

Literature emerges from within society. Edward Said has stated in his famous work, Culture and Imperialism, that literature is a cultural artefact of a particular region in a specific point of time and hence literary works cannot be 'antiseptically quarantined' from its context. Fiction as a genre, developed in mid-nineteenth century England. Although the genre has various sub-categories such as psychological, religious, industrial, proletariat and social, it is the social novels that becomes the matrix of where demography, culture, social institutions, and ideologies intersect. In the genre of fiction, culture, history, politics converge to create a work that becomes the 'cultural artefact' as mentioned by Said. This paper attempts to draw insights from select English novels to arrive at this conclusion.

KEYWORDS: *Literature, Culture, Social fiction, Edward Said*

INTRODUCTION

Plato in his work *Republic* (375 B.C) calls poetry as being twice removed from reality. However, his pupil Aristotle disproved Plato's reasoning and stated that art and literature were objective representations of reality: an imaginative reconstruction of life. It has been proved now, beyond doubt that literature is closely connected with life especially so, in the case of Social Realist novels. Realism began in Europe in the nineteenth century as a reaction to Romanticism. It was sparked by Erich Auerbach's book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1846). In the Epilogue to his book, Auerbach clearly states that the interpretation of reality through literary representation is of utmost significance. According to Auerbach, the essence of realism lies in its completeness and truthfulness. It denotes a serious portrayal of everyday occurrences among the lower strata at a specific moment in the history of their time.

Social realism takes its roots from European Realism and aims to reveal the social conditions of a society in order to expose the oppressive hegemonic power structures that are responsible for the social ills which plague that society. It developed as a reaction against idealism and the exaggerated ego that was encouraged by Romanticism. After the mid eighteenth century when science progressed, machines were made, and industries came to be established, corresponding changes happened in the social, and political world. As urban cities grew, with the influx of workers from the rural areas, to work in factories, the condition of towns and cities changed. Dirt, squalor and poverty became rampant in cities like London and Manchester. Simultaneously, there was a growing demand for books about social conditions, which, combined with advanced printing technology, and new publishing houses brought more writers to the literary scene. Social Realists had a sense of social consciousness and they pledged to expose the ugly realities of contemporary life, in sympathy with

the poor and working-class people. Although one can suggest that realism started with the novels of Henry Fielding *Amelia* (1751), and Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker* (1771) in the eighteenth century, it is the nineteenth century writers like Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Charles Kingsley, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Thomas Hardy, among others, who excelled in the art of portraying the social reality through the genre of fiction.

Jane Austen's novels became very popular for its accurate representation of social life of Southern England. She lived and wrote in the early nineteenth century, called the Georgian era in England and belonged to the class of the landed gentry. Hence, her novels depict the culture, lifestyle, and ethos of the gentry. Although her novels have been criticized for not reflecting the turbulence of the period, she became popular for writing 'drawing -room dramas' about few families she knew around her, and the relationships within families.

Austen's novels *Emma* (1815), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Persuasion* (1818) reveal the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of English society. There were predominantly two classes: the landlord and the serfs or workers. Women were treated as second-class citizens, uneducated and unemployed: her education limited to the skills required for the home. Intellectual pursuits were not encouraged in women. Hence Mary Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is ridiculed for her interest in academics. The education provided at Mrs. Goddard's School in *Emma*, was sufficient for women to run the house and bring up children. Instead of intellectual pursuits, women were encouraged to cultivate virtues that would enhance their chances in marriage for which beauty and character were the prerequisites. Marriage was the sole purpose for which girls from the genteel tradition were religiously groomed from a very young age. Remaining a spinster was not encouraged. Austen realistically depicts the plight of old maids in the character of Miss Bates in *Emma*. Although Miss Bates is a cheerful and kind person, she is an object of ridicule and pity. Austen also points out that wealthy spinsters were not treated with the same condemnation as the poor ones.

Social etiquette and code of conduct was of prime importance to her class and Austen highlights this in her fiction. Strict rules of conduct governed polite society and breaking it was considered serious. There were also double standards of morality for men and women. For instance, in *Mansfield Park*, Maria Bertram is banished from society for running off with Henry Crawford, whereas he escapes punishment. Those who belonged to the genteel class could be distinguished by their good manners and correct behaviour. The 'ill-bred' Mrs. Elton is loud, rude, over-bearing, and boastful. Austen captures the lively atmosphere of Bath that was a popular vacation place for the wealthy in pre-industrial England. The novels *Northanger Abbey* (1817), and *Persuasion* (1818) give evidence of the topographical knowledge she had about Bath.

Unlike Austen, Dickens who was influenced by Smollett, wrote social fiction on the squalor and poverty of London cities. Dickens' social fiction came to discuss the social problems of the working class people of England and came to be called Social Problem Novels or Condition- of-England novels following the usage of that phrase by Thomas Carlyle in his essay "Chartism" (1839). Condition-of-England novels focused on the representation of class, gender, labour relations, as well as the antagonism between employers and employees, the rich and the poor.

The novels of Charles Dickens novels are the best examples of social fiction. In almost all his novels, Dickens has relentlessly focused on some major issues in the society of that period. The educational system and the harsh treatment of the poor and orphaned children has been the concern in *Hard Times*, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*. *Hard Times* (1854), is set in a small Midland industrial town, to which he gives the fictional name Coketown. The novel critiques education that involves

the learning of facts and information, disregarding imagination and creativity. This novel exposes the Utilitarian philosophy that was being advocated by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Dickens was a staunch anti-utilitarian.

Hard *Times* is the story of Thomas Gradgrind, a wealthy retired merchant who has decided to devote his life for improving the educational system. He believes in the learning of facts to the exclusion of creativity and imagination. He runs a school where children grow up only with facts and no feelings. His own two children Tom and Louisa, become victims of such an educational system. Tom grows up a selfish, dissipated hedonist. Louisa although married to Mr. Josiah Bounderby, is unable to love him and is almost swept off her feet into a love affair with an aspiring politician and student of Gradgrind's philosophy. He is Mr. James Harthouse. Cecilia or Sissy, on the other hand, who is the circus clown's daughter and, adopted by the Gradgrinds, becomes a happily married woman at the end of the novel because she has grown up combining facts with imagination. Tom commits a bank robbery and has to be deported from London with the help of Sleary, the circus manager. Louisa returns to her parents' home, leaving her husband Josiah Bounderby, a wealthy businessman and friend of her father. Sissy on the other hand settles down to a happy marriage and a large family. Gradgrind is thus forced to admit the harm that a factual education has on human character. Having understood the fallacy of his educational policy, we see him a changed person towards the end of the novel, especially after the tragedy of both his children: one becoming dishonest and the other unable to be a good, loving wife in her marriage.

Dickens' literary efforts led the British Government into introducing the Poor Law in 1834 under which relief was provided in cash or sustenance to the aged, handicapped, and the poor. The Poor Law continued till 1870, Afterwards as the proportion of the poor decreased considerably and other societies such as trade unions were formed to ensure proper wages to the workers as well as better working conditions the law was abolished. Karl Marx is said to have said this about Dickens: "Dickens issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together" (Kucich & Sadoff 2006, p155).

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1854–55) dwell on the differences between masters and workers in the industrial cities of Northern England. *Mary Barton* depicts the misery of the working class, caused by a materialistic culture that industrialization had introduced. The story is set in the English city of Manchester between 1839 and 1842. Gaskell lived during the upheaval that followed the Industrial Revolution and was aware of the difficulties of that era (Gaskell 1833, 237). *North and South* deals with the conflict between masters and workers as Gaskell analyses Victorian social realities of industrialism, urbanism, class and gender conflicts. The novelist draws a comparison of the cultures between the industrial North and the rural South. The reality of the poverty and squalor among the workers of Milton which is the hub of factories, is seen through the eyes of Margaret who comes from the southern part of a rural countryside called Helstone. She witnesses the brutal world created by the Industrial Revolution. Through John Thornton, the mill owner and the worker Higgins, Gaskell seems to suggest that the greed of the owners and the ignorance of the workers creates conflict and hinders social progress. She exposes the beliefs and reasoning of manufacturers in Thornton's defense of a theory akin to Social Darwinism, which advocates capitalism as a relentless desire for progress in which humanity is sacrificed: the weak die, whether master or worker. In her novel, Gaskell upholds the theory of John Locke, in which masters and workers work in solidarity. For instance, after the strike in the textile factory, Thornton acknowledges that "new forms of negotiation between management and labour are part of modern life" (Bodenheimer 1991, 61). He agrees that the strike which ruined him financially, was "respectable" because the workers depend on him for money and he depends on them to manufacture his product (Nash 2007, 107).

North and South has been interpreted by Roberto Dainotto as a “kind of apocalyptic journey into the inferno of the changing times—modern poverty, rage, desperation, militant trade unionism, and class antagonism” (Dainotto 2000, 178). Gaskell does not offer any definite solutions to the class struggle; she suggests an understanding between those who wield economic power and their workers, in order to decrease conflicts, and brutality. In this novel we find Thornton and Higgins coming to an understanding, and which encourages communication between masters and workers (Stoneman 1987, 137). Both undergo personal transformations that unites them in the end, and the novel achieves what Stoneman calls a “balanced emancipation” (Stoneman 1987, 138). Gaskell illustrated effectively the social misery of the slums and it resulted in bringing about the Factory Act of 1833. This, in a way is the motive and purpose of social realist writings: to bring about changes in society.

Indian English fiction has always been modelled and inspired by Victorian literature. The social realism of the Victorian novelists can be seen in the novels of the three classicists of Indian English Fiction: Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan. Anand’s *The Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936); Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), R. K. Narayan’s *Guide*(1958), are all unforgettable portrayals of Indian village/ city life in the 1940s and 50s. One of the significant woman novelist of this period who also belonged to the South, was Kamala Markandya (1924–2005) who came from a Brahmin Hindu family in Mysore. Her novels *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), *Possession* (1963) and *Two Virgins*(1973), along with a number of short stories, give us a very realistic portrayal of life in 19th century India. Her themes revolve around the woes of peasants, the painful impact of modernization upon peasant life; and culture conflicts in interpersonal relationships.

Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*, depicts life in Indian villages of the 1940s. The turbulence which industrialization caused in England’s social economy and culture in the 1830s and 1840s is seen as happening in India in the 1940s. Markandaya’s novel is set in a village in South India. She does not give it a fictional name by which we are to assume that the same is true for any village in India. The novelist depicts the lives of tenant farmers through the story of Nathan and his wife Rukmini.

Nectar in a Sieve is in a way a protest document against industrialization. The coming of the tannery destroys the rural fabric of the small village in South India. Markandaya shows how the tannery takes away the sons from the soil and lure them to work in the factory, instead of becoming farmers like their fathers. The tannery also brings many workers to the village and the men seek pleasures which encourage prostitution. Rukmani’s only daughter Ira turns to prostitution in order to feed her starving little brother during the famine. The novel effectively captures the fear of the villagers regarding the onset of industrialization because of the change in the economy. Their fear is a fear of their own uncertain future, brought on by the vagaries of Nature as well as the machine age. In Nathan’s case, the fear comes true. When the tannery factory owners buy the plot of land on which Nathan used to cultivate, as a tenant farmer, he is forced to leave the village. In the city, Nathan and Rukmini are robbed of their belongings on the first day itself. Then they wander around for some suitable job, and being farmers, there are no jobs they can do in the city. Finally they join a group of quarry workers and cut metals. The pollution of the place, and starvation leads to disease. Nathan becomes sick and dies. The tragedy is reminiscent of the tragic fate of Tess in Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1892) or in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), both appropriate parallels of the context in *Nectar in a Sieve*.

The southern coasts of peninsular India has witnessed the migration of people from Eastern and Western countries. A number of novels have been written on the subject of the cultural pluralism in the coastal plains of Kerala. A recent novel, *Aliyah: The Last Jew of the Village* (2017) written by A. Sethumadhavan in Malayalam and translated by Catherine Thankamma, is about the Indian Jewish community of Cochin in the 1940s. The Jewish diaspora is a significant event in the history of the world. The Jews came to India in three different time-periods. There were those that came around 50 CE following the destruction of the Temple during the siege of Jerusalem by the Romans. They came through the sea route to Cochin, and was given shelter in the land by King Cheraman Perumal, of the Chera dynasty. They came to be called Cochin Jews. The Bene Israeli, that form a larger group came between 1600-1800 AD. They occupied the Konkan regions of Maharashtra. The last wave was that of Baghdadi Jews who arrived by the 18th and 19th century. They are the business class in the British port cities of Calcutta, and Bombay.

The story of the Cochin Jews is located in Chendamangalam, which lies in the outskirts of Cochin city. The story focuses on three generations of a Jewish family of Issac Muthapan. His only grandson Salamon, is the narrator - protagonist, who like the others, are awaiting the return to Israel, their homeland. The novelist weaves together myth, history and fiction to create a compelling narrative about the Jewish history, culture and identity in Kerala. In 1948, with the formation of Israel, Jews were expected to respond to the Zionist call to return to their country Israel. Salamon, the son of Evron, had an elder brother Menahem and a younger brother Elias. The two brothers have no children, therefore Salamon is the 'last Jew' in that family. They are Black Jews or Malabari Jews as they are called, and were the first wave of emigres from the Middle East. The novel reveals the differences between Malabari Jews and Pardesi Jews. The latter was of fair colour and had migrated from Western Europe mainly Spain, at the time of The Crusades.

The novel *Aliyah* gives a graphic picture of the life and culture of Chendamangalam and surrounding regions in the time of 1947-48. There were 200 Jews who lived in that area around a synagogue. They had a formidable presence in the village as they were the pioneers in bringing newspaper to the village, of electricity, the telegram, as well as a typewriting institute that was run by Elias. The very title 'Aliyah' means ascent and refers to the holy call to the Jews to return to their homeland. However, Sethu's novel poses the dilemma of the Jews in India. Even though they responded to the Zionist call, many of them were rooted to the land they had fled to centuries ago, and suffered from divided loyalties. *Aliyah* is both a call and a cry for the Indian Jewish community. Although they long to reach their homeland, they must also sever all ties with the place they have lived and loved for centuries. Eshumuthiamma, Salamon's paternal grandmother, who has brought him up after he lost his mother at the age of four, believes that they are 'The Chosen People.'

The novel captures the political context of Kerala in the 1940s with the Communist government of EMS Namboodripad. Pavithran is the communist, who questions the decision of the Jews to leave the land. "This God's call of your elders!. Tell them to keep quiet Soloma" (*Aliyah*192). Comrade Pavithran cannot justify the Zionist call. He questions Salamon: "What has happened here to cause such a departure? When your people were forced to scatter throughout the world, didn't this land stretch out its arms to welcome you?. Isn't this ingratitude?" (195). These are pertinent questions for which no Jew can give any reasonable answer.

Aliyah depicts the political upheavals in the time of Namboodripad. It was the time of Liberation Struggle called 'VimochanaSamram': a protest of the people against the policies of the communist government. The church leaders had got involved and were encouraging the faithful to resist communism in the land as it was anti-god. "The bishops palaces

and parishes were in turmoil. Colleges and schools remained closed. Processions towards the south and the north. Marches with lighted torches to the east and the west... Furious tirades. New slogans everyday” (303). The novel is set in a small rural village called Chendamangalam, that is close to the urban city of Cochin. It narrates the-coming-of- age of this small community at a time when India is taking the first step of self-government after obtaining independence. The people are divided between the Nehruvian ideas of progress and modernity and the promise of a more egalitarian society by the comrades preaching communist ideology in Kerala.

Sethu’s novel is important also, for its portrayal of the Indian Jew, their culture and ethos. The novelist locates his story in the surrounding regions of Cochin- Chendamangalam, Vadekepuram, Thompumpady. It is a region where people of different caste, and creed live in harmony. There is unity and love between the Hindus, Muslims, Konkans, Christians, and Jews. As we hear Salamon explaining his Jewish identity to Ramanandan, a Hindu Konkani Brahmin in the village: “Do you know ours is also a closed community like yours. We mingle only within the boundaries of our group, a small group that takes pride in the purity of its blood” (334). The Konkani community had fled from Goa during the persecution and forceful conversion to Catholicism by Portuguese invaders in the 15th century. The Konkans were provided shelter by the king in Kerala. According to Ramanandan: “...everyone is an outsider... People came from different places at different times.” Elias thinks that it is the “land of people who came and went” (332). It is precisely the migrations from different regions of the world, into Kerala, which has shaped its history and culture. This is precisely the contention of Sethu, who himself belongs to Chendamanglam. Kerala’s distinct culture: unity in diversity, is evident even as early as the 1940s. It is this reality which Sethu attempts to depict in *Aliyah*.

Social fiction as a genre has always succeeded in revealing to posterity, a past age and its culture. Its importance lies in it being read as social documents and succeeds in portraying the past era more effectively than a historical document.

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