

Consciousness-Raising in the Postcolonial Novel

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Abstract: In spite of conflicting views about the value of literature, which have been voiced right from the Greek times, there is a high degree of unanimity among readers world-wide that reading literature does provide valuable gains. Among these, the most striking one is that it raises the level of consciousness of its readers by putting them in the interrogative mode. They question received opinions, social norms and conventions, political and cultural correctness, all forms of oppressive ideologies, and are motivated to initiate reforms, raise voices for change, and even bring about revolutions. This essay tries to demonstrate how the postcolonial novel seeks to raise the level of consciousness of readers by using history in varied ways, in the work of Chinua Achebe, Mulk Raj Anand, and Salman Rushdie.

Keywords: Literature, ideology, social change, history, postcolonial novels.

Controversies about the value of literature have been heard right from the Greeks to the present times. In spite of voices of dissent about its value, literary works continue to be written and read in greater numbers than before. A vast majority of readers and writers believe that literature does affect us positively in several ways. It improves our understanding of life by exposing us to human experiences that would not be available to us because of the limitations within which we are forced to live; it provides us pleasure because this understanding is made available in pleasing packages. It also encourages us to question modes of justice, conventional morality, accepted patterns of behaviour and thinking, and notions of political and cultural correctness. These largely constitute the consciousness-raising aspects of literature. Mario Vargas Llosa puts it forcefully by stating that literature is meant to “arouse, to disturb, to alarm, to keep men in a constant state of dissatisfaction with themselves: its function is to stimulate, without respite, the desire for change and improvement even when it is necessary to use the sharpest weapons to accomplish this task” (72). My essay attempts to demonstrate how the postcolonial novel does this through its complex relationship with history. Since the history-novel connection dates back to the origins of the novel, I shall first outline this connection to clarify how it has changed over time, and then move on to the postcolonial novelists.

Right from the time of its beginning in the eighteenth century in the West, the novel's connection with history has widened and deepened over time and gone through three major phases. In the first phase, novelists imitated history, by writing narratives that approximated life as we know it, which laid the foundations of the realistic novel; in the second phase, novelists also incorporated history within their novelistic frames by bringing into them actual people and incidents and juxtaposing them with invented happenings and characters, which gave rise to a variety of historical novels; in the final phase, almost in the middle of the twentieth century, novelists also problematized history, by using the fictional space of their novels to deal with the complexities involved in history-writing, which brought these two disciplines very close to each other.

History in the postcolonial novel not only reflects some of these trends, but also goes beyond them to allow for a special relationship between the two, mainly because the novel had its roots in the actual historical experience of colonialism. Since colonialism is a political arrangement in which people of one country take control of people in another country, resulting in a relationship between them of masters and slaves/servants, the writers of the colonized countries use the resources of fiction to dramatize accounts of the colonial encounter from different perspectives and for different purposes.

The most known and widely explored example of history in the postcolonial novel is the one in which the novelists recreate their country's past to offset its disfigured versions by the colonial writers, and as a resource for combating the social and psychological damage to the colonial subjects caused by their situation. This I shall demonstrate through the personal narrative of Chinua Achebe and a brief reference to his novelistic theory and practice.

Apart from this, novelists also use history as a resource for raising consciousness of the native subjects by making them aware that their understanding of the processes of history can make a difference in their lives and help them evolve effective strategies for fighting the colonizer's might. This I shall illustrate by using the fictional and non-fictional writings of Mulk Raj Anand.

Finally, I shall show that postcolonial novelists also problematize the very discourse of history, to draw attention to the fact that there can be several versions of a country's past. In this, the postcolonial novelist's engagement with history comes very close to one of the major varieties of the postmodernist novel.

Achebe's narrative about how he turned into a novelist who made special use of history is dealt by him in detail in *Home and Exile*, which owes its origin to the three lectures he delivered at Harvard University in 2000. He tells us that during the course of his formal education, he understood the true meaning of living under the imperial gaze. The British colonizers not only exercised control over the people of his country but also damaged their psyche, by inducing in them a sense of racial inferiority.

This is similar to what Frantz Fanon has written in his classic work on colonial subjectivity, in which he shows how the colour difference between races is legitimized by the colonial masters by invoking scriptural authority and quoting passages such as: "We [the whites] are the chosen people—look at the colour of our skins. The others are black or yellow: that is because of their sins" (23). So, sinful and depraved, people of black races are no better than barbarians; they have "no culture, no civilization, no 'long historical past'" (25).

The colonial masters convinced their subjects that the scriptures could not be wrong; they truly were depraved and barbaric. In this way, the colonizers constructed for them a picture of the world they lived in and their place in it to make them accept their superiority over them as well as to justify their moral right to rule them.

To add to this, almost as a proof of their assertions, the colonizers also created a vast storehouse of knowledge to justify their presence in the colonies. The main purpose of producing such historical, fictional, and non-fictional writings was to expose the moral and spiritual degeneration of the native population. This is the kind of work that Edward Said examined with passion in his thesis on *Orientalism*: to explain the widely-circulated stereotype created by the West of a lazy, wild, and morally poor people with no history and culture.

Achebe read about the falsehood spread about the Africans in the novels of Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad. He also found that for over three hundred years, nearly four hundred volumes of fiction and non-fiction had been produced in the Western world, a mixture of “fantasy and myth,” for the sole purpose of establishing the inferiority of Africans. These find mention in a volume put together by Hammond and Alta Jablow titled *The Africa That Never Was* (26).

Achebe drew two important lessons from this. First, the belief about “the innocence of stories” that had been instilled in people like him was false and needed interrogation. Reams of fabricated narratives and piles of interested knowledge needed to be read with “greater scrutiny” and “with adult eyes” (Hammond and Jablow 34). Second, literature that clouds artistic insight with “stereotype and malice” is a literature of devaluation, an example of “the colonization of one people’s story by another” (43).

This understanding made him realize that the story of Africa had to be reclaimed and retold. Fanon too had said that if Africans desired to free themselves, they needed first to regain their lost voice, which could be done only by reclaiming their past. Achebe calls it “‘storying’ people who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession” (79), to make them recover from their “badly damaged sense of self” and to help them regain their eroded self-esteem. His belief in what he calls the “curative power of stories” grew so strong that he made it the cornerstone of his fictional practice and propounded the idea of the novelist as teacher (Achebe, 1990).

As a teacher, he uses the resources of fiction to retell the story of his people and to re-frame the colonial encounter to do two things simultaneously: a) expose the deceit and treachery in the carefully contrived route the colonial master took to gain control over his country; b) demonstrate that his people were neither barbaric nor did they lack a viable institutionalized political structure that was less democratic than what the British had imposed on them.

It goes to the credit of Achebe that in his recreation of the past of his country in his novels, especially in *Things Fall Apart*, which has been widely written and commented upon, he is honest and truthful. This is evident from his depiction of the colonizers and the colonized; he neither romanticizes the oppressed, nor does he demonize the oppressors. The British succeeded in making inroads into his country, because they were helped by the natives. That was the sad truth, but that does not in any way lessen the culpability of the colonizers.

Since Achebe did not want to be what he calls a copycat, he used the form of the Western novel to do his job but made it his own by combining it with the narrative traditions of his country. Likewise, though he wrote in the language of the colonizers, he transformed it by bending its syntax, by bringing it very close to the native speech rhythms, and lacing it with versions of local proverbs and expressions, thus creating a basis for more language experiments of the later-day postcolonial novelists.

If Achebe brought history within the fictional frame to correct the misrepresentation of his country's past by the British and thus help his people regain their self-confidence, Mulk Raj Anand, much before his time, used history in his fiction not only to make sense of their pitiable situation but also to help people find the main cause of their long enslavement by the British.

Anand is not generally read as a postcolonial novelist but as one who is concerned with the plight of the downtrodden in the society of his day, the untouchables and the coolies. If the British also figure in his novels, it is because, during his time, they formed an important part of the social and political scene. Besides this, Anand does not approve of his people's traditional thinking on history.[†]

A close study of his fiction and non-fiction shows that Anand does use history in the manner of a postcolonial novelist in his fiction to do two things simultaneously: a) he unravels the oppression of the Indians by the British quite tellingly; b) he also lays bare the cause of this oppression by relating it not as much to the distortion of their past by the colonizer as to their own understanding of the march of events in history.

Anand's delineation of the colonial bondage of the Indians forms a recurring backdrop in almost all the novels that he wrote before the independence of his country, but it does not function merely as a setting. Its microscopic picture dramatized in *Two Leaves and a Bud* brings out forcefully the two repulsive aspects of the presence of the British in India. The first is their dissemination of the theory of racial superiority for legitimizing their rule and the exploitative and immoral nature of their policies and practices. The novel also uncovers the "layer upon layer of the superciliousness, the complacency and the assurance of the spirit that built the Empire" (*Two Leaves* 49) by showing how the British perpetuated themselves in power because "they let lie pass for truth," made "deceit a virtue," and "exalt[ed] the worse to the best" (65). The exposure of the exploitative policies and practices of the British is thorough and complete. Anand's purpose is not merely to expose the depravity of the British, but also to understand why the Indians accepted the colonial bondage for long, without any effective resistance. He found that it was mainly because of their belief that God was always present in history, and events and happenings in human lives were governed by forces beyond their control.

In his *Apology for Heroism*, which Anand calls his intellectual autobiography, he writes: "We put too much emphasis on the unknown fate and prostrated ourselves before

[†] The discussion on Anand and Rushdie draws on my earlier work published in 1993, 1998, and 1999.

the deity....We became bound in the cycles of Karma” (*Apology* 111).These words capture the essence of the traditional thinking of the vast majority of Indians on time and history.This view had also encouraged gross exploitation of people of lower classes and castes: “...the realities of life lay buried beneath the thick crust of mendacity and superstition, of dogma and unreasoned belief, where knowledge had been sedulously built up only in the interest of the few....” (*Apology* 112).

In *Two Leaves and a Bud*, Havre, as Anand’s mouthpiece, helps us see that the Indians accepted everything in life with hopeless silence.They put up with all forms of oppression, both at the hands of the British and their fellow beings, with “resigned indifference.”When Gangu’s visions of liberation are snuffed out by the brute British forces, he understands his situation only in divine terms, as the working of “an inevitable, inexorable fate, imposed by the Omnipresent, Omniscient Providence, of whom Siva and Vishnu and Krishna were the supreme incarnations” (261).In a tone of passive resignation, he tells his companions: “brothers, there is nothing to be done except to make up our minds to settle down here and smoke the hookah, and mention the name of Ram” (213).Anand suggests that in the popular imagination, the British were the kinsmen of God, and therefore to be obeyed. In *Across the Black Waters*, Lalu thinks of George Panjim as the incarnation of God.The soldiers who fight for the British in France “obey the orders of the Sarkar and of God who made us servants of the Sarkar for our past deeds” (133).They think they are “without a will of their own,” and therefore act like “soulless automatons” (136).

This is further reinforced in *The Sword and the Sickle*, in which Lalu’s perception of the Sarkar is presented through a powerful image, invested with divine force, which inspires awe:

...one could merely stand aside for a moment and contemplate its potencies, stand aghast and gaze, wide-eyed, at its invisible, insidious presence, gaze at it as one gazes at a god, merely to see its magnificent, all-embracing, omnipresent, omniscient being in action and to seek to understand its inscrutable, inexorable presence, to realize the reality behind its various manifestations. (188)

The most striking quality of this image is that Lalu associates all the divine attributes with it: it is all-powerful, omniscient, and inscrutable.It compels obedience in the same manner in which people pay obeisance to the Gods.Anand is suggesting that the Indians have accepted the British as divine beings. As such, they form part of the inexorable wheel of time, and beyond their control.

After establishing that the British and the gods cohabit in the psyche of the majority of Indians, Anand develops the action of his novels to work out a fundamental change in their attitude, without which it was impossible to fight the British.He makes Lalu accept and then recognize that there is an alternative mode of understanding the processes of history, which provides hope for a healthy change.

A careful look at the Lalu novels reveals that, initially, Lalu is totally in the grip of fatalistic thinking. When he returns from France to India, he looks back on his life up to that point as a movement within the inexorable wheel of time, the pitiless fate, which had consumed several of his companions. But he also experiences the first stirrings of the spirit with which he could shake off this burden and break the chains of that fate that prevented people from shaping their own lives. Caught in the thick of turmoil in India after returning from France, he resolves that he would “look for it, he would track it down, the oppressor that drowned the agonies of the people—he would know it and seek to master it.” (*Sword and Sickle* 66) This contrasts with the view of his uncle, who sticks to his earlier thinking of the “pessimistic faith in renewal, in the going back to God, who seemed to the devout the beginning as well as the ultimate end of the journey” (67).

Throughout the novel, Anand elaborates these contrasting views in such a manner that they develop into two conflicting attitudes towards the march of events in time, two different kinds of historiography. Lalu has to decide whether he should believe in the divine interpretation of history or the one directed by human agency. Through his struggle and the understanding he finally arrives at, Anand endorses the latter. Lalu’s moment of realization is bright and clear:

The Sahibs were no gods, as he himself had seen at close quarters in Europe. The days were gone when he would be cowed by the red-faced monkeys or by rich Indians, like Harbans Singh and other greasy sycophants. Why, the Hindustanis were a separate nation like the Germans and the Francis and the Angrezi people...! They had the right to be a separate nation and, what was more, they had the right to their own land! (82-83)

When Lalu learns to disentangle the presence of the British in India from the belief that they were gods, he develops confidence to think of ways and means to combat them. This provides the basis for debates on the modes of resistance to fight the British.

The Big Heart has the same contrasting views of history at its centre, which are related to the crisis in the community of Thathiars, because of the introduction of machinery in their trade. Ananta understands the constraints of objective reality, that the machines had come to stay in their trade, but maintains that even then one could control and direct change. In contrast to this is the view of Viroo, who says: “I got my trust in my kismet and my God,” and that of Ralia, who extends its scope to the whole range of human activities: from playing cards to fighting his masters. Ananta thinks differently about gods and fate: “God’s won’t help us because, as far as I have known Him, he has always preserved a discreet silence in the affairs of men. And Fate, like money, seems to be bitch goddess, favouring the few...” (197). He does not merely dismiss God’s role in human affairs, but also suggests that this has been exploited by vested interests to gain access to wealth and power. Even the British used the idea of providence to legitimize their rule over India. Anand sides with Ananta when he says: “It is a good thing that we are not like wax in the hands of Destiny ... we can now make a choice in this world of evil and destruction, if we have heads and hearts” (198-99).

It is interesting to note that although Salman Rushdie distanced himself from what he calls the earlier group of Indian English novelists, Raja Rao, R K Narayan and Anand (Rushdie 1982:19), in *Midnight's Children* we see reflection of Anand's insight, for the novel builds a contrast between two kinds of India's past.

Rushdie's assumption in the novel is that India as a nation was born only in 1947. An invented and imaginary country, it was made possible through a massive collective dream. This is expressed in a passage of remarkable power:

There was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary, into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream....” (*Midnight's Children* 111)

The passage clarifies that Rushdie is putting on a new interpretation on the very entity called India. Since he dates its existence from 1947, he thinks that its five thousand years of history are inconsequential. This is a massive act of interpretation, much more severe than Anand's opinion that the country's past had many ugly spots. In Rushdie's view, post-independence India takes on a mythical shape, because it is the result of a collective dream of a large number of people, representing its different regions and communities.

Although Rushdie's view might sound like the well-covered thesis that the British really made us into a nation, it is much more than that. For his India is a wished-for country. He invests it with a new character, so that it contrasts with its older version, which is unhealthy and therefore undesirable. The things he associates with the new nation are suggested through the children who were born along with it. Saleem, hints at this:

They can be made to represent many things, according to your point of view: they can be seen as the last throw of everything antiquated and retrogressive in our myth-ridden nation, whose defeat was entirely desirable in the context of a modernizing, twentieth-century economy; or as the true hope of freedom.... (Rushdie Interview 197)

The passage makes it clear that Rushdie understands India's post-1947 past from the perspective of the 1970s, more precisely, the declaration of Emergency in 1975, about which he states in one of his interviews: "...it seemed to me the period between '47 and '77—the period from Independence to the Emergency—had a kind of shape to it: it represented a sort of closed period in the history of the country. That shape became part of the architecture of the book” (Pattanayak 21).

Rushdie projects the idea that India has two kinds of past: the pre-and post-independence pasts, which are qualitatively polar opposites. The thrust of the narrative in the novel is to make us perceive that the problems of post-independence India arise from

its occasional lapses into the myth-ridden, undesirable past of the pre-independence days, where time operates on a different scale and the values of a secular polity, associated with the new one, are messed up completely. This is made clear in another passage in the novel:

History, in my version, entered a new phase on, August 15th, 1947—but in another version, that inescapable date is more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga, in which the cow of mortality has been reduced to standing, teeteringly, on a single leg; Kali-Yuga—the losing throw in our national dice-game; the worst of everything; the age when property gives a man rank, when wealth is equated with virtue, when passion becomes the sole bond between men and women, when falsehood brings success....(*Midnight's Children* 191)

The passage implies that in a country like India, there are alternative ways of understanding events and happenings because of alternative notions of time. Saleem's version follows the Western mode of horological time, but the other mode is mythical, and is related to ancient India. The imagery employed for bringing out this contrast suggests that the latter is not the Indian mode, as Rushdie understands India, but the Hindu mode. By extension, these two modes of time lead to two modes of understanding the past, or history: one is based on a proper understanding of the movement of time and also on reason and the secular ideal; the other is shaded by myth and legend and aided by superstition.

Apart from this, Rushdie's novel also deals with the problems related to writing history, through his protagonist, Saleem Sinai. Rushdie builds him carefully as a person who is a world in himself—history encapsulated in a human frame. Every passing moment makes him full and heavy. The cracks and fissures in his body are constantly widening because of its pressure. "History pours out of my fissured body," he tells us quite often.

Saleem's connection with history is also suggested by the amalgamation of the public and private in his person:

I was linked with history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively, in what our scientists might term 'modes of connection' composed of 'dualistically composed configurations' of the two pairs of opposed adverbs.... (*Midnight's Children* 232)

The different types of the active and passive connections between Saleem and history are both interesting and problematic. As an embodiment of history, Saleem is made into a receptacle of what has happened and is happening around him. This makes him into a passive being, even a kind of victim. Because he is also placed at the centre of all the happenings in the novel, he gives history shape and meaning, which makes him into an active agent. This active part of him becomes the nucleus of the problematizing of the historical discourse.

To begin with, Saleem, like the traditional historians, aspires to produce some kind of a totalization of the past, a complete and coherent account, and avoid the

temptation of selective representation of events, which he illustrates by telling us that he would write the history of his family with all its pleasant and unpleasant aspects. But he realizes that it is not possible to do that, because, as Rushdie writes in one of his essays “Human beings do not perceive things whole; we are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable only of fractured perceptions” (*Imaginary Homelands* 12). This is clarified by the metaphor of the perforated sheet through which Saleem’s grandfather looks at his future wife only in bits and parts. This clearly suggests that howsoever hard we might try, all accounts of history are bound to be incomplete; this makes historical knowledge provisional and relative.

Rushdie explains this by connecting Saleem’s links with his past through his memory, which “selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also, and yet creates its own coherence. By implication, he suggests that the same happens in the process of representation. Events can be shortened or lengthened by controlling the distribution of space among them” (*Midnight’s Children* 211).

In spite of these handicaps, Saleem works vigorously and with speed, which increases the risk of errors:

I remain conscious that errors have been made, and that, as my decay accelerates...the risk of unreliability grows....I am learning ... what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe.... (*Midnight’s Children* 263)

Saleem realizes that mistakes and exaggerations are the lot of a historian; he has to work within serious limitations. But in the last two lines, we also get to see his arrogance and mischief: what actually happened is less important than what the author is able to persuade his audience to believe. It suggests that cohesiveness in historical accounts is more a function of how things are put than the truth of the things themselves. This is where historical truth, no matter how elusive, becomes a casualty.

Rushdie offers another variation on this, when he writes about the preservation of past through memory, the chutnification of history: “in words and pickles, I have immortalized my memories, although distortions are inevitable in both methods. We must live, I’m afraid, with the shadows of imperfection” (*Midnight’s Children* 442). He then goes to another extreme, where we see his arrogance: “...I fell victim to the temptation of every autobiographer, to the illusion that since the past exists only in one’s memories and the words which strive vainly to encapsulate them, it is possible to create past events simply by saying they occurred” (427). This is where history comes very close to fiction.

At another place, we see the same mixture of helplessness and arrogance. To remove imperfections in his account he thinks of subjecting it to revision: “I should revise and revise, improve and improve; but there is neither the time nor the energy. I am obliged to offer no more than this stubborn sentence: It happened that way because that’s how it happened” (443). That is why in his account, Gandhi will continue to die at the wrong time. In fact, it also suggests that the uniqueness of all historical accounts lies in their novelty of presentation or interpretation. It is because reconstructions of reality are

“built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge” (Rushdie, Errata 100).

Reading all the three passages together we find that these are a mixture of humility and authority. Historical recreations are the result of our knowledge and ignorance; carefulness and carelessness; and finally of our modesty and arrogance.

Thus we see that the three novelists sharpen our understanding of the colonial encounter through the fictional recreations of history in their works. We also get to know the reasons for doing so, as well as the complexities involved in the processes of history-writing, which create space for historiographic contestation in postcolonial novels.

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