

**O.P. Mathur, *Post-1947 Indian English Novel: Major Concerns*. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2010. 181+viii pp. ISBN 0: 8176259985/13: 9788176259989.**

The present critical anthology contains thirteen critical articles by O.P. Mathur written on different occasions, but expanded and gathered together here under a common rubric of political fiction of the post-colonial India. He makes some important generalisations about the major concerns of these novelists, which intensify our awareness of the Indian English Political Fiction as a separate sub-genre of fiction.

In the first chapter entitled, "A Bird's Eye View: The Post 1947 Indian English Political Novel," Mathur offers a panoramic picture of the post-colonial political fiction of India right from K.S. Venkataramani, A.S.P. Ayer, K. Nagarajan, through Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, K.A. Abbas, Khushwant Singh, with Manohar Malgonkar, H.S. Gill, Raj Gill, Attia Hossain, Gurucharan Das, Nina Sibal, Shahi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, O.V. Vijayan and several others in-between. He has diligently but briefly sketched the major political problems of Indian society like the Nehruvian idealism, Gandhian rural uplift, minority-ism, communal reservation, assertion of regional identities, never-ending hunt for wealth, corruption of Indian bureaucracy, constabulary atrocities, trauma of Partition, power-politics and fundamentalist nationalism etc. The bird's eye view happens to be of enormous help to the young researchers in the field to expand these insights into broader perspectives and in greater depth.

Mathur highlights the theme of depression and loss of identity, especially of the Panjabiyat of Kanshi Ram, an ordinary grain merchant of Sialkot and the Hindu-Muslim enmity depicted in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*. He rightly opines that the novel attains epic dimensions. Interestingly contrasting it with Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, he describes it as a "Train to India."

Analysing Manohar Malgonkar's *The Princes*, Mathur highlights the political theme of the merger of the Begwad Princely State into the Indian Government and the contrastive approach to this political inevitability by Maharaja Hiroji and his son, Prince Abhayraj. He shows how Maharaja Hiroji is rigid in his belief in feudalism, whereas his son is quite flexible in his acceptance of democracy and compromise with the historical situation.

In his discussion of Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov*, Mathur draws our attention to the contradictions between the Western and the Eastern ideologies seen in the life of the protagonist, a South Indian Brahmin called Padmanabha Iyer, who changed his name to Kirillov. Initially an orthodox Brahmin, a nationalist and a devotee of Mahatma Gandhi, he discards the creed of his

forefathers and becomes a Communist and a bitter critic of Gandhian philosophy. But finally he is disillusioned with Communism too. Then he returns to India in search of his true identity but is lost in existential despair.

Mathur offers a thematic analysis of Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Shadow from Ladak* by showing how the Gandhian rural oriented approach embodied in Gandhigram and the Nehruvian modernist rapid industrialisation embodied in Steeltown are harmonised. He shows how Satyajit and Suruchi study at Tagore's Santiniketan and deeply influenced by Tagore's philosophy they realise the need for harmonising asceticism and aestheticism and experiment it in the life of their daughter, Sumitra by allowing her to marry Bhashkar Roy and leading a normal life. Mathur rightly concludes, "The novel, thus, appears to be more a human than an ideological document" (70).

He discusses Nayantara Sahgal's *A Situation in Delhi* as an important political novel, which depicts a pessimistic picture of Post-Nehruvian India characterised by political vacuum, violence, authoritarianism, censorship, hypocritical concern for "social justice," Naxalite Movement and student agitation etc. He rightly remarks that the political situation presented in the novel foreshadows the period of Emergency clamped by Mrs. Indira Gandhi during 1975-77.

In "Darkness at Noon: The Trauma of the Emergency and the Novel," Mathur briefly sketches the theme of the evils of Emergency declared by the Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi like mass sterilisation, city beautification executed heartlessly through blind bulldozers, dance of bureaucratic and constabulary tyranny and censorship of the press etc., as depicted in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and *Such a Long Journey*, Malgonkar's *Garland Keepers*, Raj Gill's *The Torch Bearer* and so on. Mathur makes an insightful observation when he remarks that most of these Indian English novels, unlike the depressing dystopias of the West, are political novels, which in spite of being realistic, achieve either symbolic, mythological or allegoric dimensions thereby harmonising politics with religion.

Mathur illustrates how *Midnight's Children* emphasises the multiplicity, pluralism and hybridity of the Indian society. He rightly says that the novel is based "on a serious-cum-comic, symbolic-cum-allegorical, multifaceted presentation of his exposition of the search for meaning in the Indian history of about a century" (97). He shows further how the old philosophy of India is expressed in the modern life.

Mathur shows in Rushdie's *Shame* the admixture of fantasy and realism and how fantasy conceals the satirical element in it. He highlights the themes of the gory horror of slaughters, rapes, arson and sin. He rightly says, "Rushdie satirically exposes the reality of his 'Pakistan' through a dual strategy of mockery and horror."

Commenting on Rushdie's *Shalimar, the Clown* Mathur says that it is a multi-stranded novel dealing with the global phenomenon of terrorism, especially in Kashmir, through the psyche of the clown-like Shalimar, who is a representative of a number of other terrorists. Along with the theme of terrorism, the feminist theme and that of revenge tragedy are also depicted as they appear to be interconnected. Mathur considers it as the greatest work of Salman Rushdie after *Midnight's Children* as it holds mirror to the burning problem of terrorism in the contemporary world.

He analyses the theme of transcendence of politics and the division of humanity between "here" and "elsewhere" as depicted in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. He aptly describes it as a "highly evocative novel" which intends to extinguish politics of all kinds and to place man in direct contact with the world in thought, imagination and action.

Commenting on Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Mathur contrasts the two Indias – of Darkness and of Light depicted by the novelist. He shows how Balram Halwai murders his master Ashok Sharma due to his poverty and wants to become an entrepreneur. Finally, he concludes that "This positively powerful novel has, thus, a potentially ambivalent ending which challenges our understanding" (152).

The last chapter entitled, "Rumination: Looking Back and Forward" is a very important one in that it shows the multidimensional and voluminous currents of English, Hindi and regional literatures. Mathur offers insightful remarks about the strengths and weaknesses and a contrastive picture of Indian English fiction and regional Indian fiction. The regional Indian novelists complain that the Indian English novelists have no deep knowledge of Indian culture, especially the rural one. It may be true to a certain extent, but Mathur rightly points out that the Indian English novelists are generally elitist, but quite secular and highly imaginative and reflective in their writing. He points out the ironical fact that though the regional novelists claim to be more authentic in their knowledge of Indian culture they have not produced any significant novels on Emergency whereas the Indian English novelists have produced many, which is noteworthy. Mathur points out how certain types of fiction are conspicuously missing in Indian English literature like the "international" novels or war novels. But in spite of such lacunae the Indian English writers have been quite successful in depicting a variety of themes and experimenting with a variety of techniques. On the whole, Mathur rightly believes that Indian English fiction has a bright future.

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