

'For us Joyce is a nightmare'

a conversation with Hindi poet Vishnu Khare

Modern Hindi literature has never enjoyed a large readership, overlooked by the increasing number of non-Indians interested in Indian cultural expressions such as cinema and Indo-English writing. Hindi poet Vishnu Khare, presently translating a Dutch novel into Hindi in a temporary office in the centre of Amsterdam, shares his views on the state and future of the Hindi novel.

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Although the novel today is the most widely accepted form of fiction writing worldwide, it arose out of a specifically European cultural and historical context. A genre that arose in the eighteenth century, there is, to date, no inclusive definition that finds agreement among literary theorists. As recently as the 1930s Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal essay 'Discourse in the Novel', which set forth his concept of dialogism, initiated a period of frantic reconsideration of established research. Bakhtin, for example, counted Greek adventure romances of the third century as novels. For him the binding factor of a novel is a specific type of discourse, a use of language.

Despite the novel's geographic origins, non-European writers have adopted the novel as a means of expression to such an extent that it has become a standard mode of writing. But what happens to modes resulting from 'individualistic' Western development in 'communalistic' Indian society, such as representation of the individual and verisimilitude? If Edward Said argued that the English novel is inextricably bound to imperialism, what consequences does this have for the Indian character of the Hindi novel?

Some see the pervasive influence of the novel on non-European literary communities as a remnant of colonial hegemony, even a persisting colonization of the mind. In a recent essay, writer and critic Nirmal Varma discussed the case of India and argued that in certain instances, the novel is perhaps not the most appropriate form to convey certain Indian experiences. One of his points is that the circular Indian sense of time is not properly complemented by the linear form of the novel.

The Indian literary character

Implicit in Varma's argument is the suggestion that Hindi novels have a somehow distinctly Indian literary character. One expression of this, difficult to put a finger on, is the mood underlying the plot. I have even heard Dutch readers, unacquainted with Hindi, comment on a particular 'Indian' feel when reading works in translation. In many Hindi novels characters do not really come to life when compared to European counterparts of the same style and theme. Their personalities and experiences are either overshadowed by their nearly allegorical representation of a theme, or their function is to evoke an emotional state in the reader, achieved by highlighting a particular aspect of their personality.

Examples of such novelistic writing are found throughout the twentieth century: contemporary Hindi writers such as Geetanjali Shri and Alka Saravgi but also earlier writers such as Nirmal Varma, K.B. Vaid and 'Ajneya'. A fitting example is *Ajneya's Apne Apne Ajanabi (To Each His Stranger, 1961)*, which explicitly thematizes the concept of time. Two characters are juxtaposed and clearly symbolize extremes of Western (linear) and an Indian (circular) sense of time. Both characters equate the other with certain views of time, thereby creating a caricature and a flat character. Thomas de Bruijn has pointed to Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* as a novel with a radically different treatment of the same subject matter. The main character Hans Castorp often philosophizes about time, but always in a manner that complements and adds credibility to his fictional personality. Time is not forced into the novel's structure and remains separate from the storyline, embedded in the plot and characters.

Residues of Indian tradition?

If flat characters partly identify an Indian feel in Hindi novels, then what can be said about how it comes about? Perhaps 'flat character' is inappropriate, too Western a term and the study of the protagonist in Hindi novels would be helped by taking a less Western literary theoretical approach and looking more from the viewpoint of traditional Indian poetics. To a large extent Vishnu Khare, who is in Amsterdam translat-

ing a novel, *Rituellen (Rituals)* by Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom, remains puzzled by the fact that the novel never took off in Hindi writing.

Khare explains that in India there is a long tradition of the narrative. The telling of stories is important and the plot of many epic narratives, such as the sixteenth century Sufi romances, is exciting and full of action. However, the characters in these tales are two-dimensional; they do not develop in line with the events because they are purely allegorical. 'It is like in your Dutch *Elckerlijc*' Khare states, drawing a parallel with the late medieval allegorical play where Elckerlijc talks to personifications of death, friendship and family.



The second sense in which characters of the Hindi novel remain flat is in the predominance of function over character development. In some cases it seems as if a character's function to evoke a certain emotional state in the reader is more important than the coming to life of the actual character. This might be compared to an example proffered by the above-mentioned Mikhail Bakhtin, that of the ancient Greek romance-adventure novel where an important function of the characters is to maintain the experience of adventure. The use of a literary character to evoke a certain mood also reminds us of an influential theory in Sanskrit poetics, that of *rasa* (literally: sap). Bharata expounds in his fourth century *Natyashastra* that good art expresses one of nine essential states of being. The feeling of *rasa* is the desired result of experiencing one of these nine states. Perhaps the Indian feel of much modern Hindi writing can be explained by analyzing it from the perspective of *rasa*. If applicable, then such a mode of reading would be unlike any Western novel and would correspond with previous research about tendencies towards the *atman* (soul), non-personal and non-worldly in contemporary Hindi literature.

Visnu Khare too finds it probable that these tendencies and traditions - *rasa* and the non-personal - are influential for Hindi writers today. On one hand he speaks with Bakhtinian distaste for the neat category of the novel as it still stands - referring, half jokingly, to the Indian epic Mahabharata as a postmodern myriad of stories - while on the other he signals a reluctance in Hindi writing to experiment beyond a certain point. Khare explains this as resulting from a higher level of social commitment. 'Despite globalization Indian society will remain cohesive and retain values of morality and neighbourly respect. Because of the extreme numbers and diverse denomination of Indians, literature in India has a more important social function than in Europe'. Khare's view of the importance of

literature's social function is reflected in his enthusiasm for the still burgeoning school of Dalit literature. This writing is a protest movement by casteless writers, and like feminist and other identity politics of the 1980s, is less concerned with aesthetics than with social reform.

Khare agrees that there is a fine balance between social engagement and personal introspection:

'Writers should be socially engaged, but without forgetting the private human behind their work. For Hindi writers this personal expression does not come easy. The personal is often associated with the sexual, for example in the *a-kavita* (non-poetry) school of the sixties, but this is not all there is to one's personal life. Writers like Günter Grass or José Saramago have combined in their work questions of the larger human dilemma with those on a personal level. If an answer is not bound to the individual there is the danger of starting to resemble fascism. In my view, the unilateral placement of *moksha* (liberation through self-transcendence) in the center of a discourse carries with it the danger of absolutist tendencies'.

Khare explains that Hindi writers are still hesitant to experiment on a profoundly personal level. If they explore depths, it is in the way of the mystical Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. They do not delve into the individual mind, which was a fascination of European modernist writers. 'For us Joyce is a nightmare'. Khare explains, 'James Joyce, a writer obsessed with the individual mind and the magic of language itself, stood in direct contrast to Tagore's message of self effacement'.

Novel or short story?

The novel is the end result of a long period of development and experimentation in a Western tradition with different ideas about writing and representing reality from what existed in India. The widespread Indian use of prose is a novelty of the nineteenth century. Does the novel have a future there?

'I think it does. But in a different sense than the European novel. The whole literary scene should be taken into account, such as publishers who keep prices artificially high, the fact that most writers cannot live from their books alone, that a good selling novel will be printed in an edition of maybe 2,000 copies. The mentality of authors is not at all business-oriented. Writing is not primarily seen as a commodity, meaning that even an established author does not like to discuss financial or contractual matters.

'The novel as a genre will have to be experimented with more. Indian writers still need to find their own way of employing the novel as a frame for expressing their worldview. Indian literature in the future will continue to narrate, tell stories, and in this process discover India and maybe the world at large. But unless it examines the darkest recesses of the human mind it will remain incomplete. You cannot ignore the private, inexplicable dilemmas that one faces as a human being.'

Khare mentions poetry and the short story - Hindi writing's most popular genre - as forms that are possibly better suited to the Indian tendency towards abstraction, the non-personal and a strong sense of mood. As a poet Khare is understandably biased towards the former. However, the short story has an interesting history in India. There are many writers who have published several collections of short stories, but have yet to write a novel. One reason for this might be the small numbers in which books are printed. Writing short stories is a way of publishing regularly, thereby securing a more regular income (which more often than not remains insufficient to live off). Such practical and financial reasons are probably true, yet it would remain interesting to complete a comparative study of characterization in the short story and novel. Perhaps this would lead to other factors explaining the abundance of short stories and the awkward position of the novel in Hindi literature. ◀

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