



## MULTICULTURAL CONCERNS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELS: A CRITICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper deals with multiculturalism in *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh (1915-2014), *Bye Bye Black Bird* (1971) by Anita Desai (b 1937), *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie (b 1947) and *A Fine Balance* (1995) by Rohinton Mistry (b 1952). Multiculturalism responds to the questions of disparities among different cultures by aiming at giving equal value and privileges despite minority culture. The comparison among multiple cultures must be positive, respect giving, ideal and egalitarian. Multiculturalism always advocates the security and protection of a small culture against the big one. It promotes a sense of dignity and equality of minority culture irrespective of caste, colour, birth and nationality. *Train to Pakistan* draws a very sublime and ideal picture of a frontier village, Mano Majra, that has all the positivity of multiculturalism such as value to all cultures, respect to all religions, identity to all castes. This shows non-discriminating attitude of the villagers, mutual tolerance, fraternity, and harmonious coexistence. *Bye, Bye Blackbird* exhibits the cultural difference at emotional, psychological, spiritual, geographical and racial levels. Indian culture is put in the pot of multiculturalism surrounded by a British culture and a comparison is made evident. This novel treats cultural problems of Indian immigrants on an alien land that is England, where they are welcomed un-welcomely as blackbirds. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* captures the postcolonial reality and multicultural clashes in India. Here, multiculturalism is presented as an instrument of political, and economic interests. *A Fine Balance* focuses on the lower caste Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs. It exposes the cultural curse of low born humanity in Indian society. Here Mistry deals with the theme of political, economic, cultural and social aspects. Thus, We need to learn a good lesson of true multiculturalism from America, where today different cultures are surviving and flourishing together.

**Key Words-** Multiculturalism, Minority, Coexistence, Immigrants, Humanity, etc.

Before deliberating multiculturalism in *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh (1915-2014), *Bye Bye Black Bird* (1971) by Anita Desai (b 1937), *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie (b 1947) and *A Fine Balance* (1995) by Rohinton Mistry (b 1952), it becomes necessary to know about the term 'culture' and its various tenets in life and literature. The word 'culture', which has a Latin root 'cultura'



meaning 'tilling or cultivation', does not have any connection with agricultural task. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, culture referred to the refinement of individuals through the cultivation of education. In 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, it started including the whole peoples, national aspirations and ideals. Richard Hoggart postulates, "Culture ... means the whole way of life of society, its beliefs, its attitudes and temper as expressed in all kinds of structures, rituals and gestures, as well as in the traditionally defined forms of art"(156). Culture, a feature of humanity, the sum total of the ways of living, is built up by a group of human beings, transmitted from one generation to another. Culture inherits all the plurality in society of religion, race, caste, creed, color, language, sects, architecture, dress, dance, music, dialect, ideas, and the way of life as a whole. It has been continuously transformational in nature as H. Bhabha has viewed, "culture understood as a strategy of survival is both transnational and translational: It is marked by the 'specific histories' of cultures of displacement, exile, migration" (10).

Culture presents a great amalgamation of human knowledge of being associative, integrated, mixed, harmonious, egalitarian, gender equality, race respect, compact, composite, class caring and sharing, and positively living together separately. It also reflects differences, gaps, margins, individuation, disintegration, aloofness, divisions, dominations, exploitation, superiority-inferiority, class struggle, gender ditch, race repression and clashing together separately. These differences form different cultural ethnicities that are like small streams in the big river of society. Some are in the main streamline and some marginal. This creates class gap as Simon Featherstone has opined, " To classify as 'Post Colonial' those cultures which have experienced colonialism but have freed themselves from it, it is only to raise other questions about historical and cross-cultural comparisons and parallels" (5). Culture and literature go hand in hand. Literature creates a panorama of human life by investing cultural trends, traits, tracks, and types. Thus, literature includes all the cultural varieties of society presenting its value system, belief framework, practice process and knowledge. Ashok Chaskar has presented his views about culture and literature such as "a text draws a live picture of an organic unity of socio-cultural relations, racial differences, religious ideologies, class conflict and gender biases" (4).

A parallel study of different cultures of society promotes multiculturalism, which comprises various disciplines within a social structure. Multiculturalism responds to the questions of disparities among different cultures by aiming at giving equal value and privileges despite minority culture. The comparison among multiple cultures must be positive, respect giving, ideal and egalitarian. Multiculturalism always advocates the security and protection of a small culture against the big one. It promotes a sense of dignity and equality of minority culture irrespective of caste, colour, birth and nationality. Sura P. Rath has defined it nicely, "Multiculturalism aims to establish a better global cultural community. This community should offer a sort of cultural public sphere for ever increasing different cultures to circulate and to reduce the present uneven impact accordingly" (Lai,198). Multiculturalism intends to understand the value of different social norms of distinct ethnicities. It is very vast. It stands for a social theory. It presents a chance of two fold study of one culture in apposition and in opposition to the other culture. Multiculturalism leaves both positive and negative effects on society. It succeeds in "generating a social cultural harmony, mutual tolerance and respect in different cultures. It is a process of appreciating cultural diversity and enabling the visible minorities to attain equality and social justice" (Chasker,7).

Multiculturalism encourages the will to preserve one's ethno-cultural recognition that maintains one's beliefs. It has a set of sub-cultures in the frame of a mega culture. The mega culture is society where they clash, contrast, appose-oppose, adopt-reject, mould, unify-diversify and occultrate constantly. Multiculturalism maximizes the similarity, cooperation, tolerance, interaction, equality, respect, unity and humanity. It minimizes the gaps, differences, deadlocks, conflicts, clashes,



xenophobia, distances, gender divisions among several cultures. The purpose of multiculturalism is to plant a mutual cultural sensitivity. It equates the haves and have nots, rich and poor, capitalist and proletariat, pressed and dominant, strong and weak, chief and marginal, colonized and colonizer. Jasbir Jain has presented his view in this regard of the present social scenario as "In recent times we have shifted to words like pluralism and multiculturalism. Each one of these terms conveys a different meaning, a different concern and mindset. ...pluralism means co-existence specifying harmony, multiculturalism indicates separateness, the need for tolerance and at times withdrawal into ethnicity" (40). Multiculturalism acknowledges the interrelationship between literature, culture, and society.

This paper focuses on multiculturalism in Indian English fiction. India has a very great web of social structure that is highly complex and divergent. Here multiple ethnicities live together sharing their cultures. The growth of Indian culture and the continuous shifts in it are very complex and amazing. From Manu's division of society to Vedic period, Buddhism, Jainism, Muslims, Sikhism and Hinduism, it has got a great variety of human habits and ideas that produce small cultures. In India, culture relates one's identity, and identity defines one's caste, class, religion. Language also plays a very crucial role in cultural establishment of an individual. Caste decides one's place in society. Caste sets its definite and distinct value of people in India. It sometimes seems to promote discriminations, disparities and discrepancies in the national social set up. Multiculturalism reduces these negativities and produce commonality. Multiculturalism, which invites globalization, studies difference at national and international levels. This has been defined by Franz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*,

"A national culture is not a folklore, nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. A national culture is the whole body of the efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people have created itself and keeps itself in existence, its national consciousness" (233).

India, where we have Adivasi, untouchable, oppressed, and many underprivileged minority groups, is a big platform for multicultural study. Indians are Bengali, Punjabi, Gujrati, Tamil, Assami, Uriya, Rajasthani, and Haryanavi but above all we are a national consciousness. This reflects a very shrine and ideal multicultural position of our country. Here people can be seen preserving their own culture and sharing the others. A Hindu visits Gurudwara, Masjid equally as he goes to the temple. Indian multiculturalism sets an example of live and let live and living together separately. However, the term 'multiculturalism' sometimes is taken vague and conflict-ridden. It is considered confusing because it means many different things to many different people. Some receive it positively to enhance a better society while other see it as a separatism. In sum total, multiculturalism needs a scientific and systematic study to analyze and to reach at a logical conclusion. Multiculturalism, whether in a positive or negative sense, has its own agenda, perspective, definition and application. It is not a single principle, but it is a collection of many doctrines. That's why, the present paper looks into how different features, angles, processes, and principles are ideally maintained or badly broken in the selected twentieth century Indian English novels. Our country has all the features of multiculturalism that can promote the application of social theory. The process of this investigating the texts of these selected along with relevant critics will be closely examined. This critical probe not only attempts to feel how the various forceful elements of multiculturalism are reflected in the novels, but also to inspect how the principles of multiculturalism are shattered that lead to social gap, distance, clash, conflict and disharmony.

*Train to Pakistan* (1956), where different cultures are projected, is a novel based on the civil war that divided the country into India and Pakistan. This novel draws a very sublime and ideal picture of a frontier village, Mano Majra, that has all the positivity of multiculturalism such as value to all cultures, respect to all religions, identity to all castes. This shows non-discriminating attitude of the villagers,



mutual tolerance, fraternity, and harmonious coexistence. At the very outset, Mano Majra is shown as a real utopia far from the madding crowd. All the dwellers of the village live above their caste, religion, creed and culture but the same Mano Majra flames that brings socio-cultural misbalance, communal antagonism, mutual hatred, intolerance, disregard, displacement, disintegration, doubt and the loss of humanity. At the beginning of the novel, this border village reflects and reveals the true nature of caring and sharing of varied cultures. Even the setting of the village tells us a multicultural social set up. This is mirrored in the novel, "Mano Majra is a tiny place. It has only three brick buildings, one of which is the home of the moneylender Lala Ram Lal. The other two are the Sikh temple and Mosque" (Singh, 2). These lines uncover the multicultural atmosphere of the village where Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims have been living like brothers for centuries. There is no friction and fright, and all cultures grow and glow. They share their cultural diversity as an identity. They not only value to other cultures, religions, beliefs, feelings, way of living, mode of thinking but also encourage a mutual social understanding. They live lovingly as Sikhs have care for a Muslim and Vice-Versa: "Iqbal Singhji, have you gone to bed without food? Would you like some spinach? I have also curd and buttermilk"(49). Iqbal replies with the same care, "No, thank you, Bhaiji. I have the food I want"(49).

The roots of multiculturalism are very deep in Mano Majra, where people from all communities live in a perfect harmony, with a sublime care and with a fine attachment. When the village was about to be evacuated, Majrans behave uniquely. Imam Baksh asks to the Lambardar, "Well brother, what is your decision about us?" (133). The Lambardar answers, "This is your village as much as ours." He further says, "It is like this, uncle Imam Baksh. As long as we are here nobody will dare to touch you" (133). The darker side of the clash between different cultures is also equally made visible in the novel. How cultural difference invites partition that brings a river of blood. The human seems sometimes helpless as Hukum Chand's melancholic words reveal us in the novel:

"What am I to do? He wailed, 'The whole world has gone mad. Let it go mad! What does it matter if another thousand get killed? We will get a bulldozer and bury them as we did the others. We may not even need the bulldozer if this time it is going to on the river. Just throw the corpses in the water.'"(163)

But ultimately multiculturalism wins when a Sikh Badmash saves many Muslims' lives, the people of other culture. We find Jugga even costing his life for this in the novel, "The rope has been cut in shreds, only a thin tough strand remained. He went at it with the knife, and then with his teeth. There was a volley of shots. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan"(190).

*Bye, Bye Blackbird*, a leading Indian novel in English, deals with multiculturalism at global and at inter-continental level exposing an orient-occident relation. It exhibits the cultural difference at emotional, psychological, spiritual, geographical and racial levels. One culture is set high, dominant, ideal, superior, civilized, progressive, independent, strong and leading against the other that is low, idle, submissive, weak, dependent, primitive, uncivilized and follower. Indian culture is put in the pot of multiculturalism surrounded by a British culture and a comparison is made evident. This novel treats cultural problems of Indian immigrants on an alien land that is England, where they are welcomed unwelcomely as blackbirds. Indians go there for opportunities. Devender Kohli has put his views in this regard, "I like to say that I was born in India at a time when it was a meeting place for two cultures, Indian-British. For these were split into an infinitely larger number of spokes and panels that came together to form not an elegant object but a conveniently usable one" (Bye,3). The novel opens with the introduction of Adit and Dev in England. Adit has married to a British girl, Sarah. This match has to face a psychological disturbance caused by cultural differences. Two Indian friends are the blackbirds chirping in



the nest of Britain. Adit always seems defending the British culture. He says, "I am happy here. I like going into the local for a pint on my way home to Sarah. I like wearing good tweed on a foggy November day. I like the Covent Garden opera house. It has a chandelier like a hive of fireflies; when I stand under it, I feel like a millionaire".(20). In contrast, Dev is diasporic, nostalgic and favours the Indian culture:

"Let us abolish the vicarages and rectories and personages and build temples and mosques and gurdwaras. Let us bring across our Yogis and Gurus, barefoot and robed in saffron. Let us replace Latin and Greek with the study of Sanskrit classics and Punjabi swear words. Let us feed them all on chilli-pickles, tandoori chicken and rasmalai. Let all British women take to the graceful sari and all British men to the noble dhoti" (63).

Thus, a very ideal picture of multiculturalism is drawn but sometimes it looks like a fantasy. The British culture does not suit to Adit and its darker side is highlighted. Even Sarah feels alienated from her own culture. She feels degraded and considered just as, "Hurry, Hurry, Mrs. Scurry!"(34). Her students pester her because she is wedded to an Indian. Her own mother remarks to Adit in sneer, "well, I must say I see a great deal of difference even if you don't" (137). Sarah feels sandwiched and twanged between two different cultures. She seems failing to generate a real feeling of multiculturalism but at last, she comes to India forever that proves the real cultural triumph. Dev is treated as a second grade human. He is called as 'wog' in buses of London. He is considered as a Blackbird. He is denied even to know the price of a statue in a mall. The shopkeeper says, "Oh, very much. I would not even name the price to you" (72). He feels rejected, jilted, degraded and unwanted. Thus, immigrants of Indian culture are lonely, alienated, marginalized that fill their lives with emptiness. Dev stays in England forever ultimately. He is acculturated. It indicates a true sign of positive multiculturalism. So, in this way, this novel registers panoramic amalgamation of multiculturalism across seven seas and states how the clash of one culture can cause a cultural clash.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, a landmark in the history of Indian English fiction, captures the postcolonial reality and multicultural clashes in India. Here, multiculturalism is presented as an instrument of political, and economic interests. The narrative is spread along a wide span of time and space ranging nearly whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The action covers Kashmir, Agra, Amritsar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and West/ South India. This creates all the elements of multiculturalism in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, Aadam Aziz returns to Kashmir having done his medical studies for five years in Germany. He experiences a strange gap and aloofness from his own community, a cultural gap. Tai, the boatman, says sarcastically to him, "The ice is always waiting, Aadam Baba, just under the water's skin"(Midnight,7). Rushdie introduces a character who is sandwiched between two cultures. Having tasted the European culture, he breeds a doubt in his native culture. Even his wife Naseem states, "My God, what have I married? I know you European returned man"(38). The perforated sheet incident brings a multicultural face of the novel where the landlord prohibits a doctor to see the patient due to his culture.

Cultural clash causing great harm to society is shown by the Amritsar massacre. This tolls the departure of one culture. Aadam stands as a witness for this black and bloody day when, "Mosque and walls are crying, Hartal! Which is to say literally speaking, a day of mourning of stillness, of silence"(37). The characters form a cultural pattern of parallels and contrasts. The novel has a gradual shift from uncultural setting to multiculturalism. Saleem is discovered an illegitimate son of a Hindu mother and Christian father and brought up by a Muslim spouse. They all belong to the three major ethnic groups that frame multiculturalism in India. Naheen, the Rani of Cooch, is also torn in her cultural differences. She repents, "I am the victim, the helpless victim of my cross-cultural concerns, my skin is the outward expression of the internationalism of my spirit"(54). The characters like Lifafa Das, S.P. Butt, Alia,



Emerald and Zohra build a subtle web of multiculturalism. The characters like Mr. Methwold, Wee Willie Winke, Vanita show a liberal uni-cultural world. They contribute to the multiplicity of the culture. Homi adds Persian cultural taste in the novel. Thus, *Midnight's children* is over packed with the characters showing different tones of their cultures. Rushdie mirrors a multicultural atmosphere before partition. The British start selling their properties. Ahmed informs Sinai saying, "The Britishers are leaving in droves, Sinai Bhai. Property is dirt cheap!" (108).

The clash with the British culture is quite evident and it invites a strange conflictual consequence. There is a great cultural crisis. The Hindus contradict with the Muslims and the Europeans struggle with the both. They now seem running down the flag and picking their bags with relatively little fuss. Sometimes, cultural gap divides the society which this is apparent in the novel, "reconciliation between congress and the Muslim league became increasingly difficult" (149). Multicultural disagreements, religious differences and racial variations create a terrestrial separatism, a chaos, harm to humanity. Rushdie writes, "All other concerns were the violence and refugee problem" (84).

Sinai attempts to convince the public in his words, "Do not let this happen! Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us! We must be a third principle" (354). Hence, the idea of multiculturalism gets its fullest sense in an ideal way in the novel which presents all the glory of multiculturalism in India and concurrently warns to a serious menace of the probability when India stop sharing her ideals of multiculturalism.

*A Fine Balance*, a historical novel that draws an outline of post-independence India, focuses on the lower caste Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs. It exposes the cultural curse of low born humanity in Indian society. Here Mistry deals with the theme of political, economic, cultural and social aspects. A cultural side effect is made inside out by showing the plight of untouchables in the novel. Untouchability (Dalitism) has been a serious societal evil on the multicultural face of the country. *A Fine Balance* mirrors class and caste disparities. Mistry depicts the cultural mindset of so called low born. The upper class people treat them with disgust and detest. Dukhi is culturally trodden. He always avoids facing high caste persons, "Every time he saw high-caste persons on the road, he prostrated abjectly, but at a safe distance so he could not be accused of contaminating them with his shadow" (A Fine,100). Mistry calls untouchability a rodent that gnaws the multicultural web of Indian society. The novel revolves around the four characters – Dina Dalal and Maneck, who are parsees, and two tailors, Ishwar and his nephew Omprakash. The novel shows multiculturalism at different levels. On the one hand, we find an utter harmony and care between different cultures. Ashraf, a Muslim, proves like a real father to Om and Ishwar. On the other hand, Hindus get their axes ready to chop the Muslims. In the mid of the riots, a young Hindu bigot leader calls, "Give me a lantern. 'The light was handed over from behind the group. He bent low, held it close to their naked crotches, and was satisfied. The others crowded round to look as well. There was general agreement that the foreskins were intact" (130).

Here the positive and negative aspects of multiculturalism are shown equally in the novel. The narrative shifts from village to city and back city to village. This gives a chance to the readers to understand the relation between rural and urban social cultural setup of the country. It presents a very realistic picture of multiculturalism of country where we fight and get divided in pursuit of saving our cultures that looks like a mirage. Sometimes, protection of one's culture becomes one's protestation. The novel goes to a very deeper and subtle level of probing cultures. How the humanity sharing a common culture has to breathe in dilemma due to varieties lying inside. The Hindu culture incorporates casteism that also creates a confusion, gap division and distance between the people of the same taste, religion and culture. Dukhimochi says painfully, "that at least his Muslim friend treated him better than his Hindu brothers" (9). Religion always has been a stream of culture. Different religions growing side by side in



society always breed an ideal feeling of multiculturalism. The religious difference seems to knock a cultural crisis. The Hindu-Muslim riot scene defines this crisis very clearly. The hardware-store owner utters desperately, "Stay here. You are with friends. We will let nothing happen to your family. Where is there any trouble in our neighbourhood? We have always lived here peacefully"(126).

To sum up, today's global situation demands multiculturalism urgently. Some certain cultures are negatively promoted to dominate the world that becomes a threat to the entire humanity. We need to learn a good lesson of true multiculturalism from America where today, different cultures are surviving and flourishing together. India is a vast country where people of different castes, religions and cultures live caring and sharing their habits. They live together even being separate that is the real beauty of multiculturalism. Any kind of discrimination, whether it is racial or cultural, causes damage to the unity of the country. Recently some cases of racial discrimination have come into limelight. North Indians are treated badly in Maharashtra, North-Easterns are behaved gruesomely in Delhi that is quite alarming. Such kind of menace can be halted only by spreading the true spirit of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a unifying force that unites the society with a positive note.

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