



Reconstructing Indian Identity Through Literature

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *Defining India and its Indian-ness has its own difficulties because our identities are a queer mix of a traumatic past and the hope for a vibrant future. Indian experiences are so diverse in their flavor and vigor that the kaleidoscopic i.e. India, is hard to be penned in the form of a literary work. The body of literature is replete with an Indian identity that either mourns the terrible past of being ruled or the aftermath of these events or speaks of lost identity. It can be said that there are very few works in Indian Writing that celebrate the Indian-ness. This paper discusses Mother Pious Lady-Making Sense of Everyday Indian authored by Santosh Desai as an unapologetic exaltation of 'Middle India' and its growth story in a humorous voice. The aim of the paper is to present a vivid image of a happy India and in turn tries to capture the Indian Identity in its evolutionary phases.*

Indian Identity

The question of identity has been a long raging one which sees myriad domains of knowledge converging to create a composite symbolic representation of the nation. The question in his work "What actually makes us 'Indians' and do we really have a national and cultural identity that we can be called Indian?" (Biswas, 1976) is a poignant one. The answers to these questions can be found in literary works. Before initiating an analysis of this book as a propagation of Indianess, a theoretical affirmation of the connection between nationality and writing is mandatory. It has to be seen whether the nationality, or the place from where the writer comes influences his/her writing and vice versa. Lynne Pearce in his article The Place of Literature in the Spaces of Belonging emphasizes the impact of geographical surrounding as a milestone or reference for creating identity through writing. He provides an analogy wherein he describes the room around him and each item that is placed. He further explains that the act of describing the household objects gives identity to him because in the process he is creating a set of referents and references. The description of the positions of each objects moves beyond a simple description of the milieu and becomes a point of reference for his identity. He observes, 'By this I mean that not only can they be 'read off' as signifiers of my (composite) 'identity', but also the fact that this identity is clearly constituted by my relationship to them – the various ways in which they not only hold, but also 'produce' meaning for me'. (p.9, 2002)

This leads us to the understanding that writing about the events, situations and phenomenon around us can help us create and understand our own identity. Reading about what has happened, what is happening and what might happen in our country can help us create the signifiers which will build our identity for us. Such works of literature or otherwise can help us demystify and decode our own existence. Against this background Mother Pious Lady by Santosh Desai with its myriad events of Indian becomes the signifiers. Lynne Pearce adds to this analogy and provides further experiences that innocuously help in connecting literature and identity. He mentions that as a tourist, one of the first things that a person does is to buy a book about the place that he/she is visiting. It helps the person find his way around a new place. At the same time, books are bought as souvenirs after the visit to the new place or city. These books become essential not only to make sense of the place but also aids in recollection of the place as it symbolizes the place that we visited (p.12, 2002). In this context a book about India and its everyday life moves beyond being a simple written account and metamorphoses into a symbol and aids in the recollection of experiences and

ultimately in the formation of the Indian Identity. This affirms that the book being discussed hereinabove can be taken as a tool for extracting the Indian Identity.

In another research titled Literature and Cultural Identity by Professor Harry Levin it has been pointed out that 'Men can move in two opposite directions: toward the local or the cosmopolitan, toward the ingrained or the acquired, toward the particular or the universal.' (p.139, 1973). This means that to present identity, a person may take one of these directions and present it in the form of a creative piece of writing. Desai shows what it means to be Indian by moving from the villages to the cities, from the taught to the learnt and displays a shift from the particular and anchored to the changing Indian feeling. This movement in literature or writing is very crucial because the larger portion of Indian writing till date has either raised an alarm at the atrocities subjected or has brooded over the lost identity and tarnished culture at the hands of the colonizers. This retaliation and brooding has overpowered Indian writing for decades. However, as pointed out by Professor Harry Levin colonialism must emancipate itself by developing newer nationalisms of its own. Through the article Levin promotes the notion created by Franz Fanon which calls for a breaking away from the old identities to create a new nationalism. This new nationalism can be simply termed as a new way of looking at our nationality and a de novo way of expressing it. Moving beyond the brooding and atrocities, writing should now focus on recording the new nationalism i.e. a new way of defining who we are, a new way of bringing the contemporary Indian Identity in contemporary Indian Writing.

Santosh Desai looks within Indian to formulate this new nationalism because 'Not many can sustain an incisive sense of identity without feeling rooted somewhere or, at any rate, feeling some need of roots. Moving through the limbos of displacement, alienation, and anomie, others have reversed the outward direction and looked homeward toward some vision of the Promised Land' (Levin, 1975). He brings forth myriad experiences of the Middle class Indian as an insider and looks for the new nationalism within India and not at what others have done to us. He further argues that to define the new nationalism one has to look within one's own folds because it is only from looking inside that one can find their true voice. The choice of focus also deserves attention because this book focuses on the Middle Class India to decipher or create a new identity. Indianess is defined through the experiences of the Middle Class as "Scholars of the middle class in India have argued convincingly that this group has become invested with the symbolic authority to make claims about

the nation as a whole" (Fernandes, 2000) and only this India is 'central agent for the revisioning of the Indian nation in the context of globalisation' (Fernandes, 2000). The other India i.e. the higher and upper class India neither has the vastness nor the voice to speak on behalf of the Indian Identity. It is only the middle class India that is can authoritatively speak or define India and its Indianess.

Having established the importance of literature and writing in creating national identity and the choice of Middle India as being the mouthpiece of new nationalism & identity, the author would now like to present some of the earnest and sincere experiences that have been presented in the book. The India, as mentioned in the book, with its new nationalism of unapologetic acceptance of its own clichés, is pieced together by stitching varied experiences of a growing India. Desai calls his work a quilt 'where individual pieces are knitted together to provide a larger picture which, while it holds together as a single piece, makes no bone about the fact that it is composed out of little scraps of observations'. (p.25, 2010). These 'scraps of observations' have been divided 3 sections namely-Where Do We Come From, New Adventures in Modernity and Dilemmas of Change.

The first chapter that deserves our attention is titled An Ode To the Scooter. It opens with a bold statement, 'If the middle class man were to be reborn as a product chances are it would be a Bajaj scooter. Squat, a belly going to pot, wearing a grey safari suit, undistinguished but resourceful. With a wife perched uncomfortably at the back, Gudiya squeezed between the two and Cheeku standing up front. No product comes close to capturing the essence of middle class India as well as the scooter.' (p.55,2010) Desai address and revokes the feelings of familiarity which are associated with the scooter. He uses it as a symbol to describe where India has come from, where the Middle Class has been and how it made sense of its identity through the things that it used. He attributes the qualities of a scooter to the typical Indian middle class man and shows how their identities have influenced each other. He points out that a scooter had a stepney-which always provided a safety to those navigating on the 'independent minded Indian roads'. He further adds that the scooter had a dickey, a small place to add sundry items and all the space to squeeze in an entire family. In short, according to Desai, the scooter was 'safe because it catered to all those stable, worldly things that made a man a responsible person.' (p.57,2010) The scooter is also termed as 'a domesticated beast of burden, anonymously performing the duties asked of it'. In a way he is connecting the identities of the middle class with that of the scooter-where the middle class has always performed its duties with respect to social, economical and national demands without cribbing or harassing others. He further equates the qualities such as restraint, repression, modesty and versatility which both the scooter and the Indian Middle class have in common. Desai further ennobles the Indian middle class by trying to make sense of the autorickshaw in his chapter 'Decoding the Autorickshaw'. He mentions, 'The auto deals with the road on a second-by-second basis, recognizing that the Indian town is the abode of Constantly Changing Circumstances'. Through this Desai is trying to show us the innate capacity of India to deal with whatever comes its way. India has had its share of scams, natural disasters and attacks which have all been dealt with, not by the political forces, but by the middle class. It may not rise in arm against corruption, but it ensures that it is heard. Like the auto, the Indian Identity is etched out of its ability to deal with the laborious hurdles that spring out unawares.

The second section presents around forty chapters that deal with the theme of New Adventures into Modernity. It takes examples of the Indian transition from the old to the new and shows us how these two are closely associated with each other. The chapter 'Father Amitabh' talks about the legendary actor and how India relates to him. It charts the various roles that Amitabh Bachchan has portrayed over the years starting

from the 'angry young Vijay' to his more docile roles in the later part of his career. Desai opines, 'Vijay is let down by the father-in Deewar he is disgraced, in Lawaaris disowned, in Shakti abandoned and in Trishul discarded. Vijay spoke for a generation that felt let down by the father-figure but one that was doomed to comply with their authority' (p.100, 2010). This generation is representative of the India that was let down time and again by its elected leaders. Desai then moves on to show how during the Kaun Banega Crorepati days, Amitabh started representing an India that could shine and progress on its own capacities. Amitabh Bachchan's delivery in KBC showed that abundant wealth and fame were easily accessible to those who had the hunger and intelligence. This was a signifier for the India that has now found a place for itself in the International Corporate and other avenues due to its own intrinsic talent pool. The old and the new identities are symbolically attached to the Indian actor.

Another sign of the transition from the traditional to modern is explained through the chapter titled The Militant Mask. Santosh Desai describes the numerous young females who drive their own vehicles and cover their entire face with a duppata. He tries to decode the reason behind this action of covering oneself up completely, leaving only a slit for the eyes and attributes it to protection against the sun. However, he pushes the explanation further and says that this can be seen as the ultimate sign of independence and modernity because by covering their faces the young women of numerous small and large cities are 'in effect reversing the gaze that she has always been subjected to, it is now she who sees.' (p.215, 2010). These young females can now see all that they had been denied and their mobility adds to the fact that their 'act of withdrawal is an act of assertion rather than passive protection.' (p.215, 2010). This veil that the women wear, according to Desai, reverses the role of the traditional veil. The light powered scooters and the militant mask have are symbols of freedom and independence that shouts out that they do not require anybody's approval or attention. This is the rise of the modern India.

Moving towards the end of the book one finds a striking example of Indian-ness in the chapter A Million Matchsticks Now. Santosh Desai boldly asserts that the growth of India is not judged by the number of Indians who reside in foreign countries as they do not do anything for Indian. Neither is it fuelled by the IIMs and the IITs- the so called epitomes of education. The success of India can not even be measured by whether we get an Oscar. He then poses a serious question as to who is responsible for the growth of India? The answer is simple-The Middle India. It is the middle India which fuels the growth of India. Cities and towns are strewn with educational institutes such as dental colleges, engineering colleges, management institutes and professional course training institutes. The quality of education provided may be deficient in many terms but the spread of these institutes has clearly shown that now education is a right and an opportunity for everyone. The world is for the taking, but it needs the brave and the skilled to tame it. The Indian Middle class is equipping itself with these skills through education. It is in the numbers that we can justify our progress. The 1 million population should not be seen as 1 millions mouths to feed, it should be seen a 1 million heads to think and 2 millions hands to work. It is this vastness of demographic dividend that is driving India to a better future. Desai concludes, 'In India, we are not basking in a blazing beacon of glory that comes from the top but the light that we see today is the product of a million matchsticks that are flickering in unison. And that is good news.' (p.311, 2010). The middle class becomes the new Indian Identity.

"Everything in India is Capitalized. We are a land of swollen clichés" observes Santosh Desai in his opening statement about India. Rather than viewing this as a vituperation of the Indian identity, it should be seen as bold statement of acceptance. We do live our lives large, in whatever we have

and we do follow the accepted standards-without any shame or burden. Desai presents a social commentary of the quirkiness of the Indian Middle Class in clear terms, unashamed and unapologetic in its clichés. The clichéd Indian Identity places itself right in the middle of all these experiences and

uses a personal pronoun 'We' to define and describe each of its aberrant and mystical ways. India is not ashamed of its past, nor is it worried about its present. India simply accepts what happened, learns from it and consoles the ever changing present.

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