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Religion, a Dominant Force in the Booker Prize-Winning Novels of Indian Writers

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Abstract :

Religion is a dominant force in India. Different philosophies of different religions influence the life of the people in general. It is but natural that such a force finds a place in literature. Many writers tried to present religion in a glorifying way or the darker side of it. Good or bad, it affected the life of people and eventually literature. This paper attempts to take a survey of religious elements present in the Booker Prize Winning novels of Indian writers. Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga- everybody handled this force masterly in their respective novels. They are also the recipients of the most coveted Man Booker Prize for their great works. Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children'(1981), Roy's 'The God of Small Things'(1997), Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss'(2006) and Adiga's 'The White Tiger'(2008) proved their mettle in an international arena.

Keywords :- Religious tolerance, Hindu-Muslim, Darker side

Religion is a dominant force in India. A country where we find many religions living together for a longer period of time. Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism are shaping the ways of living of the people. Different philosophies of different religions influence the life of the people in general.

It is but natural that such a force finds a place in literature. It enters in every aspect of literature- Drama, Poetry, Fiction- and the effect is evident everywhere. Many writers tried to present religion in a glorifying way or the darker side of it. Whether it was living together of all religions peacefully or the differences of opinions. Good or bad, it affected the life of people and eventually literature.

This paper attempts to take a survey of religious elements present in the Booker Prize Winning novels of Indian writers. Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga- everybody handled religion masterly in their respective novels. All these writers are the representatives of the welcome change in Indian English Literature in recent years. They are also the recipients of the most coveted Man Booker Prize for their great works. Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children'(1981), Roy's 'The God of Small Things'(1997), Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss'(2006) and Adiga's 'The White Tiger'(2008) proved their mettle in an international arena.

The literature from ancient times could never separate itself from the influence of religion. Hinduism in the earlier period or Islam, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity in the medieval period were the sources of themes and inspirations for the writers. The impact was so strong that with the passing of years, it took the form of a separate genre.

But a new generation of writers handled the form differently. The days of glorifying the religion are no more, rather the another side of it which is perhaps darker is brought forward by the writers. The religion entered into the fields like politics, education and led to corrupt practices. All the four writers, mentioned above, minutely examined the presence of it in every walk of life.

Rushdie's 'Midnight's Children' makes us aware of the influence of religion in the life of the people in the post-independence era. Each character finds itself trapped when it comes to religion. Rushdie, who was born and brought up in the Muslim family, is very much close to the orthodox practices followed in the family. We notice a presence of those religious beliefs and faiths in his works. Various religious concepts are visible when we take a journey of 'Midnight's Children'.

The first reference to religion can be found when we meet Aziz. After losing his son Aziz completely loses his faith in God.

"In the remaining years of his life, he often disgraced himself by stumbling into mosques and temples with his old man's stick, mouthing imprecations and lashing out at any worshipper or holy man within range".¹

The traces of complete disbelief in God by Aziz transcends in Saleem also who remains completely detached from religion. Aziz also dismisses his tutor for hating other religions.

On the one hand, when we notice this 'religious tolerance', on the other, there are so many instances of extreme fanaticism in the novel. We find so many references of clashes between Hindu and Muslim religion. Being a Muslim, we find Rushdie showing some favour to Muslims by calling them hard workers, good-minded and persistent people, and Hindus criminals. Rushdie presents Hindus as the rogue who tortures Muslims for ransoms. Hindu organisations are called 'Ravana'. Muslim-Muslim differences are also visible throughout the novel. Differences of opinion between Muslim League and the Free Islam Convocation over partition can be seen. Muslim League was in favour of partition and the Free Islam Convocation was against it saying "Where can we find a land which is foreign to God?"². One of the characters, Monkey prefers to convert to Islam and leaves behind Christianity. Cyrus, one more character, turns into a religious guru and becomes a mentor to many, and makes a show of his religious love.

In 'The God of Small Things', Roy presents a horrible picture of society and its people who are exploited in the name of religion. She presents a sorry condition of marginalised and downtrodden who are facing many troubles. Religion, a blessing for the powerful people, becomes a curse for the powerless. Roy has chosen Ayemenem, a place in Kerala, as a background for her novel, and religion which is followed by many is Christianity. All the major characters- Ammu, the twins and Velutha- are crushed in the name of religion. A divorced woman finds no place in the society or even in her own house, and the children too. Ammu's secret love with Velutha-an untouchable- proves fatal for her. Even their relationship comes under strict 'love-laws' set by the contractors of religion. When they try to break the so-called 'set-up' of the society, they pay for it. The church refuse to bury

Ammu. Even a religion known for its broad attitude- Christianity- treats people differently. A fact is always put in the mind of the twins that their future is in danger as they are the products of inter-religious marriage.

Baby Kochamma's love for Father Mulligan compels her to convert into Catholic. Baby Kochamma's hatred towards Hindus is noticeable in her comment:

"The bald pilgrims in Beena Mol began to ring another bhajan. I tell you, these Hindus.....They have no sense of privacy".³

Untouchability, the word which is often associated with Hindu religion, finds its entry into Christianity. The practice of conversion from Hindu religion to Christianity is evident in Kerala from the colonial period. But the converted are always treated as outsiders and never accepted as equals. The lower castes have separate churches and treated as untouchables.

'The Inheritance of Loss' by Kiran Desai deals with the problems of the people who lives away from their own countries and consequently face many troubles. The novel touches almost all the issues of the modern society. Religion also peeps into the life of the people and affect their way of living.

The 'Secular Romance' between Mr and Mrs Mistry is one such example. Although they belong to different religions and follow different cultures, they understand each other. The writer says:

"The pilot and the student, the Zoroastrian and the Hindu, emerged from the tomb of the Mughal Prince knowing that nobody other than themselves would be impressed by their great secular romance".⁴

Mrs Sen, another character from the novel, is very cynical about Muslims and Pakistan.

"More Muslims in India than in Pakistan, they prefer to multiply over here....What sort of Muslim nation they have? And five times a day bums up to God." ⁵

She is also very critical about Muslim culture. She laughs at the double face of policy makers. The politicians for their own benefits make one set of rules and regulations for them and another set of rules and regulations for others.

"Something with the Muslim cultural usage. They also come from somewhere else, Babar and all...And stayed here to breed." ⁶

The novel focuses on the victims of colonialism and other global conflicts of religion, race etc. uncle Potty, Father Booty and Noni and Lola- the Christian sisters- all are in search of their lost identity because of different cultural and religious backgrounds. Jemubhai and Nimi's relationship is also an example of the orthodox values set by Hindu religion where a woman has no say and has to surrender to the will of her husband.

One more example of religious impact is noticeable when we find Biju refused to stay in the restaurant where Indians eat beef. He says, "One should not give up one's religion." ⁷ The impact of the practice of worshipping cow as goddess makes him stay away from the restaurant.

Adiga's 'The White Tiger' presents a sorry picture of religious values receding in the modern world. Religion is presented in a negative way and in varied lights by the

writer. In a letter to Mr Jiabao, Balram talks about his secular approach and at the same time sarcastically mentions the number of Gods.

" I guess, your Excellency that I too start off by kissing some God's arse.

Which God's arse though? There are so many choices. See Muslims have one God.

The Christians have three gods.

And we Hindus have 36,000,000 gods.

Making a grand total of 36,000,004 divine arses for me to choose from." ⁸

We also find Balram talking about Mother Ganga, a sacred river for Hindus, in a sarcastic way and suggests Mr Jiabao not to take a dip in Ganga. Reference to Buddha or Hanuman is also amusing.

The most negative and yet very real incident from the novel is the discrimination against Muslims. As we notice this discrimination continues in society, the Muslims are made to hide their identities to get jobs or houses at different places. This reality is presented when we find Balram complains about his Muslim driver who was living with a Hindu name. Balram was sure that his master would never allow Muslim driver to continue in the job in spite of his skills and honesty. The small incident throws light on the long possessed hatred between the Hindu-Muslim communities, especially after partition.

Religion has been referred so many times in the book but Balram's approach puts us in confusion. On one side when we find him showing his faith in religion, on the other we find him a different man raising doubts about it. A reference to a poem about God and Devil helps him to give way to his feelings as Devil who talked about his rights. Though the narrator never openly criticises religion, even sometimes shows his piety by bringing statues of Gods, he doesn't look honest towards God.

For Ashok, Balram's master, humanity is more important than religion. In a reference to Azharuddin and Gavaskar, he says:

"Father what a silly thing to say! Hindu and Muslim, what a difference does it make?" ⁹

The concluding lines of the novel are very helpful in knowing the present scenario of the religion where people are finding themselves detached from the religion. Balram says:

"After three or four years in real estate, I think I might sell everything, take the money, and start a school- an English language school for the poor children in Bangalore. A school where you would not be allowed to corrupt anyone's minds with prayers and stories about God and Gandhi- nothing but the facts of life for these kids." ¹⁰

It seems completely contradictory when we see religion and unethical practices are going hand in hand, and they breed corruption in the society. Though the religion is meant for healthy practices, we have an old custom of bribing Gods with prayers. The religion is nowadays used rather than practised with virtuous intentions. Religion comes first and nationality is secondary for the people. Intolerance between two religions breeds hatred and violence. All the Booker Prize-winning writers represent new era- an era of presenting the everything on the realistic level, exactly the way they are. Rushdie, Roy,

Desai and Adiga, every one of them takes efforts in presenting the darker side of the society, and religion is at the core of it. A religion which was meant to glorify the life of the people with some great values and show the righteous way is now at the root of all the corrupt practices in the society. Whether it is Rushdie talking about Hindu-Muslims or Roy about Syrian Christian Community or Desai of the race and religion or Adiga's lash on the use of religion- everybody touches the darker side of it. Though three of them with an exception of Roy are the detached observer of Indian life, the picture which they present in their respective novels cannot be denied.

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