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## Building Alternate Canon: A Critique of Makarand Paranjape's 'Another Canon'

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### Abstract:

Many intellectuals have deliberated upon the textual practices and critical discourse in the domain of Indian English literature. In this context, Makarand R. Paranjape's text *Another Canon: Indian Texts and Traditions in English* (2009) offers an insight into the reading of certain classical Indian texts. The present paper aims at visiting Paranjape's *Another Canon* and explores the nuances of the text. At the same time, an attempt is also made to offer a critique of the text to open further questions and discussions based on the text. Thereby, the paper illustrates the manner in which *Another Canon* can become a fertile ground to take up the research related to Indian novel, depiction of Indian reality and the questions of experience.

**Keywords:** Indian novel, canon, re-locating, textual tradition.

Many intellectuals have deliberated upon the textual practices and critical discourse in the domain of Indian English literature. Scholars like Meenakshi

Mukherjee, Leela Gandhi, Neelam Srivastava, Priyamvada Gopal, KR Srinivasa Iyengar, Lisa Lau etc. have discussed Indian novels, the milieu that goes into the making of the Indian novel in regional as well as English languages, the 'Indianisation process' of the 'novel', novel as a literary genre, the questions of representation of Indian reality etc. Such studies have offered many insights into the literary and textual tradition of India. At the same time, studies about Indian novels and also novel as a genre continue to interest the academicians and intellectuals who aspire to add on to the existing domain of knowledge and come up with newer hypotheses about India novels.

In this context, Makarand R. Paranjape's text *Another Canon: Indian Texts and Traditions in English* published in 2009 offers an insight into the reading of certain classical Indian texts. It focuses on the important but unrecognized canonical texts of the well-known writers of Indian literature. The purpose thereby is to build another canon and to demonstrate alternative ways of reading these texts. At the same time, *Another Canon* also aims at highlighting the manner in which India has been "invented or represented" in such texts (p xi). Paranjape further elaborates the purpose of the book by stating that is not

merely to “construct another canon but also to make sense of Indian textuality and traditions in English” over the past seven decades.

Paranjape explores the lesser-known texts by iconic writers like Raja Rao, UR Ananthamurthy, RK Narayan, M Anantanarayanan along with the works by writers like Bharti Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal etc. He studies Raja Rao's least discussed work *Comrade Kirillov* for its political insights, critique on communism and historical sources of Kirillov's character. Achievements and drawbacks of English in India are examined through an exploration of RK Narayan's short story *A Horse and Two Goats*. Paranjape argues that RK Narayan 'solves' the question of “representing” the reality of India in English by devising “a special kind of style” and Paranjape uses the term “artful plainness” to describe this “strategy” of RK Narayan. According to Paranjape, Narayan's “achievement lies in his minimalism” (42). He then draws comparisons between Narayan's writing and the writings of Naipaul and also illustrates how the story underlines the difference between Narayan and Naipaul. He demonstrates that Narayan uses English to depict “multilingualism and cross-cultural misunderstanding” while in Naipaul it becomes monolingualism. He also criticises Naipaul for his “prejudiced and opinionated judgment” about cultures and lauds RK Narayan for “weaving a complex tapestry of a profound understanding of his society” (50).

M Anantanarayanan's *Silver pilgrimage* is the next work to be studied by Paranjape. He traces the impact of Indian thought on the text, writes about the narrative technique of the book, and its educative purpose. He describes *Silver pilgrimage* as the “novel of education” (53). UR Ananthamurthy's short story *Clip Joint* is also taken up for the study. *Clip Joint* is analysed to show how the text depicts the disillusionment with the western civilization and offers an “insight into modern condition” (70) wherein the central character is “trapped in a no man's land between two cultures, two countries, two ways of life, unable to affirm either” (70). Paranjape also discusses locating Kiran Nagarkar's novel *Cuckold* in another canon by exploring the intricate dynamics of outsider/insider. He compares him to UR Ananthamurthy for being “critical insider” and 're' locates him as a “resident - national and modernist” (134).

Paranjape, then turns his attention towards the women writers like Nayantara Sehgal and Anita Desai. He explores the political and cultural allegory present in Nayantara Sehgal's *Rich Like Us*. He calls it a “gloomy book” (81) as the text shows the instances of murder, sati, reports of rape, burning and violence etc. He points out the “self - critical” and “soft” stance of the book towards the west. Similar to *Rich Like Us*, Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* is likewise explored to show its flaws. Anand's *Conversations in Bloomsbury* and Bharti Mukherjee's *Days and Night in Calcutta* are also examined for their “ideological overtones.” Vikram Seth's

*The Golden Gate* is studied for its quest for self-realization on the part of its central protagonist. Then, in his Epistle on the fiction of 1980's and 1990's, Paranjape describes the increased visibility of FEN in the international arena, boom in the Indian publishing in the recent years, emergence of new genres etc. He notices 'narrative disintegration' and is very critical about the English fiction of 1980s and 90's (FEN) which according to him is given to too much 'narcissism' and calls it mediocre (129).

Through this analysis, Paranjape thus builds another canon as he claims in the preface of the text. What is more impressive in Paranjape's text is the introduction where he speaks of situating Indian novels and claims that any effort to situate the novel depends upon "how we are ourselves situated" (p 3). With these remarks, he tries to situate Indian English novels. Unlike western novels that is associated with the birth of individualism that in turn is connected to the birth of modernity, the novel in India as Paranjape states emerged mainly to "manifest the birth of a nation" (p 4). Paranjape goes on to claim that the novels played an important role in the formation and imagination of the community and are associated with the rise of a modern national consciousness. Novels are viewed as "carriers of collective consciousness" (p 5). He situates Indian English novel within the con/ texts by which he means "group of texts which serves as contrary points of reference" (p 7). Such texts are termed as "con or contrary or opposing texts in conjunction

with which this literature needs to be read and understood" (P 7). He strongly maintains that English literature "can be read in conjunction with the counter texts that serve as contrary points of reference" (p 7). These con texts, as he explains, are nothing but the vernacular literature of India which contains the "con or contrary portrayals of India in juxtaposition to which Indian English Literature is best understood" (p 7).

Paranjape goes on to argue that the best way of situating Indian novel is as the "expression of national consciousness" (p 9). Such a claim compels him to answer certain questions like what is Indian novel? How is it defined? What function does it serve? And how is it best understood? (p 9). He defines Indian novel as "a work of art which expresses the consciousness of an emerging Indian collectivity" and according to him, "its themes, characters, plots and styles are all linked to this Indian collectivity" (p 9). He further argues that the Indian novel is "a work that reflects and interrogates the larger civilizational and national enterprise of the community in which it is produced" (p 11). He himself has summed up his arguments thus,

"Indian novel... is expressive of a collectivity... Indian novel is best understood in its wider context of literary creativity in all Indian languages. Though written by various elite groups, the Indian novel is actually concerned with the experience and expression of this Indian collectivity. This collectivity may be defined as the

modern Indian nation, which itself is a combination of usable elements from the past and critical elements of western modernity.” To put it more precisely, Paranjape defines Indian novel as a “pleasure – knowledge construct” and situates the genre in the “collectivity called the Indian nation/ civilization” that’s “function is to interrogate even as it intervenes in the lives of the people who form this collectivity” (p 12).

However, there are certain aspects in the text that needed much deliberation. For instance, Paranjape refrains from demonstrating how the novels are the manifestation of ‘modern national consciousnesses. His notions of what constitutes ‘modern Indian nation’ is unclear. Further, much space is not given for the discussion of how novels can help in the formation and imagination of a community. He makes a significant observation about ‘experience of Indian collectivity’. He defines Indian collectivity as ‘the modern Indian nation, which itself is a combination of usable elements from the past and critical elements of western modernity.’ But what are the ‘usable elements from the past and critical elements of western modernity’ lacks clarity. Paranjape defines Indian novel as a “pleasure – knowledge construct” and situates the genre in the “collectivity called the Indian nation/ civilization” that’s “function is to interrogate even as it intervenes in the lives of the people who form this collectivity” (p 12). But how the

novel intervenes and interrogates in the lives also remains unexplained.

Further in the chapter on *Journey to Ithaca* he seems to be very critical about Anita Desai for her shallow portrayal of India and her spirituality and says that she should not try to impose small Ithaca on diverse India. He calls the fiction of the 80’s as mediocre by taking a few examples. But why the writers of that particular period made such representations of India and her people in their works remains unprobed. Paranjape is positive about the role being played by the novels in India. Within the scope of *Another Canon* and amidst the objectives of the book, questions about what the novel has to offer to Indian society, the novels deal with experience and reflection are not dealt in detail.

An impressive fact is that Paranjape has explored the lesser known texts by the much-acclaimed writers that have otherwise missed critical examination to build another canon successfully.

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