

ABSTRACT

“CASTE, CLASS AND IDEOLOGY IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION: A STUDY THROUGH SELECT INDIAN ENGLISH TEXTS”

The dissertation examines the role of caste and class and the influence of different ideologies in empowering either or both as desirable to the power structures, in Postcolonial Indian Fiction. While caste remains central to Indian society and fiction, the dominance of class or the intermingling of both caste and class cannot be ruled out. The novels taken for this study show that privileged upper caste groups use caste as a weapon of discrimination and oppression in rural India whereas, in urban areas caste is often overshadowed by the dominance of class. Whether in the political or financial clout of the upper classes or the collective consciousness of the middle classes, the thesis addresses the claims of ideology or the insidious manipulation of ideology. The dissertation addresses the ways in which one person or group tries to dominate another and how each manages to hold sway by latching onto hegemonic pressures or physical restrictions. It also examines the different types and levels of subalternities as the dominated groups try to represent things from their perspectives.

The study is carried out through fifteen postcolonial Indian novels in English, written by nine prominent authors during the period 1935 to 2008. The settings of the novels, spread over a period of about one hundred and sixty years, bring out caste as well as class conflicts in rural areas under the control of some overlord or the other. To this end, each of the five core chapters examines the role of ideology in the study of caste-class dynamics in the selected novels and the politics behind it. It may be noted that some of the novels are studied in more than one chapter in different contexts.

Chapter 1 examines the different parameters that have influenced the caste-class dynamics over changing times. It looks at the challenges to the existing system from resurgent groups and ideologies as they try to establish mobility within these once rigid structures. It also examines the fallout of colonial intervention through which a caste hierarchy was given official recognition.

Chapter 2 examines through three novels of Amitav Ghosh how social oppression causes spatial mobility among certain sections of the population. It probes if the dominance and oppression of the powerful caste or class, and poverty, are some of the reasons for which a section of the oppressed chooses to move out of their native place and change their occupation. This chapter looks into the conditions that the system of indentured labour or *girmitya* entails, wherein desperate people mortgage their lives and souls to unscrupulous procuring agencies.

Chapter 3 examines the middle-class mindset in relation to middle-class aspirations and problems, and their social and individual behavior through two novels of Rohinton Mistry. It is seen that the middle class is not a fixed entity but an evolving category. More than their resources, it is their social consciousness, their apprehension of modernity as they respond to changing values, which defines them.

Chapter 4 examines through a study of five novels how caste, which has been the traditional tool of oppression, has emerged as a counter of resistance in contemporary India where the so-called lower castes choose to combine under the umbrella term *dalit* to question their oppression and press for rights and privileges. It is shown that while caste and class denominations within a structure of hegemonic control or actual dominance has prevailed in Indian society from pre-colonial times, it is only under British rule that the caste system gained prominence as a means of social stratification and control. It also shows the change or transformation of the caste hierarchies with time.

Chapter 5 maps the rise of the subaltern both in terms of consciousness and agency with various instances from eight novels. This chapter brings together different kinds and levels of postcolonial subalternities and positions. The chapter examines how the perceptions of the poor, the destitute, the marginalized or the oppressed are presented from their positions and not some imaginary position attributed to them. These subaltern perspectives vary from unveiling hidden histories, to militancy and a charter of demands to comic embellishment and ‘upgradation’ of the histories of the ‘masters.’

Each novel addressed in the different chapters has something to say on the caste-class dynamics, as it lends itself to examination from various critical positions. The choice of the novels, it may be said, is indicative and not exhaustive, as more and more narratives

foregrounding these problems continue to be published. That notwithstanding, the Postcolonial novel in India has responded vigorously and variously to colonial rule, freedom struggle, rise of nationalist and Gandhian ideology, the World Wars, Partition, race and religious riots, the Emergency, economic liberalization, natural disasters, urbanization, and industrialization. Even in the present, it is invariably informed by mutant formations that combine caste and class to empower, enable and marginalize people as this dissertation shows.