

Postcolonial Modernity and the Indian Novel: On Catastrophic Realism

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If literature is often celebrated for its alleged ability to record the permanence of human emotion, can it successfully record the kinds of catastrophic events that drastically alter the social, economic, political, physical, and psychological lives of human beings? If yes, what should be the proper mode of representation? Can literary forms change according to the experience and aftermath of a catastrophic event? How can literary critics understand the depth and violence of catastrophes by analyzing the narrative structure of literary works? Such broad questions are answered by Sourit Bhattacharya's *Postcolonial Modernity and the Indian Novel: On Catastrophic Realism* in the context of Indian fiction. Although studies such as Meenakshi Mukherjee's *Realism and Reality: Novel and Society in India* (1985) and Ulka Anjaria's *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (2012) deal with the context and growth of realism in Indian fiction, less critical attention has been paid to the literary realism employed in literature written during and about catastrophic events in India.

Bhattacharya has selected three catastrophic events, namely the Bengal Famine (1943-1944), the Naxalbari Movement (1967-1972), and the Indian Emergency (1975-1977) for his discussion of postcolonial modernity in India. Developing a concept of modernity as "the new historical situation," drawn from Jameson's formulation in *A Singular Modernity* (2005, 95), the author shows how capitalist modernization and bourgeois political dominance in the post-colony have given birth to the catastrophic events and ensuing violence and resistance which structure "the social condition of modernity in post/colonial India" (5). Bhattacharya is of the view that the moments or events of extreme historical crisis "give birth to new aesthetic modes in order to adequately represent the specificities of the historical catastrophes, crises, conjectures, and contexts" (7). He outlines the use of different forms of realism employed in the representative literary works of catastrophic events. The choice of literary forms ranges from analytic-affective to metafictional, from quest to urban fantastic, and from magic realism to critical realism. It is the proximity to and

distance from the catastrophic events which determine the experimentation of literary realisms. According to the author, these experimental realisms – apparently contradictory to the standard and traditional practice of literary realism – formulate “catastrophic realism” (3), his own coinage, which acts as “the aesthetic fabric of catastrophic-prone, crisis-ridden vulnerable condition of life and living in postcolonial India” (3).

The book comprises five chapters followed by a conclusion. The introductory chapter examines theoretical perspectives on modernity, realism and the subtle difference between literary *form* and *mode*. Bhattacharya argues that, while form is “a commitment to understanding how historical processes and historical crises take place and how the world can be registered in a work,” it is a mode that “offers the framework to do so, retaining the heterogeneity of perspectives and the element of self-reflexivity in fictional writing” (18). Chapter Two discusses two novels based on the Bengal Famine of 1943. The author suggests that Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* (1947), written immediately after the catastrophic event, exploits the literary mode of “analytical-affective.” On the other hand, Amalendu Chakraborty’s 1982 novel revisiting the famine, *Ākāler Sandhāne (In Search of Famine)*, makes use of a “metafictional” mode of literary representation. Together they contribute to *disaster realism*, a new interpretive category proposed by the author, which reveals “the specific historical conjecture, nature, and orientation of a disaster and the global forces responsible for its occurrence” (78).

The next two chapters are devoted to the historical development of the Naxalbari peasant movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Novels by Mahasweta Devi and Nabarun Bhattacharya are selected to understand the student-peasant experience in the 1970s and the social conditions of the urban poor in the aftermath of the event from the late 1990s into the early 2000s. Bhattacharya observes that, while in Mahasweta Devi’s short novels, *Hāzār Churāshir Mā (Mother of 1084)*, 1974) and *Operation? Bashai Tudu* (1978), the “quest” mode plays a dominant role, in Nabarun Bhattacharya’s later novels, *Hārbārt* (1994) and *Kāngāl Mālshāt (Warcry of the Beggars)*, 2003), the “urban fantastic mode” is exploited repeatedly to formulate a *critical irrealism*. Drawing on Löwy’s interpretive method of *critical irrealism* – which while not adhering to the rules of standard realism “takes the form of protest, outrage, disgust, anxiety, or *angst*” (Löwy 196) –, the author argues that Devi and Bhattacharya, through their respective modes, have documented and criticized the failure of the bourgeois

middle class in understanding the rampant reification of postcolonial life. Chapter Five studies the socio-economic crisis leading to state violence in the 1960s and the nationwide state of emergency declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. While the novelist Salman Rushdie, writing shortly after the event in *Midnight's Children* (1981), resorts to the literary mode of “magical realism,” the novels revisiting the event engage in a more direct critique and analysis, especially in the works of Nayantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us* (1985) and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995). Bhattacharya is of the view that the state machinery is so elaborate and vague and its consequences so widely damaging, that the authors have used two experimental modes—magic realist and critical realist—to comprehend and convey this social reality to readers. Specifically, Rushdie, Sahgal and Mistry formulate an *emergency realism* portrayed through a magical-symbolic-allegorical framework, and class- and caste-based critical realist modes.

By amalgamating the three realisms discussed in the four chapters – namely *disaster realism*, *critical irrealism*, and *emergency realism* – the book develops the concept of *catastrophic realism* as an aesthetic framework for postcolonial modernity in India. Through insightful textual readings coupled with ample quotations from the texts under discussion, and offering brief contexts of the events of historical crisis, the book is successful in capturing the attention of global readers unfamiliar with the catastrophes and novels discussed in the book. While Bhattacharya’s primary focus is on nine novels and their incorporation of experimental catastrophic realism into the narrative structure, it would also be worth considering the various other works – short stories, plays and poems, as well as movies made and remade – that register catastrophic events through alternative media and genres. Indeed, this could be a promising avenue of inquiry for future scholars. The easy flow of writing and the profuse references to world literary works are sure to enlighten readers inside and outside the academy.

Works Cited

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