IJEEL
Peer-Reviewed International Journal

International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL)

ISSN: 2583-3812
Vol-4, Issue-3, May-Jun 2025

Journal Home Page: https://ijeel.org/
Journal CrossRef DOI: 10.22161/ijeel

Postcolonial Fiction: Constructing National Identity through Mythology in Krishna Udayashankar's *The Aryavarta Chronicles*

Vinita Chandra

Department of English, Ramjas College, University of Delhi, India
vinita.chandra@ramjas.du.ac.in

Article Detail:

Received on: 29 Mar 2025
Revised on: 30 Apr 2025
Accepted on: 08 May 2025

***Keywords*— Post-colonial fiction, Krishna Udayasankar's trilogy, Indian fiction in English**

Abstract

In the roughly four decades since the category of post-colonial literature made its appearance it has become one that is able to encompass within its broad parameters texts emanating from diverse locations and dealing with a multiplicity of issues and themes. The distinguishing characteristics that seem to typify these texts for most critics are those of movement and displacement, hybridity, multiplicity/plurality, alienation and the anguish that accompanies it. At the same time, however, there is a significant amount of fiction written within previously colonized countries that does not focus primarily on the issues of movement or displacement, or the anguish of alienation, hybridity and marginality, and instead turns its attention to the conflicts, struggles and materiality of post-colonial societies dealing not only with the aftermath of colonization but with a host of particular, local, internal problem. To address these questions and their implications for postcolonial fiction, I would like to do a brief reading of Krishna Udayasankar's trilogy, The Aryavarta Chronicles: Govinda, Kaurava, Kurukshetra, written over the period of 2012-2014. By re-reading the great war in the epic Mahabharat as a people's war for freedom rather than a religious text Udayasankar is able to re-align the nation's identity with the values enshrined in the Indian constitution which came into effect soon after India's independence from British colonialism.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1986 Fall issue of *Social Text* Frederic Jameson, in his article titled 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital', famously declared that "All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel." Aijaz Ahmad promptly responded to this formulation in the Fall issue of *Social Text* in 1987 with his article 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness' challenging Jameson's theorisation of the 'Third World', and what followed was an intense debate on the 'Third World' novel. In this same period the theoretical issues of postcoloniality were also being debated. In the years that followed, the terms Third World, Commonwealth, and Minority Literature came to be called Post-Colonial Literature. Edward Said's *Orientalism* which had opened out the field of Post Colonial studies was published in 1979, so the next decade of the 1980s took up the questions of what should constitute postcolonialism, what should be its

parameters, and even what its nomenclature should be. At the same time in India, quite independent of this debate, there was a spate of publication of literary writing in English by authors like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth and many others that came to be categorized as post-colonial. Most of these authors took up issues related to nation and nationality. However, the turn of the century saw a diversification in the kind of literature emerging from a host of publishing houses which included science fiction, fantasy and even romance, shifting the emphasis from the issue of nation building. I will attempt to trace the history of post-colonial fiction in India in relation to questions of national identity, and then focusing specially on Krishna Udayashankar's *The Aryavarta Chronicles,* I will look at recent interest in the fiction emerging in the last few years on re-presenting India's mythologies, often through material studies, in the process revisiting, interrogating, and rewriting the narrative of India's Hindu origins in the formulation of the nation. This recent fiction, however, is not categorized as post-colonial, and I will try to consider some of the issues that this raises for the category of post-colonial fiction itself.

From the 1980s since the category of post-colonial literature made its appearance it has become one that is able to encompass within its broad parameters texts emanating from diverse locations and dealing with a multiplicity of issues and themes. The distinguishing characteristics that seem to typify these texts for most critics - or at least the features that critics have looked for and found at the expense of others - are those of movement and displacement, hybridity, multiplicity/plurality, alienation and the anguish that accompanies it. And by virtue of being post-colonial and therefore emanating at one level from a history of colonization, suppression and marginalization, these texts are also presumed to make representations of the Other spaces they inhabit, that are alternatives to those provided by earlier dominant, colonialist literature. Post-colonial fiction, due its very categorization, is regarded as attempting to give voice to earlier suppressed peoples and spaces and thereby providing a corrective to the appropriation of these identities by colonialist narratives that `orientalized' them for the purpose of maintaining and justifying their power. This literature is viewed as attempting to deconstruct the hegemonic binary of the Occident and the Orient which Edward Said analyses in his seminal text *Orientalism.* Said writes, "Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is – and does not simply represent – a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world." (Said, 12)

The growing corpus of fictional writing that is increasingly categorized as postcolonial in preference to the outmoded categories of Commonwealth, Third World, or Minority literature, is then typified by concerns of diasporic communities, exile, spatial movement and displacement, fractured identities. The most visible post-colonial authors are those who write from the metropolitan center, looking back at their previously colonized countries, as well as trying to articulate the complex identity of their immigrant communities which attempts to straddle tradition and modernity, alienation and belonging, hope and loss. In view of global politics the category of postcolonial literature then is broad enough to cover almost any contemporary fiction that deals with nations, populations, issues of identity or history, and thus seems to lose all specificity. At the same time, however, there is a significant amount of fiction written within previously colonized countries that does not focus primarily on the issues of movement or displacement, or the anguish of alienation, hybridity and marginality, and instead turns its attention to the conflicts, struggles and materiality of post-colonial societies dealing not only with the aftermath of colonization but with a host of particular, local, internal problem. This fiction, however, is not always seen as representative of postcolonial literature, and often not included in this category, even as it attempts to come to terms with issues of multiple and fractured identities caused by the arbitrary national borders drawn by the colonial powers.

II. SHIFTING TERRAIN OF INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

The last decade has seen a shift in the subject matter as well as in the quantity of Indians writing and being published in English. The burgeoning of Indian writing in English in the last decade makes the 1980's 'explosion' look like a mere trickle. This writing covers all possible areas from children's literature, young adult

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.3.2

literature, detective fiction, fantasy, romances – even Mills & Boons set in India and written by an Indian author. Much of this work is not aimed at international audiences and therefore does not make any conscious attempt to represent an 'Indian' identity that can easily be unpacked by the non-Indian reader, in the manner that Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* does with its focus on inter caste relationships or Indian Communism, or Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* which grapples with fractured identities of those who choose to immigrate and settle in the West. At one level the democratization of writing and publishing in English has shaken the hold of writers who belonged to the elite school of what was dubbed The St Stephens School of writers, which included writers like Vikram Seth who did not actually go to Stephens but were put in that category anyway. This has allowed a wide range of ideas, interests, and an experimentation with narratives to emerge. At the same time the growing educated middle class has created a reading public that is eager to sample a variety of writing in English as can be seen from the lists of titles on the home pages of publishing houses in India.

Out of this corpus of work, I would like to focus on the rewriting of mythologies, an area that is seeing a lot of activity in the last few years with authors such as Ashok Banker, Devdutt Pattanaik and Krishna Udayasankar, to name a few. My interest in studying these texts is to analyze their construction of an originary Bharat, that Vedic, Hindu past from which India is supposed to have been formed. This interest is, of course, driven by the surge of Hindutva politics in recent time, one not witnessed in independent India before. In this narrative Indian mythology becomes a monolithic representation of the history of ancient India, synonymous with a Vedic, Hindu India which seamlessly coalesces with a Hindutva future, based on the reasoning that the mythological epics narrate the first traceable civilization of the subcontinent. What is the role of traveling, not spatially but temporally back in time, to rewrite mythology as popular best seller, in this project of nation building? How do issues of displacement and alienation work when familiar spaces, ideas, concepts are seen from the distance of thousands of years rather than thousands of kilometres?

III. MYTHOLOGY AND THE NATION: KRISHNA UDAYSAHKAR'S *ARYAVARTA CHRONICLES*

To address these questions and their implications for postcolonial fiction, I would like to do a brief reading of Krishna Udayasankar's trilogy, *The Aryavarta Chronicles: Govinda, Kaurava, Kurukshetra*, written over the period of 2012-2014. In the Author's Note Udayasankar calls her trilogy mytho-history as opposed to mythology, and says that she will look at the world of the Mahabharat not as "a land of demigods and demons in strife, but as an empire of nobles, commoners and forest-dwellers in socio-economic conflict." Udayasankar adds, "We are the stories we tell. *The Aryavarta Chronicles* are … a construction of reality based on a completely different set of assumptions – a distinction that is important because constructing shared reality is what links individual to society, however widely we may define the latter." (vii)

Udayasankar says that she did a lot of research before she started writing the trilogy and her list of resources is impressive, ranging from Romila Thapar's *The Penguin History of Ancient India*, to alternative Mahabharats such as the Bhil Mahabharat and the Indonesian Kakawain, to analytical studies of Vedic and Upanishadic literature. Her construction of mytho-history is then a material history of mythical past; a shift from ideological history to a history based on archeology and analysis of material conditions. In consciously writing a 'mytho-history' of the well-known epic myth Mahabharat Udaysankar is performing the role of Benjamin's historical materialist. Her historical materialist version of the Mahabharat serves to destabilize the deployment of the myth as historical fact which narrativizes the nation as seamlessly evolving from a glorious, advanced civilization to a unique, progressive Hindu nation in the present. In *The Aryavarta Chronicles* "historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past", to quote Benjamin again. She rewrites the magical past of superheroes and super inventions, of grand totalizing narratives, as a history that analyzes power struggles between kingdoms, peoples, and resources within a space she terms the Aryavarta, to which she even outlines a 'national', geographical boundary.

Udayasnkar's protagonist is Krishna, but she calls him by his less familiar name, Govinda, and uses him to represent the ideology behind her revisionist epic. According to her narrative, neither the Kauravs nor the Pandavs wanted war, and Govinda is instrumental in bringing the two sides along with all

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.3.2

their allies to the brink of war in a bid to illustrate to them how important it is to forge peace. Both sides have the terrible astra weapons that are in control of only a few; the fear is what would happen if they fell into the hands of the 'wrong' people. Her narrative consciously gestures to the nuclear stockpiles that are supposed to persuade countries to maintain peace at all cost because the price of nuclear warfare is too terrible to contemplate. Indeed, her descriptions of the destruction caused by astra weapons closely follows those of the destruction caused by the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, it is only when war is imminent that she has Govinda articulate the nation that he hopes to see rise out of the ashes: "A realm of the people, for the people." (Kurukshetra, 145) When Abhimanyu goes to the forest people, the rikshasas or the tree people, he elaborates on this idea by arguing that the war is a war for the people, not a war for kingdoms. He says to Hidimbya, their Chief,

> …it is not I who am the true heir to Dharma Yudhishtir's throne. It is you. …Can your people trust that you will fight this war, not to make Dharma emperor but to prove that he could not have lost his empire in the first place? This is revolution, Chief, it is a way of telling every living person in Aryavarta that no one, not even its Emperor, can treat its people with impunity. Aryavarta belongs, has always belonged, to its people. It was never any emperor's to lose. (*Kurukshetra*, 73)

The Mahabharat then becomes much more than a battle for power or land; it becomes a revolution to change a hierarchical world order to allow the common people to become sovereign. Duryodhan wonders if Govinda is right in arguing that

> It was not Dharma Yudhishitir alone who was the problem, but the very system, the way of the world around them, which had permitted him to act the way he had. Was it not right to tear down such a system than to merely resist one tyrant who abused his position? (Kurukshetra, 155)

Udayasankar's originary narrative of modern India is then realized by constructing the past not simply in terms of kings and kingdoms but as surge for a nationhood which is imagined by the people – the peasants, common soldiers, artisans, those marginalized in the forests and tribalized – nationhood coming out of a desire for sovereignty, to live a life free of bondage through a sharing of resources and technology to make a prosperous people – a nation constituted of the people, made by the people, through their blood, marching towards an equal future. The retelling of the Mahabharat story does not trace India's history back to a superior Hindutva past to pave the way for an exclusionary Hindu nation; instead, it employs the modern ideas of democracy and equality as age old ideas that blood was shed over in the past in order to envisage a future nation where prosperity comes out of sharing technology and resources, both human and natural. Udayasankar's nation is an all inclusive, pluralistic, tolerant, socialist, non-hierarchical one.

In his thought provoking book *Playing the Nation Game: The Ambiguities of Nationalism in India*, Benjamin Zachariah writes, "Modern nations, we are told, write their histories retrospectively in order to justify their presents by their pasts. So we have learned to take nationalism as a claim in the collective existence and consciousness of a group of people in search of a state and of state power." (13) Zachariah argues that all nationalisms are exclusionary because they mobilize to form a state that is distinguishable from other states, and therefore define those values that are specifically theirs, and in the process exclude those which are not. Zachariah's argument comes from the familiar position that all nationalisms are dangerous. Udayasankar seems to be aware of the dangers of exclusionary nationalism and therefore reconstructs the Mahabharat narrative to posit a nationalism that emerges from a desire for freedom that is inherent in every individual.

Aijaz Ahmad questions Jameson's slippage between 'nation' and 'collectivity' when using the term 'national allegory' in his article 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness', and asks if 'nation' and 'collectivity' are the same thing. Ahmad writes, "The difficulty of this shift in vocabulary is that one may indeed connect one's personal experience to a 'collectivity' - in terms of class, gender, caste, religious community, trade union, political party, village, prison – combining the private and the public, and in some sense 'allegorizing' the individual experience, without involving the category of 'the nation' or necessarily referring back to the 'experience of colonialism and imperialism'. (Ahmad, 110)

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.3.2

Udayasankar's *The Aryavarta Chronicles* is a fitting example of Ahmad's definition of 'collectivity' as a form of nationhood which encompasses the multiple aspects of the citizen's personal experience rather than narrowing and restricting it to the experience of colonialism. Udayasankar travels back in time and employs popular mythology and combines it with historical research to reimagine the project of nation building as inclusive 'collectivities'.

IV. CONCLUSION

We return then to the category of postcolonial fiction. In the many years after decolonization postcolonial fiction has moved away from the immediate effects of colonization but is still striving for a way of constructing an identity for the nation that has been defined by boundaries that the colonizers have imprisoned the nation within. Krishna Udayasankar's *The Aryavarta Chronicles,* published from 2012 to 2014, is directly addressing the issue of religion in constructing a national identity by returning to the foundational religious mythology that is being used to legitimise it. By re-reading the great war in the epic *Mahabharat* as a people's war for freedom rather than a religious text Udayasankar is able to re-align the nation's identity with the values enshrined in the Indian constitution which came into effect soon after India's independence from British colonialism.

REFERENCES

[1] Jameson, Frederick. `Third World Nationalism in an era of Multinational Capitalism.' *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88.
[2] Ahmad, Aijaz. `Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the `Nationalist Allegory'.' *Social Text* 15 (1986): 3-25.
[3] Said, Edward. *Orientalism.* New York: Random House, 1979.
[4] Mukherjee, Meenakshi. `The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English.' *Economic and Political Weekly* (November 27, 1993): 2607-2611.
[5] McClintock, Anne. `The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term `Post-Colonialism'.' *Social Text* 31-32 (1992): 84-98.
[6] Udayasankar, Krishna. *Govinda: The Aryavarta Chronicles.* India: Hatchette, 2012.
[7] Udayasankar, Krishna. *Kaurava: The Aryavarta Chronicles.* India: Hatchette, 2013.
[8] Udayasankar, Krishna. *Kurukshetra: The Aryavarta Chronicles.* India: Hatchette, 2014.
[9] Zachariah, Benjamin. *Playing the Nation Game: The Ambiguities of Nationalism in India.* New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2011.

Article DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijeel.4.3.2