**Modernism, Hindi Literature**

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The advent of modernism is Hindi literature is commonly dated to the publication in 1943 of an anthology of seven young poets, *Tar Saptak* (Septet). Besides a selection of his poems, each poet here contributed a prefatory statement of his poetic creed which, together with the introduction by the editor-contributor, Satchidanand Hiranand Vatsyayan ‘Agyeya,’ added up effectively to a manifesto. A second *Tar Saptak* (1951) and then a third (1959), comprising seven newer poets each, consolidated virtually the whole canon of modernist poetry in Hindi, while a belated fourth anthology of seven more poets (1978) signaled no less clearly the exhaustion and decline of the Hindi modernist movement.

‘Agyeya’ published at about the same time as the first of these anthologies a novel of his own, *Shekhar: Ek Jivani* (in two parts, 1941, 1944). This autobiographical *bildungsroman* describes, with astonishing psychological intensity, successive acts of mounting rebellion by the hero: against parental authority, against religious belief and practice, against social conventions, and then against British rule, as a member of a bomb-throwing revolutionary group; the novel opens with him in a prison cell, fully expecting to be hanged. It was instantly acclaimed as the first work of modernist fiction in Hindi and indeed as one of the greatest Hindi novels ever written. Agyeya also explored here the themes of homosexual as well as incestuous attraction, and his second novel, *Nadi ke Dweep* (1951; Islands in the Stream), presented a complex quadrangular love-story narrated alternately by each character, two men and two women, in the first person. Agyeya’s third and last novel *Apne-Apne Ajnabi* (1961; To Each His Stranger) depicted an existential crisis experienced by three characters in a snow-bound cottage in Europe. His major themes in all his creative and discursive works were a new kind of subjectivity, the play of desire and memory, the deeply contrasted perceptions of the notion of time in India and in the West, and the cultural contention between Indian traditions and colonial modernity. He remains altogether a more significant and influential figure in Hindi modernism than any single writer one could name in Anglo-American modernism -- an arch modernist himself and the cause of modernism in numerous other writers.

Of the later Hindi poets, Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh wrote poems of direct social concern as well as some long, unfinished poems containing a mythical, mystical exploration of the darkness and obscurity at the core of human experience. Shamsher Bahdur Singh, who was a painter as well, wrote of radical themes with a self-conscious lyrical sensuousness, Raghuvir Sahay combined poetry and postcolonial politics with a nuanced irony comparable to that of some Soviet or Eastern Bloc poets, and Kunwar Narayan has explored contemporary life as well as upanishadic episodes with high ethical seriousness and austere artistic rigour.

In fiction, fitful intimations of early modernism can be traced in Premchand’s novel *Nirmala* (1927), which has a suggestive incestuous dimension involving the eponymous heroine and a stepson of approximately her own age; she also dreams a disturbing dream suitable for Freudian psychoanalysis. Jainendra Kumar created young heroines in successive novels published between 1930 and 1939 who are deeply conflicted regarding their sexual desires and moral conduct, as indeed are the men around them. But many younger contemporaries of Agyeya have been concerned mainly with a psychological exploration of new social developments, such as the ever increasing migration from tradition-bound villages to modern cities and the new patterns of individual and social formation as experienced with metropolitan angst in the three great urban centres of India which have a substantial Hindi-speaking population: Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata.

It is a special characteristic of Hindi (or even Indian) fiction that the short story has been as prominent a genre in it as the novel if not a little more so. Arguably, the first modernist work of Hindi literature was a short story ‘Usne Kaha Tha’ (1915; What She Said) by a lively Sanskrit scholar, Chandradhar Sharma Guleri; it is set in the trenches of Flanders in World War I, features both Indian and German characters, and moves back and forth in time to tell a poignant love-story. (Incidentally, this work effectively predates Joyce, Woolf and Mansfield as also most of the War literature.) The great narrators of Hindi modernity and modernism later on too have been practitioners of the novel and the short story equally. It was in fact the modern/ist short story over which many critical battles in Hindi were fought in the 1960s and the 1970s, and the works particularly in focus were those by three rising writers: Mohan Rakesh, a major fiction-writer who achieved equal eminence as a distinctively modernist playwright, Rajendra Yadav whose spectacular creative talent was exhausted early, and Nirmal Verma, probably the most truly modernist of them all, whose first novel (1966) was set entirely in Prague, over a dozen of whose best short stories too were similarly set in Europe and England, who transformed Hindi prose through a creative infusion of English and Czech usage, and whose five slim novels, featuring a wide range of protagonists from a pubescent girl to an old man about to die, probably represent Hindi modernism at its characteristic best.

Modernism in Hindi came to be called *prayogvad* (experimentalism) and has always been a beleaguered project. It has been under constant fire from *pragativad* (progressivism), which arose as a literary movement in Hindi almost coevally, in the 1930s, and Marxist critics as a rule have condemned it as too formalist/aestheticist and oblivious of urgent social issues. It was also attacked from a very different quarter by broadly Gandhian, indigenist cultural critics, who accused it of being patently Western in provenance and thus no more than pretentious pastiche. Nevertheless, the pervasive legacy of Hindi modernism persists and it is in fact rather more positively valued now when neither Marxism nor Gandhism is as dominant a discourse in India as it used to be.

**Timeline**

1941. Agyeya’s novel *Sekhar: Ek Jivani*, vol. 1

1943. Publication of *Tar Saptak*

1944. Agyeya’s novel *Sekhar: Ek Jivani,* vol. 2

1951. Publication of second *Saptak*

1954. Agyeya’s novel *Nadi ke Dvip*

1959. Publication of third *Saptak*

1964. Muktibodh’s long poem *Andhere Mein*

1966. Nirmal Verma’s novel *Ve Din*

1968. Mohan Rakesh’s play *Adhe Adhure*

1978. Publication of fourth *Saptak*

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