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| **Kahani, Nayi** |
| **New Story** |
| The Nayi Kahani (New Story) movement was an important phase in the development of South Asian modernism, particularly in Indian languages. The movement emerged in the 1950s, as an extension of sorts of the earlier ‘Nayi Kavita’ (New Poetry) movement in Indian poetry. The aesthetics of the Nayi Kahani emphasize spare language, self-reflexivity, psychologism, troubled gender relations, and a sense of social alienation, all of which put it in sharp contrast to the prevailing social realist aesthetic associated with the Progressive Writers movement. Some of the major figures associated with the Nayi Kahani include Nirmal Verma (1929-2005), Rajendra Yadav (1929-), Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972), Kamleshwar (1932-2007), Mannu Bhandari (1931-), Phanishwernath ‘Renu’ (1921-1977), Krishna Baldev Vaid (1927-), and Bhisham Sahni (1915-2003). While the Nayi Kahani is usually thought of as a movement in Hindi-language fiction, it did have an Urdu-language corollary in Pakistan (the ‘Naya Afsana’), which also emerged as a reaction to the Progressive Writers movement of the 1930s. The intellectual and ideological orientation of all three overlapping movements in South Asian modernism (Nayi Kahani, Nayi Kavita, Naya Afsana) does appear to follow the Lukacsian split familiar to scholars of European modernism, with social realists on the one side and a more experimental, alienated aesthetic emerging under the rubric of ‘modernism’, on the other. That said, in contrast to the Anglophone Indian modernism associated with P. Lal and the Calcutta Writers Workshop, these South Asian-language modernisms of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s all operated with a high degree of autonomy from the European modernist canon. |
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Since the Nayi Kahani movement emerged out of the Hindi Nayi Kavita movement of the 1940s, it seems appropriate to begin by briefly situating the preceding movement in literary historical context. One of the the leading theorists of the Nayi Kavita was himself a poet, known in English alternately as Agyeya or Ajneya (here: Ajneya). Ajneya conceptualized his poetic method as ‘Prayogvad’ (‘experimentalism’) using an Urdu-derived term that clearly suggested a dialectical relationship to the then-dominant Progressive Writers Movement (which was said to practice ‘Pragativad’ [Progressivism]).  In comparison to Anglophone South Asian modernist writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, the Nayi Kahani has been comparatively underserved by contemporary scholars of modernism, perhaps because it was so determinedly a movement that in its primary articulation was expressed through Hindi, a language few scholars in the North American modernist studies community can read easily. The two most important literary critics who have written about the Nayi Kahani, Gordon Roadarmel and Sukrita Paul Kumar, both published their studies some time ago (1969 and 1990, respectively).  Roadarmel, who spent several years in India studying modernist Hindi fiction in the 1960s, compiled the results of his research into a Ph.D. dissertation at the University of California. According to Roadarmel, the first specific usage of the phrase ‘Nayi Kahani’ was in fact in 1957, in an essay by the Hindi-language critic Namwar Singh. Singh coined the phrase ‘Nayi Kahani’ to describe a stylistic shift visible in the pages of the influential short story magazine *Kahani* that he had witnessed as occurring between 1955 and 1956. Singh saw the connection to the earlier Nayi Kavita movement explicitly: ‘In thinking about the story today, the first thing that comes to my mind is … whether like ‘nayi kavita’ there is also such a thing as ‘nayi kahani’ (cited in Roadermel, 53). Roadarmel suggests that in the space of a few short months in 1957, ‘the term ‘Nayi Kahani’ became generally applied to the new writing’. In addition to publishing (in the form of a dissertation typescript) what remains the definitive study of this phase of Hindi modernist writing, Roadarmel also posthumously published a skilful translation of a selection of representative stories from the Nayi Kahani movement. This collection, *A Death in Delhi: Modern Hindi Short Stories*, contains important stories from Kamleshwar, Nirmal Verma, Phanishwernath ‘Renu’, Krishna Baldev Vaid, and Mohan Rakesh, among others.  A classic example of a Nayi Kahani novel might be Krishna Baldev Vaid’s *Uska Bachpan* (‘His Childhood’), published in Hindi in 1957 (and later translated by the author himself into English as *Steps in Darkness*). Vaid’s novel is told from the perspective of a young boy named Beero, whose parents are trapped in a dysfunctional marriage. The novel is saturated with the vulgar language his parents use in their arguments with one another; its high degree of coarseness alone puts it in contrast with the comparatively more restrained conventions of socialist realism then dominant in South Asian fiction. *Uska Bachpan* is claustrophobically limited to the world of this single, deeply troubled family, with a climactic sequence ending in the child protagonist’s unsuccessful attempted suicide. In contrast to social realist authors such as Premchand, Vaid aspires to no broader moral idea and offers no ideological solution to the paralysis that oppresses his major characters.  In his study of the Nayi Kahani, Roadarmel also mentions an ongoing tension within the Nayi Kahani movement, between a group of writers (especially Nirmal Verma) who wrote about urban settings and who had a cosmopolitan sensibility, and those who were more focused on authentically representing alienation in rural life (Vaid’s novel might be an example of a more specifically ‘rural’ Nayi Kahani novel).  According to scholars such as Roadarmel and Kumar, the peak period of the Nayi Kahani movement can be dated to the late 1950s and early 1960s. By the late 1960s, several of the major participants in the movement had either exhausted the possibilities of the style (which was, perhaps not surprisingly, never commercially viable), or decided to move abroad. Nirmal Verma did continue to write roughly in the parameters set forth by his early work through the 1970s and 80s, though he did so as a highly independent writer not affiliated with any school or movement. For his part, Vaid, after moving to the United States, became quite a bit more self-conscious and urbane in his approach, borrowing heavily from heroes such as Joyce and Beckett in later published works. By the 1980s and 90s, the Nayi Kahani was effectively eclipsed in the critical imagination by the new generation of ‘postcolonial’ Anglophone South Asian writers. |
| Further reading:  (Ahmad)  (Kumar)  (Roadarmel, The Theme of Alienation in the Modern Hindi Short Story)  (Roadarmel)  (Rosenstein) |