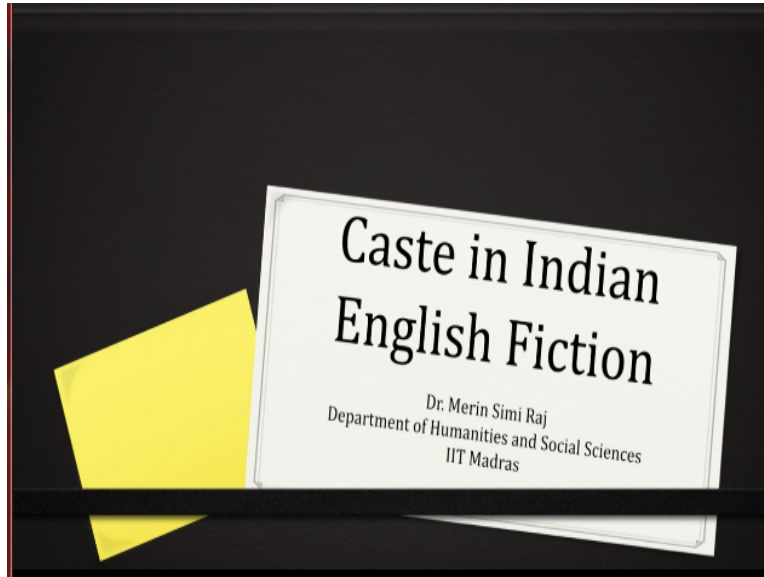


Indian Fiction in English
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Lecture-23
Caste in Indian English Fiction

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Hello everyone, good morning and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course Indian fiction in English. This week we began looking at the idea of caste as represented an Indian English fiction there could also be certain instances where caste is entirely absent. So, we are looking at these 2 ambivalence stances of the different ways in which caste is represented and also looking at those absences and gaps where caste gets represented either in a minimal fashion or in a certain way that would render it is depiction extremely problematic.

In this week sessions we will be looking at 2 novels primarily one being untouchable by ((00:57) Anand and the other one got of small things the booker winning novel by Arunthathi Roi. So, the objective of today's lecture is to set the context to set the stage for those discussions on those 2 novels which are said to be predominantly about caste there are a number of reviews and number of critical works locating those 2 works within the movements of Indian caste system.

But at the same time there are certain lapses there are certain limitations and challenges within which those works are frat as well. So, this lecture needs to be seen in that context trying to open up certain avenues for discussion in terms of the relationship of caste with Indian English fiction and vice versa. For this purpose this lecture is loosely based on Tabish Khair's work Babu fiction, alienation and contemporary Indian English novels.

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It is a work published in 2005 where he also has an entire chapter title caste the Hiranyagarbha syndrome.

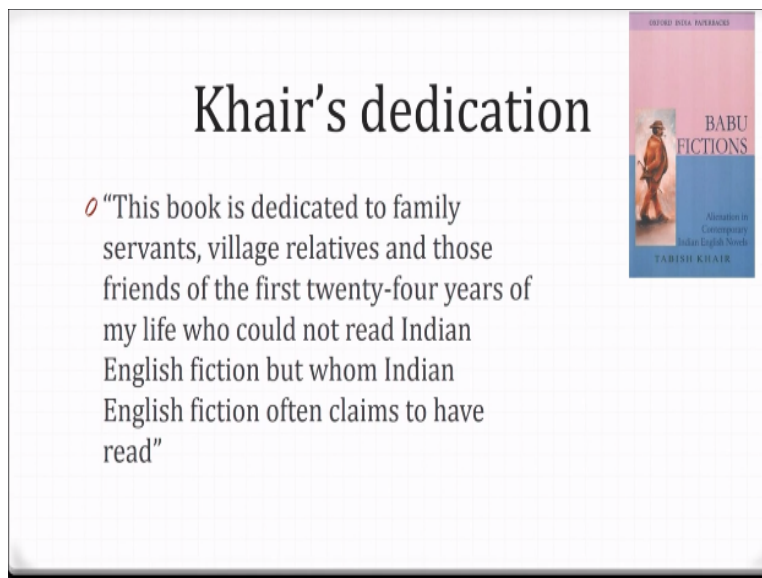
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Readings:

o "Caste: The Hiranyagarbha Syndrome" in *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* (Tabish Khair, 2005)

He talks about the presence of caste and its relative absence and tries to apply it in the social historical context of contemporary India. He also tries to theorize it though minimally. A familiarity with Khair's chapter 'Caste: The Hiranyagarbha syndrome' would be highly useful as and when you try to follow this lecture. This work 'Babu Fictions' has a very interesting dedication at the beginning of it. This book Khair has written

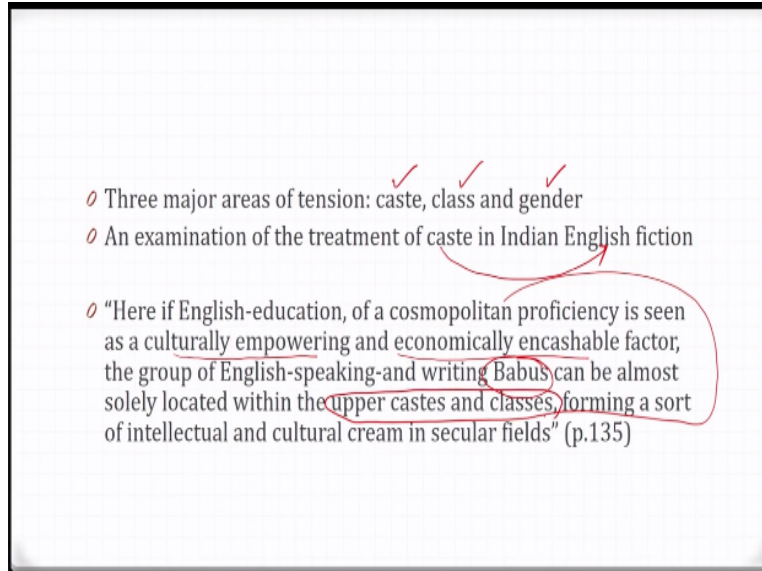
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This book is dedicated to family servants, village relatives and those friends of the first 24 years of my life who could not read Indian English fiction but whom Indian English fiction often claims to have read. If you look at some of the novels that we have already engaged with we have already understood that Indian English fiction claims to read and narrate the nation and it is many in habitants.

It is a body of writing which claims to completely understand and to completely represent what India is about and we have seen it in multiple ways in different novels. But here Khair is talking about a certain kind of an irony which is present here and this irony gets all the more heighten it is possible to accentuate the nature of that irony especially when one begins to talk about certain problematic areas it is caste or gender and quite rightfully as and when he has situated the context of this work.

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Khair identifies 3 major areas of tension as far as the narrative world of Indian English fiction is concerned. He talks about caste, class and gender in that context, he goes on to argue that being problematic areas being problematic concepts that in absence there is an apathy and sometimes there is certain kind of a redundancies with which these themes are these ideas are treated.

And he goes on to examine in detail the treatment of caste especially in Indian English fiction and that is the objective of this entire chapter till caste the Hiranyagarbha syndrome. He makes this much talked about and mostly visible connection between caste and English language to be specific upper casteless and English language. And he talks about how for reasons of inhabiting privileged circumstances, privileged habitats.

The Indian English authors they are also able to distance them over here from certain realities such as caste which is mostly relegated as an un-modern thing which is mostly seen as a backward thing that the modern secular citizen would rather not associate with. Khair speaks this is state with somewhere in the beginning of this chapter itself. Here if English education of a cosmopolitan proficiency is seen as a culturally empowering and economically encashable factor.

Notice how language is being seen as culturally empowering and economically encashable. The group of English speaking and writing Babu's the reference is obviously to the authors the Indian English authors can be almost solely located within the upper castes and classes, forming a sort

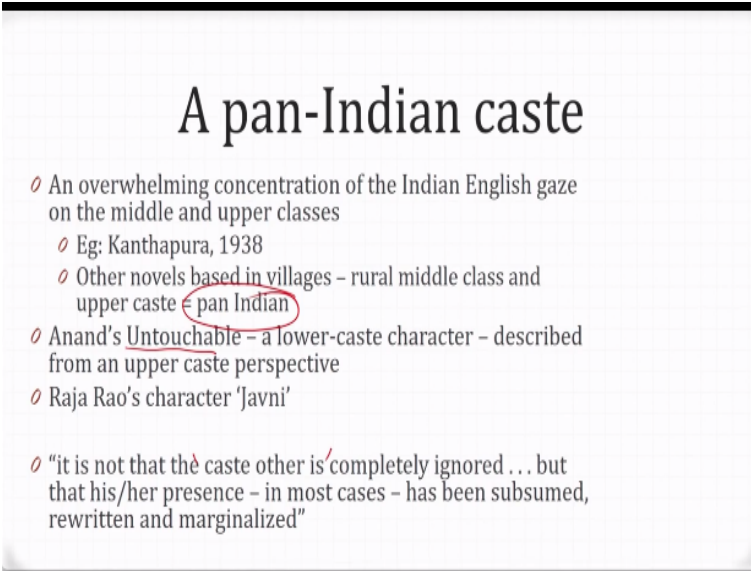
of intellectual and cultural cream in secular fields. This obvious connection that Khair begins to draw between English language and the ones who inhabit those words empowered by English language, it is not a novel idea.

Many sociologists have spoke about it, there are lot of historical and sociological concurrence and evidence to this kind of an observation or an idea that Khair is projecting. But to be able to see in the context of Indian English fiction that is perhaps originality that Khair brings in to this strand of argument. Here he is referring to the cosmopolitan habitats that are familiarized or frequented by the Indian English authors.

And he also equates this cosmopolitan proficiency with upper caste and upper classes, here in lies the problem to begin with. Here in lies the ambivalence that Khair is perhaps trying to engage with and here in also lies the superficial understanding of caste which Khair it some level is trying to uncover, is forcing us to rather uncover, with a few introductory state means on the status of caste and having explained how caste could be understood in the modern context.

And how Jathi is different from the modern understanding of caste and having provided the certain sociological sense of how caste operates in modern India. Khair begins to talk about the overwhelming concentration of the Indian English gaze on the middle and upper classes.

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A pan-Indian caste

- o An overwhelming concentration of the Indian English gaze on the middle and upper classes
 - o Eg: Kanthapura, 1938
 - o Other novels based in villages - rural middle class and upper caste - pan Indian
- o Anand's Untouchable - a lower-caste character - described from an upper caste perspective
- o Raja Rao's character 'Javni'

- o "it is not that the caste other is completely ignored . . . but that his/her presence - in most cases - has been subsumed, rewritten and marginalized"

And he gives the example of novel like Kanthapura published in 1938 which we have also noticed was celebrated as a novel which presented on microcosmic vision, a microcosmic idea of the nation. And there we also found that the author Raja Rao he claims to have a very authentic insiders kind of an information and insiders kind of outlook on the depiction of an Indian village, a typical Indian village which is entirely fascinated which is entirely in all at the new emerge in nationalist politics under the leadership of Gandhi.

We find the character Moorthy and a number of other characters who are being presented from the perspective of an upper caste narrator who is present within the novel. And the novel itself is authored by an upper caste author and having state of these things Khair goes onto make this argument and claim that even the other novels which are based in Indian villages. They have this tendency to look at and represent the rural middle class and upper caste.

And that is seen as the presentation of the rural middle class and the upper caste within the context of an Indian village is then presented as being pan Indian. So, the problem inherently lies not in talking about the upper caste presence not intending the stories of the middle class or upper caste individuals who are characters in the novels. But the problem lies, the problem begins when you began to present these limited narratives as being pan Indian.

And there is also tendency then to assume that perhaps there is a pan Indian caste in village, a pan Indian caste in the urban areas where it is minimalized where it is presented in a minimal way to such an extent that it becomes impossible to see through the many complexities within which caste operates. Khair also alerts his to certain different kinds of the fictions which are also rare exceptions and the context of Indian English fiction.

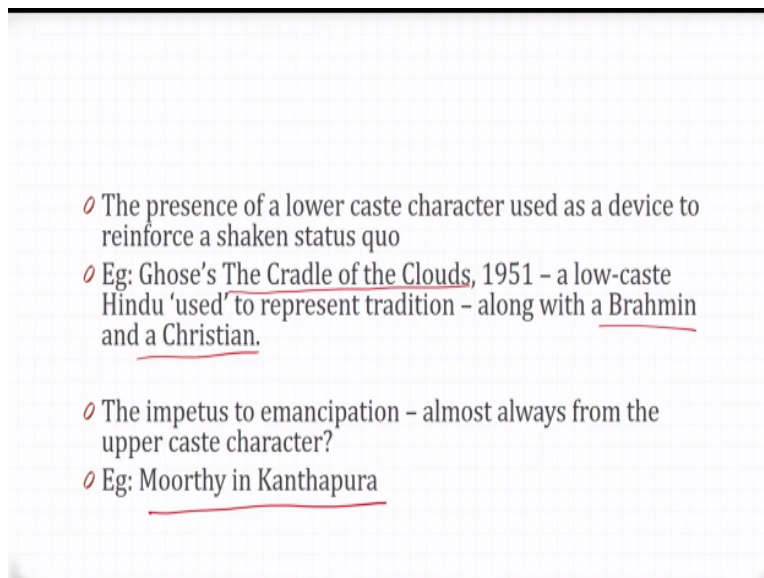
Khair talks about the novel untouchable by Anand which we shall be looking at in detail this week. There is a lower caste character Bhaka but the character of Bhaka is also described from an upper caste perspective there is a problem inherent in that which we shall be looking at in detail shortly. And there is also Raja Rao's character Javni from his short story the cow of the barricades, there is a freshness.

If you ask someone whether the lower caste characters have been presented yes there is a presence. But in what ways are they presented, there lies the challenge in the limitation and the problematic. In Khair's own words it is not that the caste other is completely ignored but that is so **her** presence in most cases has been substituted, rewritten and marginalized, one would like to argue otherwise presenting different case studies from different contexts of Indian fiction.

But Khair maintains through a series of discussions which you would also figure out if you read through the essay. There are many examples that he cites from Indian English fiction written from the 1930s onwards to showcase that there is a which of pan Indian caste is talked about. But there are no actual references, there are no indicators of the way in which caste operates in a very complex and ambiguous manner.

And this reference, this depiction is either of the middle class and the upper caste which is seen as pan Indian or there is a way in which the lower caste character also gets incorporated into the narrative fold but through a definitely an upper caste perspective. And there are certain instances where Khair talks about he refers to the presence of a lower caste character where the character is used.

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Mostly as a device to reinforced reinforce of shaken as status core, the example that he gives is from the novel The Cradle of the Clouds published in 1951 where a character a low-caste Hindu

is used to represent tradition to reinforce tradition. And he is alone with 2 other characters one a Brahmin and other a Christian. So, Khair is trying to ask perhaps whether the lower caste characters are used conveniently here, whether the presence of the lower caste characters are manipulated or maneuvered in such a way that it also serves the same end.

Especially in cradle of the clouds as how we can see the 3 characters Brahmin, Christian and a low caste character. They are not essentially different because they together the objective within the narrative these 3 seemingly different characters are only to reinforce tradition, only to talk about the only to glorify the important aspect of tradition. And there is another interesting aspect that Khair talks about where he identifies that the impetus to emancipation almost always accounts from the upper caste characters.

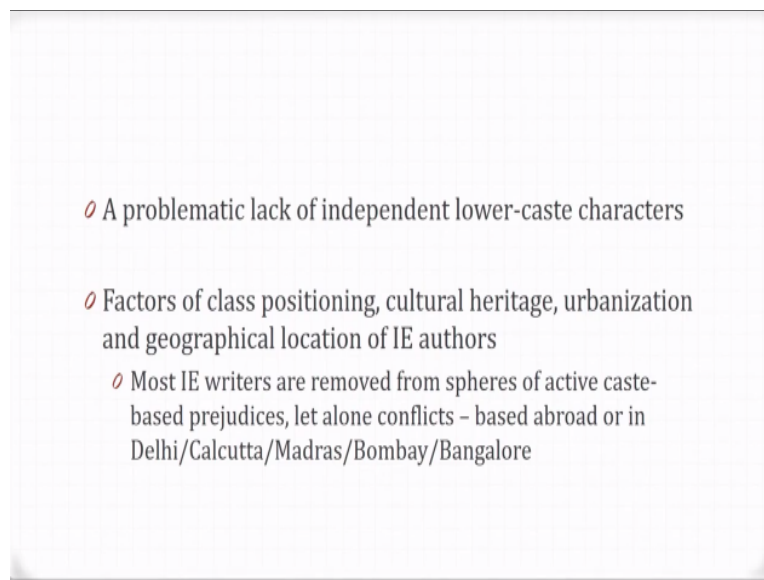
He gives the example of Moorthy in Kanthapura which he also talks about in detail if you recall the narrative structure of the novel Kanthapura you would also remember that Moorthy becomes extremely important in that village Kanthapura. He sees us to be just another villager, he becomes almost like a Mini Gandhi he becomes an extension of the political figure of Gandhi and Moorthy gets elevated to this status.

In spite of the regional, local situations within which he is placed, he becomes sound who is capable of leading the entire villages irrespective of the caste class differences. There is a subsuming of all kinds of differences class caste in religion which happens over there which we also notice in the depiction of villainies character but they cannot the only Muslim character in Kanthapura who is also presented as a villain.

And there is a clear difference in the narration between us and them the narrator the the female narrator being sound who belongs obviously to the upper caste. So, the as in them dichotomy which is built-in perhaps in advertently and this sir responsible protagonist who also incidentally again belongs to an upper class character. They all seem to tell us that there is a way in which a novel she gets restored.

There is a way in which is certain kind of normal scenes ascribed to the presence of an upper caste character as a protagonist as the leader as the main story teller, as the one who gives perspective. While the presence of their caste names or the references to caste rituals become incidental they never refer to anything as they even remotely caste as that is something very interesting that perhaps we can continue to observe in most discussions about caste in the contemporary. Especially when they are represented in different kinds of art forms drawing from these examples from contemporary in Indian English fiction. Khair is trying to drive whom the idea that.

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There is a problematic lack of independent lower-caste characters within the fold of Indian fiction. He tries to engage with the many reasons for this and he ends up identifying certain factors of class positioning, cultural heritage, urbanization and geographical location of the Indian English authors which surprisingly are rather similar. He reminds us that most Indian English writers are far removed from spheres of active caste-based prejudices.

Let alone caste conflicts which contemporary India is also ridden with and he refers to most contemporary Indian English authors being based abroad or in cities like Delhi, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Bangalore. And there is also ample evidence to show that Khair is not entirely wrong, it would be rather naive to say that it is a concerted defect, it is a concerted

effort of all these writers to deliberately ignore caste, deliberately stay away from spheres of active caste ridden areas.

It just how happens that again incidentally it just so happens that all almost all English writers they seem to be inhabiting a certain kind of class privilege they seem to be inheriting certain cultural heritages. And they also seem to be part of a growing urban cosmopolitan set of authors who are entirely removed from the realities which are part of caste based conflicts, class based conflicts or any region based differences.

And Khair in certain ways is also trying to reason out this lack of lower caste characters by trying to tell us that maybe this is the kind of reality, this is the kind of social circumstances, the social circles. That these authors are use to and this becomes a realistic kind of betrayal for them. And the kind of caste based society where there are differences based on caste, where there are conflicts based on caste differences.

Those things become relegated to a past, it is a past that modern India would rather not associate with, secular Indian citizen would rather distance himself or herself from. And in these limited attempts, in this challenging situation Khair also identifies certain brave attempts. He calls them brave but he also has certain reservations about them.

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Some 'brave' attempts

- o Younger writers who have moved away from a Rao-like knowledge of caste
- o Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance or Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things - using lower caste characters
- o BUT, not without lapses
- o 'almost an anxiety on Mistry's part' - the realist past of Dina vs. the elements of the fantastic, the fairy tale and newspaper reportage in the stories of Ishwar and Omprakash
- o The image of 'god-like' subalterns

He makes the reference to the younger writers of moved away from what he calls a Rao-like knowledge of caste. He finds Rao's position in terms of his depiction of caste is depiction of Kanthapura as then ideal village society. He finds those depictions problematic but nevertheless Khair is very careful and rather prom to acknowledge that Rao was knowledgeable about the intricate hierarchies within which caste operated.

And this he says this knowledge is not available to the younger writers for whatsoever reasons we which not part of their immediate reality or it is not there at all in the urban cosmopolitan circles within which they operate. And referring to these brave attempts that are 2 works that Khair makes a particular mention of rolling to mysteries to novel a fine balance and Arundhathi Roy's novel The god of small things.

Both have used lower characters, a lower caste characters in Arudhathi Roy's novel we have Valletta who is almost as significant as a protagonist. And in a fine balance which is a series of stories trunk together and in the within the backdrop of the event of emergency. We have 2 important Dalit characters occupying the center stage almost throughout the novel.

But this depiction of the lower caste characters as they use of lower caste characters in these brave attempts. Khair says a not without lapses, he codes an earlier work on mystery to argue that there is almost an anxiety on mystery's part and he gives the specific example of the way in which Dina the female a character holds her belongs to a family, he gives this example of how Dina story is are narrated.

And how Ishwar's and Omprakash stories at narrated, Ishwar and Omprakash other Dalit characters here. There is a classic kind of realism which we can see when Dina's past is portrayed it is a very classic realistic portrayal. But the mamini into the story is of Ishwar and Omprakash either in the past or from the way they are narrating it from the present, we find the elements of the fantastic, the fairy tale.

The newspaper reporters and all these seemly unreliable things coming in because there is no other way in which the stories of Ishwar and Omprakash could be narrated. The realist mode that

he adopts while narrating the story of Dina cannot be used in the context of Ishwar and Omprakash because there was an entirely different you also need certain different journals and different kinds of elements coming it to complete the story, to make the story more palatable, more believable.

So, this is what Khair tries to point out when he is talking about the lapses in these presentations of lower caste characters. And there is also certain dangers in moving to the other end of the spectrum where which is like Anand's untouchable there is a tendency to present the lower caste characters as being god like as being the perfect image of god-like Subalterns.

We find a similar kind of a treatment maybe not the extend to as we seen untouchable. We find the similar kind of a treatment being employed in the god of small things too where Valletta is presented as a different kind of a subaltern as a different kind of a prevent here, that is a kind of the word that the novel uses. We shall perhaps take a look at these things in detail when we talk about the novel the god of small things, while Khair is attentive to the mini lapses in the depiction of the lower caste characters or in the approach of these younger writers in **in** the context of caste.

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Younger post-Rushdie writers

- More open to the idea of certain kinds of socio-cultural change - than the Rao-Anand-Narayan generation
- But, mostly a legitimation of their own cosmopolitan class positioning
- Absence of the complexities of caste # NOT proof of the irrelevance of caste
- "we have not yet seen an Indo-Anglian fiction writer of tribal origin" (Spivak)

He also acknowledges that they are more open to the idea of certain kinds of social cultural change than perhaps the Rao-Anand-Narayan generation was. So, the younger post-Rushdie the

writers they try been deliberately impress this idea of change by depicting a different social setting all together. But Khair says that there is still a problem inherent in that because in most cases again not all in most cases.

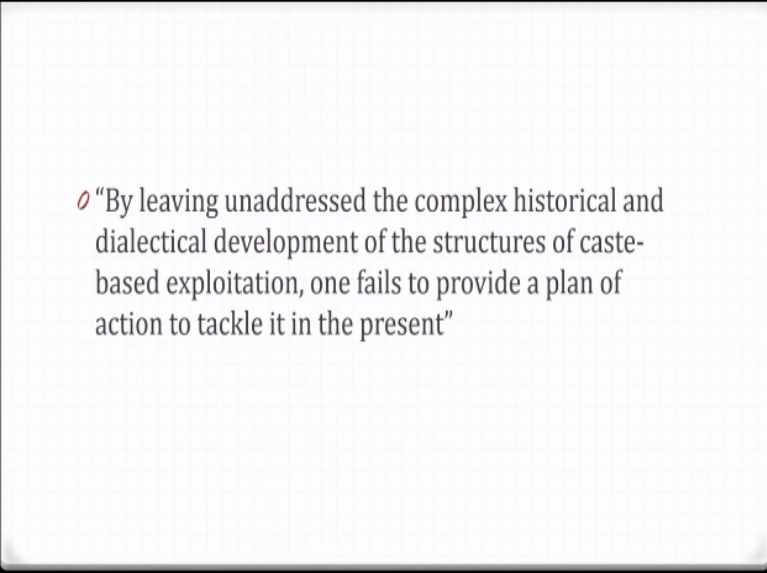
This to the idea of change, this acknowledgment that the world order has entirely change, the claim that it is more or less a casteless society and it is no longer possible to have a caste in the society mostly works as an extension of it as a legitimist of their own cosmopolitan class positioning. Khair are you sit out brilliantly in his chapter which are you can encourage you to rethought closely.

And he furthers his argument to show that the absence of the complexities of caste either in te narrative structure or in the lived reality that these Indian English authors see around them the social circles that they move around. This absence is not prove of the irrelevance of caste should not be taken as proof of the irrelevance of caste because caste been continues to operate and a visible and in invisible ways.

Perhaps outside this fold maybe there is a fold of Indian English writers or any such kind of privileged are coated where they can afford to be immune to certain social realities this is applicable not just in the case of caste it could be true in the case of gender in the case of religion. In the case of many things that he talk about a society and we may also recall feedback observation.

That they not yet seen and into a Anglo-Indian fiction writer of tribal origin could this be an incidental fact to notwithstanding the fact that there are many writers emerging from the a northeast who also face different kinds of challenges in terms of being marginalized. And being fetched against the post-Rushdie writers of the main land we will talk about it in a in one of the following weeks where we focus on the writers from the northeast and this inability to engage with the historical and dialectical development of caste is something that concerns care to the court.

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o "By leaving unaddressed the complex historical and dialectical development of the structures of caste-based exploitation, one fails to provide a plan of action to tackle it in the present"

Because he argues that if one is not attentive to the complexities in terms of history, in terms of dialectics one will not be able to engage with caste in a proper way to court care by leaving unimpressed the complex historical and dialectical development of the structures of caste based exploitation. One fails to provide a plan of action to tackle it in the present because whenever in most cases whenever caste gets talked about in the context of Indian English fiction.

It is either incidental or to show that it is possible to suppress the limitations of caste that caste has seize to be important it is a irrelevant concept in the modern context. But this kind of an invisibility this kind of an irrelevance attributed to caste will be extremely delimiting in the long run. Because as Khair points out if one does not acknowledge the basic structures from which caste based exploitation emerges.

They would it would not be possible to come up with the plan of action to engage with it, to respond with it to even to attempt to solve it. And this could be seen an extension of this could be seen in multiple ways in the arena of Indian English fiction Khair gives us a couple of more examples one being the use of myth in the narratives of Indian English fiction.

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The use of myth in IE fiction

- IE authors prefer myths drawn from The Ramayana - than The Mahabharata: Meenakshi Mukherjee
- Indian mind finds it easier to accept the ideal characters of The Ramayana rather than the ambiguous complicated characters of The Mahabharata // The Ramayana - the wellspring of upper-caste largely Brahminical value system in India
- (Khair 150)

He draws from Meenakshi Mukherjee's observation that Indian English authors prefer mostly myths drawn from the Ramayana and not from the Mahabharata. Mukherjee also **reasons in** reason this out in a very interesting way because she argues that the Indian mind finds to easy to accept the ideal characters of the Ramayana rather than the ambiguous complicated characters of the Mahabharata.

And she also furthers this argument which Khair also uses to further his own claim and his own argument that the Ramayana (()) (27:32) the Mahabharata is seen as the well spring of upper-caste largely Brahminical value system in India. And for the same reason Khair expanse his argument to wonder whether the use of met being limited to the Ramayana is also an indirect way in which Indian English fiction tries to limit itself to this largely upper caste value system.

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Gender and sexuality

o Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August – the violation of a tribal woman by a Babu – presented in terms of the Babu's different sexual norms and of the Babu's sexual starvation in a sexually frigid zone

And in terms of gender and sexuality also we find this difference being showcased in rather alarming ways we have noted how an attentive or perhaps how irresponsible the field of Indian English fiction is towards the many depictions of gender, how stereotypical are observations are and how the post rush the generation has almost manage to gloss over the area of women's writing in ways that we looked at briefly in one of the earlier sessions.

Khair refers to one of the bestselling novels of the post rush the (()) (28:42) Upamanyu Chatterjee's English, August. There is an instance of a tribal women by a Babu, Babu is the protagonist the league protagonist who is also an IAS officer who is post in the rural hint lancer for northern India. And he feels rather trap there because he is a modern cosmopolitan fun loving young man who realizes that there is nothing that he shares in common with the rural India.

And this violation which emerges as only an incidental episode in the course of the novel English August. In fact I also remember one of the reviews talking about this episode as the as a way in which August the protagonist nearly responds to a tribal women. It is not even an important sequence that the novel or any of it is discussions refer to. So, here the violation of this tribal women by the protagonist August is presented in terms of a Babu's different sexual norms yeah.

Babu is the term that Khair repeatedly almost throughout this work, he uses to refer to the privilege status that the Indian English author or any other privilege citizen enjoys. So, in

English August this violation is presented in terms of the privilege citizen Babu is different sexual norms and if the Babu sexual starvation is a sexually frigid zone. Beyond that it does not have any significance.

Because a tribal women's sexuality or the violation of it can be glossed over as an incidental episode, it need not be outrageous, it need to receive much of a retention yeah just like the Dalith man's death or the Dalith man's marginalization is can be glossed over in say a narrative. Like the god of small things where inevitably irrespective of the radicalism that it presents towards the end it **it** ends with death of the Dalith man.

So, just like it becomes an incidental occurrence here we find that the trampling upon of the sexuality of the tribal women also occurs as an incidental episode. Khair wraps up this discussion by referring to the urban landscapes in Indian English fiction.

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Urban landscapes in IE fiction

- o What is the character of the Indian English town or city? ✓
- o 'organized less in terms of caste and more in terms of class'
- o A class system that is often (but not always) superimposed on older lines of caste divisions

We would perhaps have the time later on to look at how invariably most Indian English novels are located in these cosmopolitan cities of India, how there is a pan-Indian is to these cosmopolitan cities. And how it also becomes a certain kind of a norm to talk about the narratives of India and he ask this Khair ask this very pertain in question, what is the character of the Indian English town or city.

We find that there is a certain uniform kind of a landscape that we can find in Indian English fiction. Because most urban landscapes are organized less in terms of caste and more in terms of class and it has much easier to gloss over caste and completely subsume and minimize the effective after effective caste in an urban class based society. And he also makes this important point to showcase that, the urban is in Indian English fiction.

The depiction of the urban landscape in Indian English fiction is also a trope a ploy, deliberate or in advertent to totally override the effects of caste. Because the kind of class which Indian English fiction talks about is a class system that is often he clarifies not always superimposed on older lines of caste divisions, you just name it differently. So, caste becomes merely and incidental occurrence over there with class somehow occupying a more important position.

And there is a way in which one can always equate class with various other factors like the economic aspect. The cultural heritage it could be something that you acquire through education through the kind of exposure that you get. There are multiple ways in which caste can be camouflaged caste can be made completely invisible when you use certain markers of class.

And this is what perhaps Indian English fiction had been perhaps in advertantly doing this is a kind of argument, this is the line of argument that Khair tries to presume throughout this chapter. And in the context of this discussion I encourage you to take a look at untouchable and the god of small things in detail to see how there is a glossy over of caste even when the novels are growly about caste.

You would see that both these novels have adopted different pathways to talk about caste in untouchable it is a very Gandhian way of looking at caste. And in the god of small things we find a more refined lower caste protagonist someone was conscious of his rights, a politically where Dalith merges as a protagonist in the form of Valletta. It is of course very radical way of presenting a caste what Arunthathi Roi has adopted.

But nevertheless there are certain inescapable in roads within which we find the depiction of caste continues to be fraught in the context of Indian English fiction. As I wrap up this lecture I

also leave you with this repeated appeal to read the novels *untouchable* and *the god of small things*. So, that you would be able to make better sense of the discussions which are to follow in the following sessions this week, I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.