

Exploring Social Responsibility and Ways of Attracting Greater Readership: An Eclectic Approach to Pankaj Mishra's Selected Works

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Abstract. This study reads the selected works of the Indian writer, Pankaj Mishra, in the light of an eclectic approach which aims to explore his social responsibility through his works and also to make a survey on his implementation of certain tools for expanding his readers. The central argument the present study seeks to demonstrate is that, by rendering factual evocations of people through real figures and their social voice, Pankaj Mishra tries to reply an inner call of social responsibility toward Indian community. It is through mediums of mass media, literary institutions, English language and translation that Mishra attains a marked level of readership globally. Two major works of Mishra considered for this research are the mixture of memoir, history, and philosophy, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World*, and the travel book *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond*.

Keywords: Pankaj Mishra, eclectic approach, social responsibility, attracting greater readership

1. Introduction

After India's Independence in 1947 and fundamental changes occurring in the country's structural foundations, a new capacity was created for a different trend of literary creation. Indian writers inclined towards a different type of literature that could best depict their new status as partly detached from their colonial past. While literature and its components were considered as excellent devices for representing events and outcomes of this part of history of India [1], the new generation of Indian writers tried to play a major role in shaping a new indigenous-national identity for a nation in transition, besides presenting a different positive view of their country overseas. An abundance of the literature in English produced by the Indian writers both inside and outside the subcontinent over the next three decades after Independence can be observed as a part of the same trend. This boom of literature in English, on one hand, changes the face of Indian fiction publication [2], and on the other hand, introduces many creative Indian writers to the world's literary circles, where they shine brilliantly [3]. As "the time of remarkable explosion of English literature produced outside Britain and the United State" [4], the 1990s introduces a new generation of Indian writers to the literary world who produce a major part of English Indian literature. Pankaj Mishra is one of the writers of such a generation. While deepening old discoveries and discovering new subjects about India, Mishra has attempted to explore themes of human beings' existence and their surroundings and destiny on global and regional perspectives through various genres in his writings. Such a professional writing career, together with his great global readership, relate to his reflective understanding and implementation of social responsibility in his works while he endeavors to have a true impression of the suffering underlying the Indian life experience and to articulate this suffering to the world outspokenly.

2. Review of Literature

There have been some critical commentaries on Mishra and his writing style, and lots of researches on the topic of writers' social responsibility and the devices which may expand their readership (including

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English language, Translation, Literary institutions, and Mass Media). Some of these are mentioned in the following:

- Sabin asserts that Mishra is trying to depict the realities of life in the subcontinent and West on the basis of a sort of sarcastic, ironic realism. She believes that “Mishra’s writing in every genre explores the difficulties of achieving truth and particularity about the colonial past and the postcolonial present of the subcontinent.” [5].
- Challakere states that Mishra renders many visible contrary currents and new ambivalences through concrete evocations of people and their social voice [6].
- Chanda reviews the Indian literary tradition, focusing on the social responsibility and voice (protest) as two distinctive features in some English Indian writings [7].
- Through her speech, Gordimer, deems writers responsible on two major grounds: first, by the claims of different concepts of morality before they start writing and second, by various interpretations of the consequences of the writers’ works [8].
- According to Vargas Llosa, being a writer is synonymous with having a social responsibility [9].
- In his essay, Grabovszki emphasizes on the vital role of literary institutions and mass media (specially the internet) in facilitating literary communications [10].
- Venuti mentions the superiority of English cultures after the World War II. He believes that the colonized people have used the imposed English language by the colonizers against themselves [11].
- Crystal explores the superiority of global English as a powerful medium regarding two interconnected grounds of geographical-historical and socio-cultural explanations [12].
- Deshpande enumerates various elements such as selecting a proper global language, having access to Western agents and publishers in achieving greater readership. Deshpande also asserts on the writers’ social responsibility towards women [13].

3. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

For partly exploring the outcomes of a new generation of Indian writers’ interaction with contemporary trends in the world of writing, and also for finding out more about the way Indian writers in English contribute to world literature, it is worthy to investigate major works of Mishra; a writer who has started from outside of the long-established European/American metropolitan centers of English literature, seeking two writerly goals: “a particular experience of the world” and “a true impression of life” [5]. Mishra’s analyses, narrative style and mannerism, characters, occasions, wide range of topics and themes, and most important of all his social responsibility to express a part of human beings’ sufferings, all have made him a successful writer in the eyes of many readers. Thus, this study tries to evaluate and analyze Mishra’s two selected works to elucidate the essence of such interest. In short, there would be two research questions:

- Is Mishra’s social responsibility palpable in his selected works under the study?
- Does Mishra implement any specific device to attain a greater readership?

Evaluating *intra-textual* components of the texts provides the proper ground for a better analysis on Mishra’s reaction towards his real surroundings and on the representation of his social responsibility in the texts. Investigating *extra-textual* components reflects the feedbacks on his works, and the technique and level of his interactions with the readers. The major link in the creation of such feedbacks might be Mishra’s probable utilization of four common tools for greater interacting with society.

4. Methodology

An *eclectic approach* forms the basis of the methodology. There exist two major subdivisions:

4.1. Intra-Textual and Extra-Textual Features

One part of the approach deals with the shape, structure, style and also content of Mishra’s selected works. The evaluation is done through an orderly survey on the texts and the feedbacks on them. Distinguishing the texts’ *intra-textual* and *extra-textual* features makes a valid pattern in this part of the approach. For the *intra-textual* scan, the focus has been on the textual characteristics such as genre, setting, motifs, themes, characters, tone, images, narration and so on. By analyzing the *extra-textual* distinctiveness, the present study has examined the characteristics of the context in which the given texts are located.

4.2. Devices for Attracting Greater Readership

There has always been this uncertainty that if practically there are certain passwords for a writer to enter into the world of literary globality and attract a greater readership. In response, some essentials have been mentioned as prerequisite measures, the most basic of which is the selection of a global language such as English. Having access to western agents and publishers, the migration of writers, intellectuals and scholars from all over the world to Western capitals and universities and finally fair marketing are considered as important procedures, too [13]. However, among such a long list of significant factors, four tools/mediums of mass media, literary institutions, English language and translation have been considered here in this research as more vital in conveying a writer's messages to the readers.

As significant forces and permanent parts of modern culture, mass media and modern technologies, and the globalization of publishing industry and literary institutions have made remarkable changes in dissemination of various forms of literature. Using the internet and going online in the chat-rooms are also categorized here as added to previous forms of communication (newspapers, magazines, television, radio, advertising and movies). It has been asserted that the internet allows ever greater access to literary texts. Lecturing (or even attending) at conferences worldwide, creative-writing programs, book-launch parties, book-reading sessions, presenting books in electronic formats (Pdf, Kindle, Djvu, Epub) are the newer forms of current measures under the category of literary institutions which may be added to the previous mechanisms which mainly contained publishers, authors, distributors, libraries, and bookstores.

Modern English language is another key tool, sometimes described as the first global *lingua franca*; a language which transcends national boundaries and serves communication purposes within and across different geographical contexts, by large groups of people. It is well incorporated into institutions and social processes of different societies and cultures [14], since it is a translocal and transcultural language, a language of fluidity and fixity that moves across, while becoming embedded in, the materiality of localities and social relations [15].

The fourth important medium is translation practice whose dynamic function originates in its grand role in practices of world/comparative literature, the rise of English as the international *lingua franca* and the simultaneous increase in the global demand for translations. This demand is still a good incentive for many writers around the world who share the idea and confirm that people are hungry for perspectives from other countries. For some Indian writers, besides writing in English, there has also been a focus on exporting literature into other languages via translation.

5. Analytical survey of Intra-Textual and Extra-Textual Features of the Selected Works

5.1. An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World [16]

Mishra's principal theme in this book is a rediscovery of Buddhism in the modern world. Originally, his search for the meaning of Buddhism begins in 1985 with a teenage pilgrimage to Lumbini, the Indian birthplace for the Buddha in the sixth century B.C. The book meanders from there to Mashobra, a small Himalayan village where Mishra studies ancient Buddhist texts, contemplating their relation to Dostoevsky, Marx and Nietzsche. He travels to the sites that were mentioned in the Pali scriptures of the Buddha's teachings. As the itinerary and setting of the book indicate, Mishra visits many places in the region, including Simla, Sangla valley, Spiti and Pin valleys, Lumbini, Sarnath. Next, he visits places in Europe: London, Paris, and then goes to USA. Kashmir and some places in Afghanistan and Pakistan are also in his tour. Through a genuine elegant prose, Mishra writes with surprising clarity about his physical surroundings and the world of sensation. Moreover, as the linguistic structure indicates through a descriptive narrative, mostly exact and precise, Mishra uses every noun attached to an adjective; few verbs remain unadorned.

A few figures stroll through the pages of the book; Mishra uses his interactions with these people to elaborate more on his main topics. Among these characters: Mr. Sharma, his landlord in the Himalayan foothills, who publishes *Divyajyoti*, a Sanskrit magazine with the circulation of five hundred copies. Helen, is an American girl who studies literature and becomes Buddhist nun a few years later. In late 2000, they meet again when Mishra comes to San Francisco for a Zen meditation retreat. Mishra tries to control his resentment when he thinks of the many Westerners coming to India "indulging their privilege – the unique license offered to them by the power and wealth of their countries – to be whatever they wished to be:

Buddhists, Hindus, Missionaries, Communists.” Such sarcastic remarks might indeed be interpreted as an indication of Mishra’s outspoken hatred towards Westerners’ superiority, i.e. power and wealth, of which a great majority of Indians are deprived. Mishra’s posture here mainly originates in his great sense of belonging and responsibility felt towards Indian nation. And Sophiya, a British girl with Indian backgrounds whom Mishra first met in Simla while she was working on a thesis. In Simla, and among local people, Sophiya seemed “glamorous” to Mishra but in London and in “her own world” she appears “diminished.”

In comparison with his previous books, Mishra’s third book has attracted much more attention from critics and reviewers. At least, two reviewers, Goodman [17] and Grimes [18], propose that Mishra prefers the Buddha of action to the mystical Buddha of contemplation. Grimes further adds that this is an odd, uneasy book [18]. Sawhney posits that “Mishra has waged a penetrating, revelatory critique of the most fundamental aspects of our society. Grappling with the inextricably linked forces of fundamentalism, violence, and poverty, he comes to terms with the inability of devout secularism and its institutions [...] to satisfy humanity’s most primal, existential needs and end suffering in the world. Fortunately, through his discussion of the Buddha, he outlines a progressive pathway towards the ethics and morality that much of the world is craving, which is as quixotic as it is empowering.” [19] Sharlet views the same pathway: “For those as disinclined to asceticism as to fundamentalism, *An End to Suffering* offers a “middle way” of Mishra’s own devising, a curvy, book-lined path of unfrenzied history and amateur philosophy. That is the “redemption” that Mishra, still a secular Hindu, finds in the Buddhist tradition – a life of the mind in which the mind itself is a collection of passing questions” [20].

5.2. Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond [21]

Through a collection of nine individual travel essays about India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet (China), and Nepal, this travelogue offers rare insight into the long shadow that poverty casts over human endeavor in the subcontinent. Drawing on his fluency in the history of his own country, India, in particular and his travel experiences, Mishra narrates a local story of ethnic, religious, economic, political or military conflict and injustice. Though he does not give any solution for such inequities and inconsistencies, the young writer depicts these problems quite skillfully. Mishra’s travels are interwoven with powerful commentary on modern politics in South Asia, while simultaneously keeping literary codes throughout the text. Mishra’s text is lucid and impressive, charming, honest, and attentive to both details and big picture; his profiles of ordinary people in the subcontinent with his touches upon a variety of controversial topics spices up the narrative with a generous sprinkling of facts and anecdotes. Mishra’s narrative powers are outstanding; he begins his narrative in India, the realities of Bollywood stardom, Jawaharlal Nehru’s post-independence politics, the brutal massacre of thirty-five Sikhs in Kashmir, and its local aftermath all unfold before the reader. This Kashmir chapter qualifies as good journalism. He writes about extreme situations such as the aftermath of a massacre in Chitisinghpura in Kashmir with a focus on a young girl whose father has been killed the night before. Mishra reveals the hypocrisy of corrupt modern Indian politicians who live in a self-imposed bubble and ignore the suffering of millions. From India, Mishra moves on to Pakistan and its predicaments. Here Mishra gives a vivid picture of the Western haze overwhelming the subcontinent. From Pakistan it is over to Tibet, where there are evidences about the corruption of the Tibetan monks who were in power before the Chinese invasion and about the atheist Chinese government and how Tibetan Buddhism can be “packaged and sold to tourists.”

Foran maintains that due to his local background, Mishra is then uniquely positioned to recognize and understand men and women who are, as he puts it in *Temptations of the West*, “lured away from their subsistence economies and abandoned on the threshold of a world in which they found they had, and could have, no place.” The same applies to nations obliged to “join the modern world and find new identities” in often dire, bloody circumstances. He further adds that the intensity of Mishra’s prose suggests that he wants the disruption, and the upheaval, to be felt viscerally. Daring reportage, and an obvious empathy for ordinary people, goes some way toward this ambition [22]. For Bhattacharya [23], Mishra is a keen observer of people, who has a great eye for detail, and lets his thorough, uncompromising reportage speak for itself. Focusing on the second essay in the travel book, Bhattacharya asserts that this passage offers a sort of coda to the text. Gray [24] praises this book as a subtle, vivid and inexhaustibly thought-provoking one, which is similar to Mishra’s study of the Buddha as a genre-bending book. Gray analyzes that the fluidity of cultural

frontiers is a recurring theme of Mishra's work, and it is central to this work, too. "Deeply immersed in the history of the region, he tells the reader more about the true condition of much of Asia today than can be gleaned from any number of weighty academic tomes" [24]. He approves Mishra's skeptical view of the west as a factor that distinguishes this work from other accounts of the problems of Asia. Accordingly, Mishra's portraits of politicians and officials, business and media people struggling to make sense of their rapidly mutating and sometimes collapsing societies are sharply observed and often poignant.

6. Analytical Survey of Devices for Attracting Greater Readership

Mishra's talent is not confined to the texts. While once it seemed that Mishra was shying away from the limelight, it is now more reckoned for his selectiveness. Indeed, he has revealed especial subtlety in his writing career: His estimable résumé includes attending various conferences around the globe, lecturing at different occasions, participating in online internet chat-rooms. In addition, working with some famous international journals and magazines, as an important part of the mass media, has provided Mishra with more powerful tools to introduce himself and his ideas. Such experiences have brought him broader interactions; some of his involvements and appearances in global issues and his favorite topics, major themes and motifs have already been focused upon by the mass media. Mishra's policy of collaborating with famous West-based agents and publishers also evidences the growing emphasis on their function as an important section of literary institutions. Through their vast operational scope, such publishers and agents have successfully introduced Mishra's works into various international literary tastes. Mishra has also benefited from what Deshpande has mentioned as the migration of writers, intellectuals and scholars from around the world to the West, who validate writings from their own countries, while stabilizing their positions in famous Western universities and institutions.

To transmit his stories to both local and international readers, Mishra adopts the English language rather than some limited local regional ones; otherwise, he would have not got such a great readership so fast. Of course, on one hand, this refers to the particular status of English language in the subcontinent: "The English language has a privileged place in Indian culture. It is the language of the former colonizer and remains an elite language, the language of getting on, the language of business, the language identified, above all, with modernity [25]. On the other hand, as a powerful, border-crossing *lingua franca*, English language has been a suitable medium for transmitting literary productions; it is through such a medium that Mishra manages to deal with the big local/global themes. Also the mode of language in Mishra's selected works is noteworthy. The smooth, lucid and yet attractive structure of Mishra's selected works becomes a good testimony for the crucial speculation that a sort of varied readership should be considered by the writers [13]. Mishra is rightly one of those citizens of the world who can address people easily, when he presents the unfamiliar in his selected works to make them exotic enough, while removing the unexplainable. As a part of the implemented local color, Mishra inserts Hindi phrases and sentences in his texts to add to the taste and flavor of the scenes. Also, in his works there are references to local and regional customs, rituals, habits and daily routines which are not redundant at all; the language of these works provides a transparency through which readers can easily identify with the characters or figures in their definite world. Since this sense of belonging to a region does not block the ways to the core of the occasions or events in his works and the ordinary reader is not confused by the world the characters or figures inhabit, then it is fairly judged that Mishra has succeeded in implementation of his specific use of the English language.

Translation is another vital practice in the process of using a language. Undoubtedly, being translated into other languages is considered as another major factor for the wide-ranging reception of Mishra's works. Being translated into some European languages can be considered as a strong indication of Mishra's decisiveness in creating broader perspectives for his works, even beyond the realm of English language. Moreover, availability of some of Mishra's books in electronic formats on the internet (whether planned by the author or publishers) on one hand affirms the grand role of modern literary institutions which facilitate access to literary texts and on the other hand is indicative of the fact that his works are high on the agenda.

7. Conclusion

Focusing on some definite recurring themes as developed through the genre of nonfiction prose, Mishra builds up a proper device for achieving his goals on the way of social responsibility. He creates a different pattern in his mannerism of implementation of real narratives and figures, to tell the world about the contemporary realities of the subcontinent. Mishra's particular social responsibility towards human beings and his good knowledge of mass media and the power of English language have enabled him to skillfully articulate a part of the powerless' sufferings in the mainstream media. Representing various people, cultures and traditions, the works under the study convey certain qualities to the readers through diverse intra-textual features and thus confirm Mishra's social responsibility as well. While concentrating on the distinctiveness of Indian experience and true impressions of Indian life, Mishra tends to submit factual narratives about India which best articulate thoughts and needs of the "powerless." Mishra's imagination together with his social responsibility, focus on the small tragedies of people and communities who have been entangled in the prolonged historical conflicts. In *An End to Suffering*, he fuses the retrieval of Buddha in the West with a history of India and observes the real superiority not in the power and wealth of the West, but in the ability to find the true wisdom of life. In *Temptations of the West*, he presents a factual presentation of Eastern life to the West, while depicting the sufferings of the Southeast Asian people in transition to the modern world.

Mishra skillfully avails himself of the four mediums of mass media, literary institutions, English language and translation as the inevitable components of the modern methods of literary communications. Such mechanisms have played a significant role in the expansion of the capacity of his readership, as well. Adhering to these mediums could be interpreted as either a premeditated conduct by Mishra or just a routine constituent part of his natural mannerism. Whichever the construal, Mishra is quite knowledgeable about the rules of the game inside global literary market, seeing that this is a give-and-take deal. No matter even if Mishra really uses certain passwords to logon to the global literary market, at least, it can be claimed that he knows about the promising future available in such a milieu; a realm within which eager readers always encourage and excite writers.

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