

ARDUOUS JOURNEY OF THE INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

Since independence, Indian English writings, especially, novels have become a major part of the world literature canon. They are widely read across the globe and have garnered international accolades for the vivid presentation of the multilayered, multicultural and multilingual Indian society. Mulk Raj Anand says about the novels that “the novel at its most interesting is a process of inhale-exhale, a life-giving inspiration, a prose poem which releases the body and soul, even a new visionary glimpse of the miracle of life itself.” He felt that novel was the most appropriate tool to depict the society and hence was the soul of literature. On the other hand, according to D.H Lawrence, novels are perfect medium as they reveal the changing rainbow of living relationship. Indian novels are unique blend of the glorious the pre-colonialism India, mindset of people during British rule, its long period of freedom struggle and a quest for identity. Indian English novelists such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy etc have made irreplaceable place for themselves among the elite international writers. They have also won many prestigious literary awards both nationally and internationally. These writers have successfully *nativised* the foreign language and beautified it with Indian motifs and colours. Their works portray the various phases of the rapidly changing Indian society from the pre independence era to the modern times. While doing so, they have faced many challenges in conveying the intricate depths and complex realities of the changing dynamics of the Indian society.

KEYWORDS

Universal themes, contemporary writers, nativized, colonisation, multilingual, transition, post-colonial, languages, literary themes, culture, colonial modernity, realistic, independence, suppression, magical realism

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this article is to draw attention towards the genre of novels which is written by Indians in English. The article highlights the socio-cultural backdrop behind the development of the Indian English novels. Major novelists of the post colonial and modern India and their popular works are discussed in brief in a new perspective .

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

M.K Naik in his *Perspectives on Indian Fiction in English*, an essay collection, analyses the texts of fictional writings written by major Indian English writers. The major novels which were critically studied included *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Guide*, *Midnight's Children* etc. He examined the various characteristics of the genre of fictional writings in detail. In *The Critic with A Big Heart*, O.P Bhatnagar studied several renowned Indian English authors and presented a insightful description of the major themes and subjects of their writings. Sumit Sarkar in his book *Modern India* summarises the chronicles of Indian freedom struggle from 1885 to 1947 in seven parts. It focuses on the social and political scenario of India during that period. In a similarly titled book by Bhabani Bhattacharya, *The Novel of Modern India*, she extensively discusses the modern trends in writing novels in India.

Narrative Noodles, a compilation of essays on Indian novels in English by C.L Khatri are a set of twenty three essays on major themes, issues raised by the novels. They also address the shortcomings of Indian English novels. These essays deal with the works of prominent Indian English novelists from R.K Narayan, Raja Rao to Salman Rushdie and his other contemporaries.

INTRODUCTION

When we talk about Indian English writing, we do not merely implicate the works of prose and poetry written in English in India, what we mean to imply is the entire culture of India and its deep rooted tradition. Indian culture is quite rich and diverse with people belonging to different states, following varied customs, rituals and most importantly India has people speaking almost 22 different languages and innumerable dialects. The introduction of English language in India has been a blessing in disguise for its people. Though it was introduced in India with the sole purpose to promote educational reform and produce a group of working class men who, in Lord Macaulay's words, would be Indians in blood and colour but English in taste. Although in a long run, the English language proved to be an asset and provided a common platform for a plethora of Indian writers from all over India to voice their thoughts, feelings, ideas and beliefs to the entire world. Since then there is no looking back. India has immensely contributed towards the world literature and provides an insightful analysis of the subaltern voice.

The first ever book written in Indian soil was a travel narrative by Sake Dean Mahomet, titled *Travels of Dean Mahomet* in 1793. It was in epistolary form in which he detailed about military conflicts, food, wildlife and Indian culture. The credit of producing the very first full length English novel in India goes to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee for *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864. The novel deals with domestic and social themes and speaks widely about colonial modernity. This novel opened the door for the emergence of many other Indian novelists to come in front foot and write about the prevalent social conditions such as dowry system, child marriage, *sati-pratha*, casteism and widespread illiteracy and superstitions. Raja Ram Mohan Roy had been a pioneer for such writings. He tried to make people of India culturally and socially aware and boycott such inhuman practices.

India attained independence after a long struggle for freedom and the countrymen had to pay a heavy cost of partition. This was a period of introspection and working together to build a country which could be self dependent. The novelists of this period played a pivotal role in arousing the

national conscience and raising the social issues which were needed to be addressed. The post colonial Indian English novel writing was hugely dominated by the trio of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K Narayan. They completely changed the outlook of Indian novels in world scenario. Each of them contributed differently though together they presented a single Indian voice. Critic William Walsh states 'It is these three writers, who defined the area in which the Indian novel was to operate. They established its assumptions; they sketched its main themes, freed the first models of its characters and elaborated its particular logic. Each of them used an easy, natural idiom which was unaffected by the opacity of a British inheritance. Their language has been freed of the foggy taste of Britain and transferred to a wholly new setting of brutal heat and brilliant light.'

These three novelists were the flag-bearers of Indian English novels and mirrored the postcolonial Indian society through their powerful writings. Their works reflected the after affects of the traumas of colonisation faced by the newly independent India, whose people in actual sense were miles away from understanding and truly enjoying the real essence of independence. The protagonists try to explore their own identity and place in the world full of unjust social norms and systems. The great critic K.R Srinivasan Iyengar writes about them in his *Indian Writings in English* that, "Between them they comprise as it were the North and the South, extension and concentration, vigour and urbanity, vitality and artistic reticence." It's a rare coincidence that all these three writers started their literary career at the same time; i.e., the 1930s.

Raja Rao, one of the greatest writers of post colonial India, studied in America and France and was highly influenced by the Vedantic philosophy. He wrote many short stories and four major novels, namely, *Kanthapura* (1938), *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and *The Cat and the Shakespeare* (1965). *The Serpent and the Rope* is a spiritual semi-autobiographical novel for which he was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1964. It is a philosophical and metaphysical novel dealing with the issue of a failed marriage and clash of western and eastern cultures and their values. Raja Rao was a staunch follower of the dictums and principles of Mahatma Gandhi and never failed to glorify Gandhian of non-violent struggle and success in the Indian freedom movement. P.C Bhattacharya writes about the philosophical outlook of Raja Rao that "Raja Rao felt a strong affinity towards Gandhi. The basic principles of Gandhi were derived from the thoughts of the ancient Indian thinkers, especially as contained in *Gita* and *Ramayana*. Even his fasts which some thought to be a kind of political blackmail, were of a piece with the Brahminic spirit..." And Raja Rao, being a Brahmin himself, immediately related to them. One of his highly acclaimed novels, *Kanthapura* focuses on themes of nationalism, erosion of rigidly followed caste system, labour exploitation and Gandhian ideology of building a unified India. K. R Rao, in his book *The Fiction of Raja Rao*, writes that *Kanthapura* doesn't only project the Indian spirit but is a living experience moving in time and space. The novel acts in three levels, political, social and religious and signify the concept of unified India. He is also the recipient of India's second and third greatest civilian awards, Padma Vibhusan(2007) and Padma Bhusan(1969).

Another prominent novelist, Mulk Raj Anand has written several essays, eight short stories and more than a dozen novels. He is best known for his realistic novels dealing with sympathetic portrayal of the downtrodden and poor in India. He very clearly shows the class conflicts and strongly followed caste system and heavily condemned them. Born to a coppersmith, Anand studied at University of Cambridge and University College in London. He was an active participant in Indian independence movement. Anand gained recognition with the publication of two of his great novels, *Untouchable*

(1935) and *Coolie* (1936). Both of these novels brought him name and fame. *Untouchable* is a heart wrenching tale of Bakha, a man belonging to the lowest of castes in India considered untouchable by people of upper castes. He did a menial job of cleaning the public toilets and latrines and could hardly earn three meals a day for himself and his family. The novel focuses on miseries faced by the untouchables who were treated as pariahs. E. M Forster writes in the preface to *Untouchable* that, "The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion. The novel reveals that it is not only the external foreign colonisation that hinders the progress of India and oppresses its people but colonisation even exists in the mindset of Indian. This acts as an obstacle in transition of the Indian society in a civilised modern one. Anand emphasizes on the need of India to get rid of its exploitive social structure and rise above it to be truly independent. *Coolie* on the other hand is a realistic, picaresque novel about the plight of a teenage boy Munoo in a society governed by caste and power structure. Mulk Raj Anand received the International Peace Prize, Sahitya Akedemi Award and Padma Bhusan.

The third but integral part of the trio of post colonial Indian English novelists, R.K Narayan is the most widely read and loved one. His writings in true sense portray the real rural India. His rustic style, portrayal of simple, everyday life and relatable characters makes him a favourite of all from children to adults. He started his career as a journalist but soon turned his focus on writing novels and short stories. Most of his works are set in a fictional South Indian town called Malgudi. Through his simple, elegant and humorous style, he brings out the difficulties and peculiarities in human life and relations. Iyengar says about R. K Narayan that "he sees the world as a mere balance of forces and focuses on the miracle of transcendence and the renewal of life, love, beauty and peace". His most famous novels are *The Guide* (1958), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Man Eater of Malgudi* (1961) and *A Tiger for Malgudi* (1983). *The Guide* describes the gradual transformation of the hero of the novel, Raju, from a tour guide to a spiritual man. In a career spanning over 60 years, Narayan received many awards such as Padma Vibhusan, Padma Bhusan, Sahitya Akedemi Award and Benson Medal from Royal Society of Literature.

These novelists gave an idea of the experiences of the Indians during and after the freedom struggle and tried to create awareness among people amongst people against the dominant social evils through their remarkable writing. Their aim was also to draw the attention of the world on the devastating impact of imperialism on the colonies and their psyche. They tried to uplift the society from the clutches of illiteracy, discrimination and suppression on women. They also provided a well decorated stage for the modern Indian English novelists such as Anita Desai, Khushwant Singh, Arun Joshi, Arundhati Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Tharoor and many others.

The modern and contemporary novelists have a greater range of issues to deal with. With the advent of globalisation and rapid industrialisation, the modern world has become a complex sphere and writers have crossed all geographical boundaries. The focus of the modern novelists have shifted from general to specific, i.e. the post colonial Indian English novelists dealt with social themes and their works revolved around the conditions before and after independence. On the other hand the modern and contemporary novelists have found the human mind quite captivating and fascinating. Their works chiefly focuses on the life of individuals and the journey of their personal and

psychological growth. These modern writers have enriched the Indian literature by each of them incorporating an individual style and approach. They have touched universal themes and adapted the literary styles from around the world by experimenting with different forms of writing. Anthony Spaeth says that these contemporary Indian English novelists have redefined English prose “with myths, humour and themes as vast as the subcontinent.”

One of the most prominent writers of the modern era is Arundhati Roy. She has strongly portrayed the most overlooked issue of suppression of women in the patriarchal society and the steadily growing Marxist mindset of people. She emerged as a luminary for many other women writers who were not taken seriously as their male counterparts. She highlighted the burning problems prevalent in society through her path-breaking novel, *A God of Small Things* (1997). The novel very cleverly touches all the major problems of Indian society through a well-knit story. *Library Journal* reviewed the novel as “a brilliantly constructed one that untangles an intricate web of sexual and caste conflict in a vivid style reminiscent of Salman Rushdie’s early work.” Arundhati Roy is also a social activist, reformer and essayist. She is the winner of the Booker Prize and Sidney Peace Prize.

Shashi Deshpande is also a well known novelist in India. Her writings are centred around the plight of educated urban women in Indian society and how the society by all means try to mulch the ambitions and aspirations of girls, confining them only in domestic sphere either by persuasion or employing power. Her major novels include, *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980). It portrays the theme of marital violence and the courage and perseverance of the protagonist to attain freedom. Her other work, *Roots and Shadows*, shows a rebellious young girl who leaves her home and escapes to work in the city and fulfil her dreams. Her novels depict the true condition of women in Indian society and the notions of people about women. Deshpande highlights this in one of her novels, she states, “A wife should always be few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA you should be a BA. If he is 5’4’ tall you shouldn’t be more than 5’3’ tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety nine rupees. That’s the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage.... No partnership can ever be equal. It will always be unequal, but take care it is unequal in favour of the husband.”

Anita Desai, an eminent modern Indian English novelist, mostly wrote about concerning about the psychological journey of the characters through her novels. She unlike her contemporaries didn’t deal with social themes and issues but her novels dealt with the emotional upheavals and the psyche of the protagonists. Her writings covered their journey to find true meaning of life. In one of her novels, *Cry, the Peacock*, Maya, the protagonist is constantly obsessed by the fear of death. In her childhood, an astrologer had predicted that after four years of her marriage, either she or her husband would die. This resulted in such mental trauma that Maya loses her mental balance, her relationship with her husband deteriorated and ultimately kills her husband herself. According to S.P Swain, “The fate of Maya is indeed the fate of the anguished self craving for companionship and harmony in an emotionally chaotic milieu. It is the fate of the hysterical mind of an Indian housewife. Prediction and fatalism is a fact to Maya. The mournful cry of the brain-fever bird, with the advent of spring is, to Maya, the peacock’s cry.” In *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, Desai describes the hypocrisies and insensitivity of the urban life. Sita, the sensitive and emotional protagonist of the novel couldn’t bear the mental agony caused by the external world and creates a world of her dreams. Her insanity makes her escape her life in city and move back to her childhood village to find solace. She tells her husband: “What I am doing is trying to escape from the madness here, escape to

a place where it might be possible to be sane again..." Anita Desai was thrice shortlisted for Booker Award and received Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978.

Salman Rushdie was born a few months before India's partition and had closely witnessed the pain it caused to people. His writings were hugely influenced by the social and political conditions in post-independent India and Pakistan. *Midnight's Children*, the novel which brought him international name and fame is a fictional historical account of India after its independence and partition. This novel established him as a leading figure in Indian English writings in England. This novel is a classic example of magical realism. The protagonist of the novel, Saleem Sinai was born at the exact moment of India's independence. He along with 1001 other children, who were also born at this momentous hour were gifted with special powers and could communicate with each other through telepathy. Through subtle humour, Rushdie drew a fictional picture of India and satirized the social and political scenario of the country. History played a pivotal role in Rushdie's writings. He says, "Literature revalues history by shifting the point of view, by demystifying, by seeing what was always there to be seen, what we would have seen if the conjurers of power had not been trying so hard to distract our attention." His *Satanic Verses* caused huge controversy and it was boycotted by orthodox Muslims. Many Muslim countries even issued *fatwa* against him and he had to flee abroad to save his life. Salman Rushdie is the recipient of Booker Prize in 1981, the Booker of Bookers Prize in 1993 and the Best of the Booker in 2008.

Shashi Tharoor is a well known, politician, writer, diplomat and a great orator. His novels are based on wide ranging themes such as films, politics, culture, society etc. He is also given credit for coinage of several new words. In an interview to Indian Express, Tharoor spoke about his book, titled *Tharoorosaurus*, which is all about his love for words. His first full-length novel, *The Great Indian Novel* draws hugely from the great epic, *Mahabharata*. Here, he recreated characters of *Mahabharata* based on present circumstances of India. David Davidar, the former head of Penguin said about the book, "it was interesting how he managed to weave and mould Indian myths and legends into the contemporary politics. It was a very clear way of recasting an epic."

The Indian English novels are still evolving and getting enriched by the contribution of each new writer. These writings heavily owe to the works done by great masters of past such as Rabindra Nath Tagore, Kamala Das, Swami Vivekananda, Sarojini Naidu, Sri Aurobindo etc. They tried to create social awareness through their works. The post colonial and modern writers have also focussed on highlighting the dominant social issues of their respective periods. The future of Indian English novel appears to be in safe hands and Indian English Novel is developing at par with English Novel.

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