

# The Indian English Novel – 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## INTRODUCTION

*"The English-language book output from India ranks third in the world. After the success of Salman Rushdie's books in the 1980s, several Indian writers began penning works in English. Several of them have received international awards. There is no other site where Indian English literature from 1980 may be found. During this time, several promising novelists published their first collections. Some venerable masters have recently released new works demonstrating a continuity of vision that has survived the years. During the 18s, Indian authors received acclaim at home and abroad for their work. Like the works of writers of the third generation before them, these works speak eloquently about the authors' great inventiveness and uniqueness. There is no denying the contemporary existence of Indian English literature. Over the years, it has attracted a large following in India and beyond."*(Chauhan 4430)

Today, the Indian English novel represents a significant genre located on the global literary map. Its remarkable trajectory evolves from the imitative, realistic, psychological, and finally to the experimental stage. A colonized country for nearly 200 years, India's adoption of English as its official language opens the discourse on a cultural context of negotiating natural and cultivated identity. No doubt, the language provides the country's mammoth diverse cultural and geographical expression, a unifying thread, and yet English remains a second language for the people of India. The adopted English language projected in the Indian English Novel successfully paints the world of the idea of India and its layered experience. The ongoing debate on the rise of the English language, especially the success story of the Indian English novel, is also about the fear that the expanding use of the English language will propel the forces of linguistic and cultural homogenization at the cost of vernacular languages. The paper aspires to present a critical assessment of the journey of the Indian English novel on the global terrain by taking examples of writers' writings and providing critical commentary on their place in the dynamics of the larger English language frame.

### The First Phase

Examples of some early Indian novelists writing in English include Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Toru Datta and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, of which the paper critiques the work of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who primarily after writing in English, went on to be one of the most authoritative writers of the vernacular language Bengali.

Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), acknowledged for his colossal legacy, contributed to the novel, poetry, and essay writing genre. As a writer in Bengali, Chattopadhyay creatively used his art to motivate the growing fervour of the Indian Independence movement against the British. The point to note was that the power of his pen was in the local language, of which some landmarks included the Bengali novel Anandmath. Moreover, he composed the lyrics of the song *Vande Mataram* (homage to motherland), steeped in Sanskritized Bengali. The song and call became the slogan for the National Independence movement. (Khan)

### The English Novel

Chattopadhyay became the first Indian writer to foray to write an experimental English novel. This phase marks the writing by Indians adopting and imitating the new form of the 'novel'. Interestingly, his maiden novel was not in Bengali but in English, and this was true of other authors such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt, who also wrote in English before switching to their mother tongue, Bengali.

Titled 'Rajmohan's Wife', Chattopadhyay's historical romance novel examines themes of colonialism, gender roles and societal norms, the caste system, love, and sacrifice and was serialized in the 'Indian Field Magazine' in 1864. Bankim wrote this novel in English because he aspired to reach a broader and more diverse audience of English-speaking readers under British colonial rule to awaken their nationalist sentiments, create awareness and encourage his audience to take a stand against exploitative and dismal socio-political reality. The writings in English of the time (mid-19th century) coincided with the growth of the national movement and efforts by Western-educated intelligentsia to address improving the Indian society in engagements known as the Social Reform Movements.

To establish himself as a credible English language writer who chose to use the new format of writing the 'novel' was challenging. He competed with British writers who monopolized the creative space. Another issue was a gap in the Indian and Western perspectives. The target audience/readers needed to fully understand the cultural and linguistic context of the English language. Bankim, therefore, proceeded to write in his mother tongue, Bengali, and his great success in connecting with the audience is part of history. His Indian English novel 'Rajmohan's Wife' faded away until it was republished (2002) and established as a benchmark in the development of Indian English. (Chaudhuri 31-44)

### The Second Phase

The contextual reference of the development of the Indian English novel is the political, economic, and social context that emerged from the Indian independence movement against the exploitative British colonial century since 1757. The Indian English novel in this phase, on the one hand, symbolized the process of free Modern India. On the other hand, the English Indian novel was a metaphoric creative expression to assert the new nation's arrival on the global stage even as the vibrant parallel support, production, and consumption of diverse vernacular literature remained.

Among several, three writers, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan, greatly influenced and shaped the art of the Indian English novel in the 20th century. Each successfully attained global recognition for their writings. Though each writer was distinct, their place is unique in the evolution of the Indian English Novel on the global stage.

Raja Rao explored themes of Indian philosophy, spirituality, and mysticism; Mulk Raj Anand, a realist at heart, wrote extensively about the cruel realities of the lives of the poor and the evils of the caste system in India, delivering a strong social message, and finally, R. K. Narayan, reimagined the idea of rural India in the Malgudi Village, a fictional town, to give the reader an insight into everyday life using humour and satire to understand the authentic Indian experience. (Dave 43-44)

Their writings reflect a structured use of the English language in the novel's format. Secondly, they, like Chattopadhyay and other earlier Indian writers writing in English, strove to present the Indian view of their civilization, which Western writers had previously projected. Furthermore, their presentation of Indian culture aimed to highlight the universal ethos through Indian settings.

Raja Rao was educated in France, returned to India, and later settled and passed away in the United States, where his engagement was teaching philosophy. Several critics assess his contribution to the metaphysical form (Jha 36-39) of the Indian English novel.

Even as these writers churned out many creative works, the vital question was whether using English as the medium of creativity created discomfort in these writers, which Rao expressed in the preface of the first novel, 'Kanthapura' (1938): "The telling has not been easy. One must convey in a language that is not one's own. One must convey the shades and omissions of a thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word 'alien', yet English is a familiar language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up like Sanskrit or Persian was before, but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our language and English (the colonial language). We cannot write like the English. We should not; We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Therefore, our method of expression must be a dialect that will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the Americans'. Time alone will justify it." (Agarwal 1879-1882)

The Kanthapura novel, which recounts the influence of Gandhi's teachings, especially that of non-violence, serves to pitch and highlight the importance of philosophical Indian views to the world even when the country was still under colonial rule. Another exciting feature in Rao's writing was experimental, where he brought the style and structure of the Indian folktales and epics into his novels.

R. K. Narayan, often compared to Chekhov for his humour, irony, and portrayal of everyday simple life, had a friend and mentor in Graham Greene (British author and playwright), who was instrumental in getting Narayan's first four books published. (R. K. Narayan & his Style of Writing). His first novel, *Swami & Friends*, depicts the simple, light-hearted everyday life of an Indian boy named Swami. His narrative charm brings humour and compassion in the most effervescent way, where the imaginary town of Malgudi is brought to life, showcasing the universality of the cultural and social context of life in rural India. Also, often compared to William Faulkner, both writers explored complex characters in a fictional setting using humour, delving into exploring the human mind and making their storytelling memorable and compelling. (Joon, 2022)

Narayan's friendship with Greene testifies his presence on the international literary stage with a career spanning more than six decades (1930s to 1990s) (Bhattacharjee). Like Raja Rao, he, too, on the one hand, provides a model for the growing number of Indian English fiction writers to come, such as Rushdie and later Arundhati Roy. On the other hand, Narayan joins in the latter phase of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the Indian English Novel emerged as a distinct genre in literature.

The third stalwart in Indian English Literature in the 20th century is Mulk Raj Anand, known for his literary creativity bringing human suffering and adversity to life in his fictions. The central theme of Anand's books, such as "Coolie", speaks about the complexity of human nature dealing with social discrimination, exploitation of the poor, and the deep divide between the haves & the have-nots. A Marxist at heart, Anand pitched for the underdog. (Verma 83-103) Anand's contemporary Satyajit Ray (writer and movie director) often continued Anand's trend of realism and humanism in showing the dark days of India and the exotica of poverty in his works 'White Tiger' & 'Slum Dog Millionaire', asserting the voice of the global Indian. Anand's works received international recognition where he

received the International Peace Prize from the World Peace Council, the Sahitya Akademi Award, "Padma Bhushan", and the Leverhulme Fellowship, all of which propelled Indian English literature onto the world stage, bringing the Indian English novel to its glory. ("Mulk Raj Anand, 1905")

### The Third Phase

The development of the Indian English Novel as a process mentioned earlier is the overlap of the work of several writers from the second phase. The third phase in the discussion on the Indian English Novel is set against a post-colonial context where there is a continuity with the second phase, where writings are profoundly regional yet communicate themes of universal concerns. The significant watershed decade between the 1980s and 1990s when a plethora of third-generation writers, starting with Salman Rushdie, were other authors such as Shashi Deshpande, Vikram Seth, Gita Mehta, Amitav Ghosh and Anita Desai, among many others. Their work, characterised by representing the Indian cultural nuances and expert control over the English language, has left a mark on the Global Literary map.

Winning the 1981 Booker Prize and other Booker accolades in 1993 and 2008, Salman Rushdie's *'Midnight's Children'* (1980) ushers a new force in the evolution of the Indian English novel. The book is a metaphor of the moment and events related to India's freedom from the two-hundred-year-old colonial rule. The book, inspired by *magic realism* (*Manzoor, Walinir 1-4*) presents the post-colonial imagination to the reader. The central protagonist, Saleem Sinai, with extraordinary telepathic power, was born precisely when India formally became free on the midnight of 15th August 1947. Unlike earlier writers like Raja Rao, there are no apologies for expressing in English; the humour and wordplay illustrate Rushdie's command over the genre as much as the English language.

The paper has considered male writers, but in the third phase, significant successful female writers contributed to the growth of the Indian English novel. They were born mainly after independence, and it is unsurprising that their writings do not carry the colonial element. Presenting the reality of their time, their works reflect an impressive command of the English language and provide a diverse illustration of the regional cultural diversity of India.

Much like Rushdie, Arundhati Roy shot to fame when her novel *'The God of Small Things'* won the 1997 Booker Prize and emerged as an inspiration for women writers in India. Her work "evolves a small cosmopolitanism that appeals to the global through the local. Roy reaches out to global readers with narratives of local struggles to inspire them to cultivate a cosmopolitan empathy towards those others who inhabit socio-culturally backward parts of the World." (Macwan). Like Mulk Raj Anand, Roy's stories depict the narrative of the marginalised and bring forth the discourse of the status of women in a patriarchal world. In her protest novel 'God of Small Things,' Roy uses the leftist worldview and lends voice to millions of voiceless and powerless downtrodden.

### CONCLUSION

The contribution of Indian writers to world literature in the English language and particularly to the genre of the novel has created a unique place for Indian English as much as the importance and significance of creative Indian writing. In the new phase of the 21st century Indian novelists in English, there is no longer the perception that the Indian English novel represents a recent literary occurrence; the Indian English is well and truly a recognised literary phenomenon. To quote, "The New York Times (16 December 1991) has called these new Indian writers "Rushdie's children." These novelists, as Anthony Spaeth has pointed out, are making conscious efforts to redefine English prose "with myths, humour or themes as vast as the subcontinent." Moreover, Rushdie himself once told in an interview in 1982: "I think we are in a position to conquer English literature," (Yesapogu 37-44), and this is what precisely these novelists are trying to do in their own ways. Thus, they demand serious critical attention, analysis, classification, and definition as a distinct genre of fictional literature of our times." (Blaise)

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