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[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## The Indian English Fiction, Beginning to Modern

**Smt. Vidya. R Patil**

Professor, P.G Department of English  
B.L.D.E.A's S.B.Arts and K.C.P Science College, Bijapur.  
Karnataka.

### Abstract

Indian Writing in English has contributed in the field of both English fiction and poetry. The history has seen many great writers like Raja Rao, Mulkraj Anand, R.K.Narayan. These were the writers who made this genre popular and gained world recognition. In the recent years, Indian fiction writers have been widely recognized by the West. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Laheri have either won the prestigious literary Prizes or they have been short listed for it. Most of them have been praised for their creative English. The most recent dynamic writer, most popularly known as the youth Icon, Chetan Bhaghat. His works play an important role in giving a new trendsetter image to the Indian English Fiction. A study is made towards the development of Indian English Fiction.

### Introduction

The story of the Indian English novel is really the story of a changing India. Indian Writing in English has come quite a long way from the mere use of English language to the authentic tool for expressing one's ideas, thoughts, concepts and imagination. There was a time when education was a rare opportunity and speaking English was unnecessary. It has attained maturity, but it is not that it suddenly emerged from nowhere. It has had its phases of development. The stories were already there- in the myths, in the folklore and the umpteen languages and cultures that gossiped, conversed, laughed and cried all over the subcontinent. India has always been a land of stories, the demarcation between ritual and reality being very narrow.

### Birth and Parentage of Indian English Fiction

Indian writers in English have made the most significant contribution to the field of the novel. Ever since the publication of Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864, Indian novel has grown considerably in bulk, variety and maturity. What began as a small plant has now attained a luxuriant growth and branched off in various directions. The development of Indian novel follows certain definite patterns, and it is not difficult to trace its gradual progression from the imitative stage to the realistic to psychological to the experimental stage.

The Indian English novel erupted in the fiery talks of Henry Derozio, the spiritual prose of Tagore and the pacifist dictums preached by Gandhi. With the coming of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan, the Indian English novel had begun its journey.

The early novels in India were not just patriotic depictions of Indianness. There were the cynics. Niradh C Chaudhuri viewed India without the crown skeptically. He discarded the fiery patriotism and spiritualism that were 'Brand India' and mourned the absence of colonial rule. As India grew out of her obsession with freedom and viewed her own streak of imperialism during the Emergency, the Indian idiom began to change. Now with the Indian Diaspora being a reckoning force in the publishing world, Indian English speaks a global tongue, unconfined to any particular culture or heritage- the language of the displaced intellectual.

This brings us to a problem with contemporary Indian English writing. When you ponder on the subject very few Indian English writers in India have made it with their English writing. They inevitably have the odd degree from Oxford and Cambridge and their foundations are laid abroad. It seems to be a prerequisite to have a global perspective if one is to be successful in writing in English. The real need in India is more publishing houses that are willing to give aspiring writers in India a chance. Writers in India need more avenues to make themselves heard and as readers the Indian audience should not get too mesmerized by foreign publications.

The Indian Diaspora raised the curtain on the fantastic mythical realities that were part of domestic conversations in the villages. Salman Rushdie fascinates critics with his 'chutnification' of history and language as well. He opened the doors to a plethora of writers. Amitav Ghosh dabbles in postcolonial realities and Vikram Seth fuses poetry and prose with an air of Victorian grandeur. While Rohinton Mistry tries to decipher the Parsi world, Pico Iyer effortlessly walks the map in his writings.

Women writers explore old wives' tales, condemn exploitation and try to make sense of the fast changing pace of the new world. Kamala Das explores women's plight in India and the world and others like Shashi Deshpande paint characters who blame their own complacency for their sorry condition. Arundhati Roy begins her story without a beginning and does not really end it while Jhumpa Lahiri's well-crafted tales move at a perfect pace.

Indian English began with a bang when Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature and by the time V.S.Naipal bagged the same, the Indian English novel had a far flung reach. Now Indian English novels are sparking off debates about huge advances, plagiarism and film rights. Hinglish masala and a dose of spiritual realism are only the tip of the iceberg. The Indian audience and the rest of the world have a lot to look forward to when they get an Indian English novel in their hands.

### **The Trio of Indian English Fiction**

In the thirties the "Big Three" of Indian Writing in English arrived on the scene, and they were the founders of true Indo-English novel, though almost all the time they inevitably portrayed the village life and the concomitant effect of freedom movement. They could not keep themselves away from the *Gandhian* philosophy, which consciously or unconsciously entered their creative writing. But it is in this phase that we come across excellent novels for the first time, as is evident from Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* (1935) and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938).

In “Coolie” by Mulk Raj Anand, the social disparity in India is laid bare. In R.K.Narayan’s imaginary village Malgudi, the invisible men and women of our teeming population come to life and act out life with all its perversities and whimsicalities. In ‘Kanthapura’ by Raja Rao, Gandhism awakes in a sleepy village down south. India no longer needed to be depicted by outsiders. The perspectives from within ensured more clarity and served a social documentative purpose as well.

It was R.K. Narayan who first portrayed a purely Indian sensibility. He is India’s most revered and prolific novelist. In the words of K .R. Srinivas Iyengar,

*He is one of the few writers in India who take their craft seriously, constantly striving to improve the instrument, pursuing with a sense of dedication what may often seem to be the mirage of technical perfection. There is a norm of excellence below which Narayan cannot possibly lower himself.* (1962: P.359)

Though R.K. Narayan was not radical as Raja Rao in his appropriation of English, Narayan is part of the process, which in his own word is an ‘Indianisation’ of English..

Mulk Raj Anand showed to the West that there was more in the orient than could be inferred from Omar Khayyam, Tagore or Kipling. When he started writing fiction, he decided that he would prefer the familiar to the fancied. He had first seen his heroes as pieces of trembling humanity and loved them before he sought to put them into his books.

Raja Rao was a child of the Gandhian age, and reveals in his work his sensitive awareness of the forces let loose by the Gandhian revolution as also of the thwarting or steadying pulls of past tradition. But as a user of a foreign language he also confesses his limitation in a ‘Forward’ given by himself in his first novel Kanthapura. He writes,

*English is the language of our intellectual make up whereas our mother tongue is the language of our emotional make up.* (1938: P.8)

Such was the creative genius of these “Big Three” that they discovered a whole new world in Indo- English fiction. They examined minutely the Indian sensibility and exposed the foibles of the Indian way of life.

### **The other Major Novelists**

In the forties, G.V. Desani’s All About H. Hatterr (1948) made a major breakthrough in formal experimentation and became a masterpiece of remarkable artistry. Hatterr’s dazzling, puzzling, leaping prose is the first genius effort to go beyond the Englishness of the English language. It created indelible impression in the minds of the readers by its highly evocative narrative technique and the language unparalleled in the history of Indo- Anglian fiction.

After the 1950’s, however, Indian novelists interest moved from the public to private sphere. They began to delineate in their works the individual’s quest for the self in all varied complex forms along with his problems. Most of them in their eagerness to find new themes “renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man” and engaged themselves in “a search for the essence of human living”.

Novelists like Anita Desai, Arun Joshi and Nayantara Sahgal changed through their works the face of Indian English novel and their works contain seeds of future development. Anita Desai

is one of India's leading authors. Most of Desai's novels reveal the break down of relationship. She deals with the psychological aspects of her characters. Anita Desai explored the inner climate, the climate of sensibility in her novels and added a new dimension to the achievement of Indian women writers in English fiction. A striking feature of Arun Joshi's fiction is his experimentation with different narrative techniques.

While the trios are still creatively alive, the novelist of second generation keeps on bringing out remarkable novels from time to time. The contribution of Kamala Markandanya, Manohar Malgaonkar and others has already been recognized in and outside India.

Beginning with Ruth Praver Jhabvala, known for engaging comedies of North Indian Urban middle class life, the women novelists have displayed not only authenticity but also brought a freshness to their works whereas Kamala Markandanya takes us to the heart of a South Indian village where life has apparently not changed for centuries. She depicted rustic and urban realism in her work. Another writer Nayantara Sahgal, with her work *Rich Like Us* (1985), has shown a very charming way of story telling, and Kamala Das with her autobiographical and bold works treaded the paths hitherto unknown for Indo-Anglian novelists.

Among the contemporary writers, Amitav Ghosh has shown his genius in the Indian English fiction. His two novels – *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) established Ghosh as “the finest writer who were born out of the post *Midnight's Children* revolution in Indo-Anglian fiction.

Vikram Seth attained a dizzy height of success with *The Golden Gate* (1986) and *A Suitable Boy* (1993). He stunned the literary world with his novel *A Suitable Boy*. In its forbidding size, the novel can be compared with Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Upamanyu Chatterjee, with his novel *English August* (1988), got great success. His tone was ironic and he hit all the foibles of the Indian bureaucracy. Chatterjee brilliantly uses Indianised English in the novel. His contemporary Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is one of the greatest achievements of Indian English fiction. In the 1990s, Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a significant novelist. His *Such a long Journey* (1991) is his maiden attempt in the genre in which he deals with the predicament of modern life.

### **Experimentation in English Language by Indian Writers**

Recent years have witnessed a good number of Indian English fiction writers who have stunned the literary world with their works. Their works have enriched the world literature, and they have been awarded with accolades and prizes in the field of literature. But a careful study of their development makes it clear that there are two kinds of writers who contributed to the genre of novel: The first group of writers focused on the various social problems of India like poverty, class discrimination, social dogmas, rigid religious norms etc. which has an appeal to the West. The second group of writers includes those who are global Indians, who are Indian by birth but they have lived abroad, so they see Indian realities objectively. They are at ease with the English language and have enriched English language with their creativity. Even though handling Indian sensibility these writers are no longer the slavish imitators of English. They have used English so creatively that the freshness becomes a prominent feature in their language. They have



experimented with the language and fused Indian spirit in the foreign language. They have coined new words and idiomatic expressions in English and added a new flavour in English language. Some of these terms are now accepted as English words. The West relished it with zest and they have their permanent place in the world literature.

There was a time when the West used to recognize the 'Third World' writers with a sense obligation rather than genuine acceptance. It is often argued that if one wants to be noticed in the west, one should present the East in unfavorable light. Often the Indian writers who present India, its culture in the unfavorable light are considered for the awards. The west has a typical notion about the third world, where their eyes only see poverty, wretchedness, terrorism, lack of system, failure of democracy and so forth. And the writers, voicing one of these are sure to be recognized by the West. But in the last few years, the scenario has changed. The Indian writers are major contributors to the English fiction and they are no longer a 'sympathy seekers'. They have their English and their genuine experience to share.

### **The recent generation of Young Indian Novelists**

It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that unexpected and overwhelming changes in Western attitudes toward India and Indian Literature came when Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* was published in 1981. In the novel, Rushdie conjures up a generation of Indians born at midnight 15 August 1947. He writes,

*What made the event noteworthy... was the nature of these children, every one of the whom was, through some freak of biology or perhaps owing to some preternatural power of the moment, or just conceivably by sheer coincidence... endowed with features, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous. It was as though ... history, arriving at a point of the highest significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would genuinely differ from anything the world has seen up to that time. (p.195)*

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the fiction at the turn of the present century, from the Indian point of view, is the emergence of new talent. A number of novelists have produced significant novels, making a mark in the literary world. The most sensational literary event in the recent past was probably, the publication of Salman Rushdie's magnum opus *Midnight's Children* which became an international success instantly on its release. It created generation of young Indian novelists who eagerly followed his footsteps.

Arundhati Roy is one such talented writer of the post- *Midnight's Children* era who shows real psychological depth while conveying the realities of culture and history. Her novel *The God of Small Things* has earned much critical attention all over the world and fetched her Booker Prize. Undoubtedly, Roy has managed to free her from the shackles of conventional writing. She successfully experimented with the language, and has been duly rewarded for that.

As with Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai's work also manages to explore the post-colonial chaos and despair. Her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* satirizes society at large. Her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) spans continents, generations, cultures, religions, and races. She handles all these with ease like a master craftsman. Her narrative style, creative use of language and handling of plot put her among the leading Indian English fiction writers. And this is acknowledged by the Booker Prize she got for the novel.

Indian fiction in English has come a long way from the triumvirates of the thirties to the modern recent English fiction writers. The language which was once treated as a language of the

foreigner or the language of the elite class is viewed differently. As the number of readers Indian English fiction has increased. So the quality of writing has also improved. The writers are now no longer active users of English but they have English as their first language (Lingua franca). They express themselves with native proficiency. They are the writers who think and write in one language, which is English. They have travelled in various continents and they have something substantial to tell their readers. Indian English fiction is now a world literature. It has struggled, endured indifferences of the west and now finally emerged as a clear winner among the recent fiction writers.

Amongst the new young writers the most talented, is perhaps Chetan Bhagat. With four back to back selling novels, *One night @ the Call centre*, *Five Point Someone*, *2 states*, *Three mistakes of my Life*, Chetan Bhagat has single handedly reshaped the Indian English novels. The influence of Bhagat's writings has been so impactful, that even Hindi films are adapting his novels on the big screens. Another current writer who has gained immense popularity in the recent time is Amish Tripathi. *The Immortals of Meluha*, based on the origin of Lord Shiva, Amish has captured the imagination of the country.

Apart from this, yet another reason for which Indian writers are also recognized is their innovative experiments in the genre. These writers, who have created a new form, have been handsomely rewarded. It can be a narrative innovation or linguistic experimentation. Such writers have native-like proficiency of the English language; they know how to handle English creatively. So for them form and style are equally important in their story. Often we find autobiographical elements in their works. These writers have reached the height from where they can tell their own tale in the language suitable for their native set. Such writers are often awarded for their linguistic experimentation and genuine tale.

### **Conclusion**

Indian English novel has gone through a lot of transformation from its initial days to the present time and has attained a whole new intensity in terms of concept, marketing, presentation, business and impact on the Indian Culture.

If we go back to the list of Indian Booker Prize Winners, we see that the writers of the Indian origin like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and the recent winner Arvind Adiga have one thing common in their writings – they are not traditional Indian English writers. All the three are at ease with the English language, rather English is their first language. So medium is not at all a problem for them. They can use English as naturally as they breathe. And what is more important is that these writers have lived abroad for major part of their life, so they have imbibed and assimilated the Western trends and it lends them the distance to have an objective view on India and Indians. These writers have come across many Englishes of the world and showed the world their English.

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