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## Contemporary Writings in Language and Literature

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Literary language is a register that is used in literary criticism and general discussion on some literary work. For much of its history there has been a distinction in the English language between an elevated literary language and a colloquial language. After the Norman Conquest England for instance, Latin and French displaced English as the official and literary languages and Standard literary English did not emerge until the end of the Middle Ages. At this time and into the renaissance, the practice of aeration (the introduction of terms from classical language, often through poetry) was an important part of the reclamation of status for the English language, and many historically aureate terms are now part of general common usage. Modern English no longer has quite the same distinction between literary and colloquial registers. English has been used as a literary language in countries that were formerly part of the British Empire, for instance India up to the present day—Malayala in the early twentieth century, and Nigeria, where literary language is a register that is used in literary criticism and general discussion on some literary work. In the early 20th century, when the first idea introduced into the general culture, it caused infinite anguish and a great sense of loss. Writers and artists, and then people in general began to question the very meaning of life, and finally arrived at the conclusion that, if there is no God, life is inherently meaningless. Objective truth does not exist; all we have to rely on is our own perspective—our own truth—since that is all we can see.

Most of the literature written before World War II (most notably T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and F.Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*) dealt with the issue of how people could go on living these realizations. Contemporary literature is difficult to characterize because it reflects contemporary life and culture, which is rapidly changing and full of contradictions. But

there are certain trends which stand out. (These are generalizations, remember; there are exceptions.)

First, contemporary literature is no longer "innocent," but ironic. It reflects our political, social, and personal disillusionment, and no longer dares to believe it can create anything new. It can only cast the old in new forms. In the postscript to "The Name of the Rose," Umberto Eco explains: A second trend in contemporary literature is a new cynicism about the role of art and literature itself. The 1980s witnessed a second coming for the Indian novel in English. Its messiah seems to have been Salman Rushdie. The appearance of *Midnight's Children* in 1981 brought about a renaissance in Indian writing in English which has outdone that of the 1930s.

Its influence, acknowledged by critics and novelists alike, has been apparent in numerous ways:

The appearance of a certain post-modern playfulness, the turn too history, a new exuberance of language, the reinvention of allegory, the sexual frankness, even the prominent references to Bollywood, all seem to owe something to Rushdie's novel.

Rushdie's fame may have identified an international audience for Indian writers in English, but commercial developments in English-language publishing within India have played their part in enabling a new crop of novelists to come forward. New novelists of the 1980s such as Chatterjee (b. 1959) have tried to demonstrate that, on the contrary, the Indian 'tang' is not a pure essence but the masala mix of a culture that has always been able to appropriate influences from outside the subcontinent. After all, in a country which still has very low levels of literacy, literature in whatever language is not a popular form. Furthermore, it has been argued that 'the nation has first to be imagined to become real', and these novelists make their own contribution to that process, often in ways that directly raise the issue of the role to be played by the English language in the wider community as part of the broader debate about the identity of the nation as a whole. Amit Chaudhuri was born in Calcutta in 1962, but brought up in Bombay before going to university in England, where he lived until recently. In his fiction Bombay figures as the symbol of a disorienting modernity to be contrasted with Calcutta, 'the only city I know that is timeless'.

Both *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991) and *Afternoon Raag* (1993) are permeated by a lyrical sense of the loss of self. What for Rushdie is a supplementary of identity, the possibility of an idea of Indianness built on the very differences within the culture, is for Chaudhuri more often a lack, a sense of disorienting loss. In Chaudhuri's third book, *Freedom Song* (1998), the child's Calcutta is still present but has been changed by two decades of communist rule and political violence across the country. In his fourth, *A New World* (2000), Chaudhuri writes of a more ambivalent Calcutta, a city no more than a minor place of transit: in fact the focus is not the city but a small family with a divorced son visiting from America. Ghosh is obviously a novelist given to generic inventiveness and he has been taken by some critics to be a champion of post-modern cultural weightlessness, but his writing is as interested in the ties that bind as in the transitory nature of global culture. A similar of Allan Sealy idea of using traditional Indian literary forms for the purposes of historical narration underpins Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Tharoor (b. 1956) is another international Indian who went on from St. Stephen's to a career with the United Nations. Perhaps rather too relentlessly, his novel adapts the story of the *Mahabharata* to an allegory of modern Indian history. If all these novelists share an interest in retrieving suppressed histories, they also foreground, in their different ways, the act of narration. The process of examining exclusions from the national imaginary seems to have brought about recognition of the nature of history as itself a form of narrative which relies on literary devices, such as metaphor to create its meaning. Shashi Deshpande (1999).

What *A Suitable Boy* shares with some of the more experimental narratives is its size. Male writers, especially, seem to have been drawn to reimagining the nation on an epic scale, a pretension to inclusiveness even where the inevitable failure of that ambition is signalled in the more meta-fictional narratives. Perhaps their assertion of a right to rewrite national history is itself the expression of a certain privilege to which Indian women do not easily gain access. An overview of contemporary Indian fiction in English reveals an incredible array of talent. Many of the novelists seem to regard India's wealth of literary and mythical tradition as freely available to rewrite in the present.

*Contemporary Writers in English* is a series that presents critical commentaries on some of the best-known names in the genre. With the high visibility writings in English in academic, critical, pedagogic and reader circles, there is a perceivable demand for lucid yet rigorous introductions to several of its authors and genres. Raja Rao, along with R K Narayan and

Mulk Raj Anand, defined Indian writing in English in the early twentieth century. His works exhibit a deep engagement with psychology, mysticism, spiritualism and philosophy.

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