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Evolution of Indian English Literature through the Lens of M. K. Naik

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Abstract:

Madhukar Krishna Naik's book, *A History of Indian Literature in English*, published in 1982, is now more than forty years old but is still celebrated as the most authentic and reliable account of the evolution and growth of Indian English Literature. The work successfully traces the development of Indian English Literature from 1809 to 1979, in 334 pages with six chapters and many sub-chapters. Widely acclaimed, the book achieved its 22nd printing in 2021. Naik objectively traces the course of this history from its beginnings to recent times, dividing it into convenient periods, in an analytical, critical, and engaging style.

Keywords: *A History of Indian Literature in English*, M. K. Naik, Indian English Literature.

Madhukar Krishna Naik is a distinguished critic and a renowned scholar of Indian Literature in English. His contribution to tracing the history of Indian English Literature is unparalleled. He has several monumental works to his credit. His scholarly achievements include *Raja Rao*, *Mulk Raj Anand*, and *Studies in Indian English Literature* amongst many other significant contributions (Source: Wikipedia). His legendary literary landmark *A History of Indian Literature in English* establishes him as one of the leading authentic scholars of Indian English literature. The book was published by Sahitya Akademi in the year 1982.

Interestingly, Professor K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar is often regarded as the father of the serious study of Indian literary works in English language. However, despite the great pioneering efforts of Iyengar in his works *Indo-Anglian Literature* (1943), *The Indian Contribution to English Literature* (1945), and *Indian Writing in English* (1962, 1973), a systematic, comprehensive, and critical history of Indian English Literature had not been attempted.

Chapter One titled, “The Literary Landscape: The Nature and Scope of Indian English Literature” gives a comprehensive overview of Indian English Literature and introduces the readers to the very concept of Indian English literature. Chapter Two, “The Pagoda Tree from the Beginnings to 1857: The Age that shaped English Literature in India” explores the first phase of its history with a focus on Aurobindo Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarojini Naidu. M. K. Naik traces, explains and critiques the notable authors, poets, and literary figures who laid the foundation of literature in the language of the oppressors.

Chapter Three called ‘The Winds of Change 1857-1920’ discusses the second phase, describing it as the golden period of English Literature. Chapter Four aptly labeled as “The Gandhian Whirlwind, 1920-47” studies the third phase of the development of this literature, and deals with the Gandhian ideology and its impact on literature. It celebrates the novelists who emerged on the literary horizon, as R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Mulk Raj Anand.

The section entitled, ‘The Asoka Pillar: Independence and After’ deals with Indian English literature after the independence, 1947, and talks about the literary giants in the post-Independence era. In the section called, “Retrospect and Propects”, Naik connects the past with the present paving the path for a promising future as regards the potential and productivity of Indian English Literature.

Savitri, published in the year 1950, was composed by the first major poetic voice in the annals of Indian English verse, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh. He was a poet of varied achievement in lyric, narrative, and epic modes. Rabindranath Tagore, hailed by Mahatma Gandhi as “The Great Sentinel”, was a poet, dramatist, novelist, short story writer, painter, thinker, educationist, nationalist, and internationalist. He wrote mainly in Bengali and creatively translated some of his work into English. He is the only Indian Nobel Laureate in Literature. His award-winning “Gitanjali” (1912) has “devotion” as its central theme. “He is where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking the stones.” His poem, “The Gardener” portrays Tagore as the poet of love and “The Crescent Moon” is about childhood. His other works include “Fruit-Gathering”, “Stray Birds”, and “The Fugitive”.

Sarojini Naidu is another important name in Indian English poetry. Her works include “The Golden Threshold” (1905), “The Bird of Time”, and “The Broken Wing”. Her lyric is influenced by British Romanticism. Her younger brother, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, was also a poet in the romantic mould. His works,

“The Feast of Youth”, “Virgins and Vineyards”, and “The Magic Tree” are replete with romantic themes such as nature, beauty, passions, compassion, melancholy, etc. Swami

Vivekananda also wrote some poems in English. Joseph Furtado wrote “A Goan Fiddler” and “Songs in Exile”. He was the first Indian English poet to use pidgin English for comic purposes.

As regards the prose, Dadabhai Naoroji, the Grand Old Man of India, wrote “Poverty of India” and “Poverty and Un-British Rule in India”. Other prose writers include V. N. Mandalik, R. G. Bhandarkar, Mahadev Govind Ranadev, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Nationalism is the common theme in their work which comprised mostly written speeches. Next prominent figure is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who wrote novels and essays on spirituality and nationalism. Romesh Chunder Dutt wrote many works on Indian history and civilization. His “History of India” about the economics of colonialism has been hailed as the “first history of a colonial regime written from the point of view of the subject of a colonial empire”.

The Bengali trio- Tagore, Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, produced the most noteworthy prose of the period around the themes of religion, spirituality and nationalism. In the North India, prominent prose writers include Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Motilal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, and Ameer Ali. In the South, Sri Rama Varma, S. Subramania Iyer, Srinivasa Sastri, A. K. Coomaraswamy, and Sarojini Naidu published their political speeches. The common prose forms included written speeches, biography, autobiography, travel books, essays, and criticism.

Naik discusses drama of that period and claims that Indian English drama dates from 1831, when Krishna Mohan Banerjee wrote “The Persecuted”. Michael Madhusudhan Dutt translated three of his own Bengali plays into English. Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya produced dramatic writing too. Sri Aurobindo’s plays show the influence of the Elizabethan drama; two common themes are human evolution and love. Tagore’s famous plays are “The Post Office”, “The King of the Dark Chamber”, and “Chitra”. His plays can be divided into thesis plays revolving around celebration of life, religious fanaticism, true love, etc. and psychological dramas giving an insight into feminine mind and maternal love. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya started his career as a dramatist. He wrote verse plays about social issues. The only examples of Indian English drama in Bombay during the nineteenth century are C. S. Nazir’s verse play “The First Parsi Baronet” and D. M. Wadia’s “The Indian Heroine”.

The growth of fiction in later years far exceeded that of most other forms. Interestingly, fiction was actually the the most recent to appear on the landscape of Indian English Literature. Early fictional work was actually tales, not novels, that were published in

journals. The Calcutta Literary Gazette published *A Journal of 48 hours of the Year 1945* by Kylash Chunder Dutt on 6 June 1835. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's first and only novel in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* was serialized in the Calcutta Weekly, *The Indian Field* in 1864. It was published in book form in 1935.

During this period some minor social and historical novels were written, modelled after British fiction. Some women writers also produced some novels. Romesh Chunder Dutt, A. Madhaviah, T. Ramakrishna Pillai, and Sir Jogendra Singh are other notable names during this phase. The first short story collection appeared as late as 1885. The first notable short story writer in English was Cornelia Sorabji.

Outlining the Pagoda Tree, Naik traces all literary output from the beginnings to 1857. For early prose, Naik credits C. V. Boriah and Raja Rammohun Roy. Then, he dwells in detail on the prose writings produced in Bengal, the Bombay Presidency, the Madras Presidency, and in North India. Naik celebrates Henry Derozio, Kasiprasad Ghose, and M. M. Dutt as the earliest poets in the field.

Recording the "Winds of Change from 1857 to 1920", Naik first depicts the contributions of the Dutt Family Album. He writes about Ram Sharma, Toru Dutt, B. M. Malabari, R. D. Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, and some minor poets of that period.

Then, the author describes the Prose of Thought that emerged in the Bombay Presidency and Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo made immense contributions to the prose of this time. He discusses the prose produced in North India and the Madras Presidency. V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, Sarojini Naidu and A. K. Coomaraswamy were notable writers during this phase.

Prose flourished in the form of biography, autobiography, travel books, essays, and literary and art criticism.

Drama was enriched by K. M. Benerji, M. M. Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya. Drama was produced in Bombay and Madras too. After deliberating on how V. V. Srinivasa Aiyangar enriched the genre, Naik briefs about other playwrights. Early fiction blossomed in Bengal and the Madras Presidency. The genre of the short story too witnessed its glorious emergence during this period.

During the Gandhian Whirlwind, from 1920 to 1947, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Bose, M. N. Roy, B. R. Ambedkar, and other associates of Gandhi and some critics of Gandhism, enriched the political prose during this phase. Hindu Mahasabha ideology, Muslim Political thought, Communist thought, Socialist thought, Moderate thought,

Journalism, History, Religion, and Philosophy coloured the prose of the period. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan made significant contributions. Genres such as biography, autobiography, travel books, essays, and literary and art criticism flourished.

Poetry was enriched by the School of Sri Aurobindo, Religious and Philosophical verse, Romantic verse and some minor verse writers. Drama was popularised by A. S. P. Ayyar, T. P. Kailasam, Bharati Sarabhai, J. M. Lobo-Prabhu, and other playwrights. Fiction was developed by K.S. Venkataramani, A.S.P. Ayyar, K. Nagarajan, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Dhan Gopal Mukerji, and other novelists.

The short story writers such as Shankar Ram, A. S. P. Ayyar, S. K. Chettur, K. S. Venkataramani, Manjeri, Isvaran, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and K. A. Abbas contributed tremendously to the genre. Thus, the period from 1857 to 1920 produced a number of mature works in verse and prose, though drama was yet to establish a tradition and fiction still remained in infancy.

In the section called, “The Asoka Pillar: Independence and After”, Naik discusses the literature produced after the Independence. He discusses the Romantic School in detail. He writes about the New Poets such as Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes P. Lal, Adil Jussawalla, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Gieve Patel, K. Mehrotra, Pritish Nandy, K. N. Daruwalla, Shiv K. Kumar, Jayanta Mahapatra, and Arun Kolatkar. Naik also mentions women poets, focusing on Kamala Das.

Then, he writes in brief about other modern poets. Naik appreciates the contributions to fiction by Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, R. Menon Marath, Balachandra Rajan, Sudhindra Nath Ghose, G. V. Desani, M., Anantanarayanan, Arun Joshi, and Chaman Nahal. The author commends the efforts by women novelists such as R. P. Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Santha Rama Rau, Nergis Dalal, and others. The short story has been enriched by Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal, Arun Joshi, Ruskin Bond, and Manoj Das. Great women writers like P. Jhabvala, Anita Desai, and some other short story writers made remarkable contributions to the genre. Talking about drama, Naik writes that the poetic drama has been popularised by Manjeri Isvaran, G. V. Desani, and Lakhan Deb, while the prose drama was enriched by Asif Currimbhoy, Partap Sharma, Nissim Ezekiel, Gurcharan Das, Girish Karnad, and other playwrights. Nirad C. Chaudhuri is a great prose writer of this period. Prose productions during this phase are diverse, revolving around autobiography, biography, politics, history, religion, philosophy, travel books, essays, letters, and literary and art criticism.

In the last section, “Retrospect and Prospect”, the author describes the output during the 1970s and after. He systematically defends this body of literature from various criticisms. He highlights the significance of English as a second language in India. Commenting on the contemporary status of Indian English literature, Naik shares his wisdom and insights glorifying the immense remarkable contributions of the Indians in this foreign language.

Thus, beginning with a tribute to Professor K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar as the father of the serious study of Indian English Literature, for his outstanding contributions such as, “Indo-Anglian Literature” (1943), “The Indian Contribution to English Literature” and “Indian Writing in English” (1962), the book “A history of Indian English Literature”, by M. K. Naik, successfully traces the entire course of Indian English Literature from 1809 to 1979 in six chapters. According to Naik, the first composition in English by an Indian was C. V. Boriah’s “Account of the Jains”, which appeared in Asiatic Researches, Vol. IX, 1809. The first chapter “The Literary Landscape”, defining “The Nature and Scope of Indian English Literature” begins with a striking statement, “Indian English Literature began as an interesting by-product of an eventful encounter in the late eighteenth century between a vigorous and enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India” (Naik 1).

Defying all the confusion related to the various terms designated to Indian English Literature like Indo-Anglian Literature, Indian Writing in English Indo-English Literature, Naik defines Indian English Literature as “literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality. The Anglo-Indian Literature comprises the writings of Western authors about India. Works of Kipling, Forster, F. W. Bain, Sir Edwin Arnold, F.A. Steel, John Masters, Paul Scott, and M. M. Kaye belong to the British Literature. Moreover, translations from the Indian Languages into English cannot form part of Indian English Literature, except when they are creative translations by the authors themselves.

The Sahitya Akademi has accepted Indian English Literature as the most suitable appellation for this body of writing. The term emphasizes two significant ideas: first that this literature constitutes one of the many streams that join the great ocean called Indian Literature, which, though written in different languages, has an unmistakable unity; and secondly, that it is an inevitable product of the nativization of the English language to express the Indian sensibility. For his first comprehensive study of the subject, published in 1962, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar used the phrase, ‘Indian Writing in English’. Two pioneering collections of critical essays on this literature, both published in 1968, also followed his example: *Indian Writing in English: Critical Essays* by David Mc Cutchion and *Critical Essays on Indian*

Writing in English edited by M. K. Naik, S. K. Desai and G. S. Amur. But the term ‘Indian Writing in English’ has been accused of having a rather circumlocutory air, and while ‘Indo-English Literature’ possesses an admirable compactness, it has, as noted earlier, been used to denote translations by Indians from Indian literature into English.

Quoting the famous verses of Kamala Das about the social restrictions on the use of English, Naik justifies and celebrates this peculiar body of writing- Indian English Literature. Highly optimistic about the future of such a diverse literary output, Naik aptly concludes his landmark work with Henry Derozio’s promising words:

I see

Fame in the mirror of futurity

Weaving the chaplets you are yet to gain.

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