



An Introduction to Indian English Literature

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ABSTRACT

Indian English literature (IEL) is the body of work by writers in India who write in the English language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. Its early history began with the works of Michael Madhusudan Dutt followed by R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao who contributed to Indian fiction in the 1930s. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian diaspora who are of Indian descent.

It is frequently referred to as Indo-Anglian literature. (Indo-Anglian is a specific term in the sole context of writing that should not be confused with Anglo-Indian). As a category, this production comes in the broader realm of postcolonial literature—the production from previously colonized countries such as India.

Key Word :

Literature, History, Later history, Poetry, Writers

Introduction :

Indian writing in English has a relatively short but highly charged history.

In 1793, Sake Dean Mahomed wrote perhaps the first book by an Indian in English, called *The Travels of Dean Mahomed*. However, most early Indian writing in English was non-fictional work, such as biographies and political essays.

This began to change in the late 1800s, when famous Indian authors who wrote mostly in their mother tongue, began to try their hand at writing in English. In the early 1900s, Rabindranath Tagore began translating his works from Bengali to English.

Starting in 1917 Dhan Gopal Mukerji wrote many children's stories that were set in India. He was awarded the Newbery medal in 1928 for *Gay Neck, the Story of a Pigeon*.

Soon after, a new generation of Indian authors, who wrote almost exclusively in English, hit the bookshelves, beginning in 1935 with R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* followed in 1938.

What made Narayan's, Anand's and Rao's writing different from the Indian authors before them was that their stories were about the contemporary man on the street.

There was also an Indianness to their work, in terms of the words they used and their style of writing. This resonated with the new, but growing ranks of Indians reading English literature.

Later history

Among the later writers, the most notable is Salman Rushdie, born in India and now living in the USA. Rushdie, with his famous work *Midnight's Children* (Booker Prize 1981, Booker of Bookers 1992, and Best of the Bookers 2008), ushered in a new trend of writing. He used a hybrid language – English generously peppered with Indian terms – to convey a theme that could be seen as representing the vast canvas of India. He is usually categorized under the magic realism mode of writing most famously associated with Gabriel García Márquez. Nayantara Sehgal was one of the first female Indian writers in English to receive wide recognition. Her fiction deals with India's elite responding to the crises engendered by political change. She was awarded the 1986 Sahitya Akademi Award for English, for her novel, *Rich Like Us* (1985), by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters. Anita Desai, who was shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times, received a Sahitya Akademi Award in 1978 for her novel *Fire on the Mountain* and a British Guardian Prize for *The Village by the Sea*. Her daughter Kiran Desai won the 2006 Man Booker Prize for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. Ruskin Bond received Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of short stories *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* in 1992. He is also the author of a historical novel *A Flight of Pigeons*, which is based on an episode during the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

Vikram Seth, author of *The Golden Gate* (1986) and *A Suitable Boy* (1994) is a writer who uses a purer English and more realistic themes. Being a self-confessed fan of Jane Austen, his attention is on the story, its details and its twists and turns. Vikram Seth is notable both as an accomplished novelist and poet. Vikram Seth is also a prolific poet.

Another writer who has contributed immensely to the Indian English Literature is Amitav Ghosh who is the author of *The Circle of Reason* (his 1986 debut novel), *The Shadow Lines* (1988), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), and *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first volume of *The Ibis* trilogy, set in the 1830s, just before the Opium War, which encapsulates the colonial history of the East. Ghosh's latest work of fiction is *River of Smoke* (2011), the second volume of *The Ibis* trilogy.

Rohinton Mistry is an India born Canadian author who is a Neustadt International Prize for Literature laureate (2012). His first book *Tales from FirozshaBaag* (1987) published by Penguin Books Canada is a collection of 11 short stories. His novels *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995) earned him great acclaim.

Shashi Tharoor, in his *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), follows a story-telling (though in a satirical) mode as in the Mahabharata drawing his ideas by going back and forth in time. His work as UN official living outside India has given him a vantage point that helps construct an objective Indianness. Vikram Chandra is another author who shuffles between India and the United States and has received critical acclaim for his first novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) and collection of short stories *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997). His namesake Vikram A. Chandra is a renowned journalist and the author of *The Srinagar Conspiracy* (2000). Suketu Mehta is another writer currently based in the United States who authored *Maximum City* (2004), an autobiographical account of his experiences in the city of Mumbai. In 2008, Arvind Adiga received the Man Booker Prize for his debut novel *The White Tiger*.

Recent writers in India such as Arundhati Roy and David Davidar show a direction towards contextuality and rootedness in their works. Arundhati Roy, a trained architect and the 1997 Booker prize winner for her *The God of Small Things*, calls herself a "home grown" writer. Her award-winning book is set in the immensely physical landscape of Kerala. Davidar sets his *The House of Blue Mangoes* in Southern Tamil Nadu. In both the books, geography and politics are integral to the narrative. In his novel *Lament of Mohini* (2000), Shreekumar Varma touches upon the unique matriarchal system and the sammandham system of marriage as he writes about the Namboodiris and the aristocrats of Kerala. Similarly, Arnab Jan Deka, a trained engineer and jurist, writes about both physical and ethereal existentialism on the banks of the mighty river Brahmaputra. His co-

authored book of poetry with British poet-novelist Tess Joyce, appropriately titled *A Stanza of Sunlight on the Banks of Brahmaputra* (1983), published from both India and Britain (2009), evokes the spirit of flowing nature of life. His most recent book *Brahmaputra and Beyond: Linking Assam to the World*(2015) made a conscious effort to connect to a world divided by racial, geographic, linguistic, cultural and political prejudices. His highly acclaimed short story collection *The Mexican Sweetheart & other stories*(2002) was another landmark book of this genre. JahnabiBarua, a Bangalore-based author from Assam has set her critically acclaimed collection of short stories *Next Door* on the social scenario in Assam with insurgency as the background.

The stories and novels of Ratan Lal Basu reflect the conditions of tribal people and hill people of West Bengal and the adjacent states of Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. Many of his short stories reflect the political turmoil of West Bengal since the Naxalite movement of the 1970s. Many of his stories like *Blue Are the Far Off Mountains*, *The First Rain* and *The Magic Marble* glorify purity of love. His novel *Oraon and the Divine Tree* is the story of a tribal and his love for an age old tree. In Hemingway style language the author takes the reader into the dreamland of nature and people who are inexorably associated with nature.

Poetry

An overlooked category of Indian writing in English is poetry. Rabindranath Tagore wrote in Bengali and English and was responsible for the translations of his own work into English. Other early notable poets in English include Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, RomeshChunder Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu, and her brother Harindranath Chattopadhyay. Notable 20th Century authors of English poetry in India include DilipChitre, Kamala Das, Eunice De Souza, Nissim Ezekiel, KersyKatrak, Shiv K. Kumar, ArunKolatkarr, P. Lal, Jayanta Mahapatra, Dom Moraes, Gieve Patel, A. K. Ramanujan, and Madan Gopal Gandhi among several others.

The younger generation of poets writing in English include Abhay K, Arundhathi Subramaniam, Anju Makhija, Arnab Jan Deka, Bibhu Padhi, Ranjit Hoskote, Sudeep Sen, Smita Agarwal, Makarand Paranjape, Jeet Thayil, Jaydeep Sarangi, Mani Rao, Jerry Pinto, K. V. Dominic, Meena Kandasamy, Nalini Priyadarshni, Gopi Kottoor, Tapan Kumar Pradhan, Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Robin Ngangom, Vihang A. Naik, Anuradha Bhattacharyya and K Srilata.

Modern expatriate Indian poets writing in English include Agha Shahid Ali, Sujata Bhatt, Richard Crasta, Yuyutsu Sharma, Tabish Khair and Vikram Seth.

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