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## Exploring Indian English Literature: A Cultural and Literary Odyssey

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### Abstract

*English Literature is a linking agent. Looking at the splendid fabric of English Literature, we realize in it a 'coat of many colors', reflecting the world's varied cultures, traditions, and modes of thought. Literature imparts values and creates an awareness of the culture of one's individuality. Literature as an articulation of life has an intense value. This necessitates the view that literature which does not arouse poignant feelings in humans is not literature. It is unimaginable for true lovers of literature that life without literature would be like salt, the most essential ingredient in cooking which would be incomplete, and tasteless. So human beings will be depriving themselves of the 'aesthetics of literature' if they do not read and enjoy the works of literary art. All forms of art and media project life as it truly and really exists. Similarly, every era is a representation of the Zeitgeist spirit in which the literary writers and artists depict the social, historical, cultural, religious, economic, political and linguistic background of that epoch. Hence, every writer becomes one with the existing social group. Their writings are a mirror of society and certainly there is an enormous impact of the prevailing conditions of contemporary life on the writers of that age. Literature has captured the attention of human hearts through its passionate portrayal of themes and subjects applicable to human life. Today we have literature from almost all continents of the globe. Literary Writers from across the globe have proved their caliber by producing mind-blowing artistic pieces of enduring value. World literature is an example to display the lofty ideals and innate talents possessed by the writers. Through their works, the writers have painted life as experienced by people and lay bare to the readers various glimpses of life which cannot be evaded by human beings. Subsequently today these world literatures-American Literature, African Literature, Canadian Literature, New Zealand Literature and South Asian Literature-which encompasses Indian English Literature, have acquired immense value. The article attempts to make a comprehensive evolution of Indian English Literature from a Cultural and Literary perspective.*

**Keywords:** Indian English Literature, poignant, reflection, social, historical, cultural, religious, economic, political, linguistic, background.

### Introduction

English Literature is a linking agent. Looking at the splendid fabric of English Literature, we realize in it a 'coat of many colors', reflecting world's varied cultures, traditions and modes of thought. Literature imparts values and creates an awareness of the culture of one's individuality. Literature as an articulation of life has an intense value. This necessitates the view that literature which does not arouse poignant feelings in humans is not literature. It is unimaginable for true lovers of literature that life without literature would be like salt, the most essential ingredient in cooking which would be incomplete, and tasteless. So human beings will be depriving themselves of the 'aesthetics of literature' if they do not read and enjoy the works of literary art.

All forms of art and media project life as it truly and really exists. Similarly, every era is a representation of the Zeitgeist spirit in which the literary writers and artists depict the social, historical, cultural, religious, economic, political and linguistic background of that epoch.

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Hence every writer becomes one with the existing social group. Their writings are a mirror of society and certainly there is an enormous impact of the prevailing conditions of contemporary life on the writers of that age. The words of Rene Wellek are true in the context:

The writer is not only influenced by society:

he influences it (Wellek 102).

Literature has captured the attention of human hearts through its passionate portrayal of themes and subjects applicable to human life. Today we have literature from almost all continents of the globe. Literary Writers from across the globe have proved their calibre by producing mind-blowing artistic pieces of enduring value. World literature is an example to display the lofty ideals and innate talents possessed by the writers. Through their works, the writers have painted life as experienced by people and lay bare to the readers various glimpses of life which cannot be evaded by human beings. Subsequently today these world literatures- American Literature, African Literature, Canadian Literature, New Zealand Literature and South Asian Literature-which encompasses Indian English Literature, have acquired immense value.

### **Influences on Literature**

The impact of medieval literature turned out to be a great influence on Indian Literature which brought a redefinition that witnessed Indians succumb to alien interferences especially the ones coming from the corners of Persia, Turkey, and even the European voyages to chart a world map. The Muslim era under which the Indian cultural ethos expanded laid an impetus, extolling and influencing the historical development of Indian English literature and it has been an aid in the form of materials to Indian creative writers.

The third important factor that is responsible for the successful emergence of Indian English literature is colonialism. Colonialism was a traumatising experience for Indians. Described as a distinct form of imperialism, Colonialism exerted its direct control over a country. M.K. Naik wrote:

Indian Writing in English 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. The important words here are vigorous and enterprising, which imply a sense of ordered action or progress, and stagnant and chaotic, which in turn imply disorder and inaction. Post-colonial critics like Homi Bhabha and others have drawn attention to the colonizing strategy of dividing "colonial space" into binary opposites - that of nature and culture, chaos and civility etc. The colonizing enterprise of the British subsumed the Indian sub-continent through its strategic deployment of such culture shocks.

Fiction became much sought-after genre of literary expression and subsequently obtained a distinguished bearing. Critics from all over the globe appreciated the novels for their realistic projection of Indian ethos expressed creatively by Indian authors in an alien language. Prof. M. K. Naik remarks:

...one of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was probably a fountain head of storytelling, the novel as we know today was an importation from the West. (4)

Two important phases can be considered to discuss about Indian English novels. They are pre-independent and post-independent novels. Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Raj Mohan's Wife* added vigour and colour to Indian English literature.

With the rise of India's independence, Indian writers received freedom to express about the rich culture and heritage of Indian thought in a foreign language English. Very particularly fiction writers have taken a challenge of writing in English and creatively project the ethos of India. M. K. Naik was right when he exclaimed about creativity and innovative quality of Indian writers:

one of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was probably a fountain head of storytelling the novel as we know today was an importation from the west.

Indian writers have employed English language in a peculiar and with extraordinary skill by commanding convolutions of the alien language and embracing in its ethnicity of India. One of the veterans Raja Rao wrote in his Preface to *Kanthapura*:

English is not an alien 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 in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can only write as Indians. Our method of expression will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. (14)

Macaulay's Minute has impacted the development of Indian Literature and provided the ground for inauguration of English to be introduced in all sectors of life in India. In his presentation of the famous Minute, Macaulay declared openheartedly though he knew nothing about Sanskrit and Arabic, yet he could make an ordinance:

...A single shelf of a good European library  
is worth the whole native literature of India  
and Arabia. ...All the historical information  
which has been collected in the Sanskrit language  
is less than what may be found in the paltry  
abridgements used at preparatory schools of England...

(Speech on Indian Education, 2nd Feb 1833)

India obtained the supreme position and became the springboard creative use of English and English Literature in educational institutions. Eventually English language took reins in all walks of life in India-educational institutions, administration, law, Courts, offices, etc. A great gentleman like Lord William Bentinck too favoured English and set forth the view that all should:

“favour English Language alone” henceforth and would move towards “a knowledge of English literature and Science through the medium of English language alone.

So, the setting up of Universities in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta paved the way for English language reachable and handy to teachers and Government officials.

### **Budding Artists**

The beginning stage of Indian English Poetry was the rise of rebirth and reawakening of literature in India. A galaxy of poets acquired the literary scene globally through their realistic treatment of themes and innovative stylistic devices. Great poets like Sri Aurobindo,

Rabindranath Tagore, Toru Dutt, Kamala Das are ample testimony to the widespread expansion of Indian Writings. Nonetheless, Indian English Literature progressed by leaps and bounds only with the tremendous growth in fiction. The names of M. R. Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan strengthened and stabilised Indian English fiction with their unique style of writing and publication of enormous works. In this respect, William Walsh stated:

It is these three writers who defined the area in which the Indian novel was to operate. They established its assumptions: they sketched its main themes, freed the first models of its characters and elaborated its logic. Each of them used an easy, natural idiom which was unaffected by the opacity of a British inheritance. Their language has been freed of the foggy taste of Britain and transferred to a wholly new setting of brutal heat and brilliant light.” (Indian Literature in English, 219)

Thus, the contribution by Writers to world literature exhibits creativity and innovative ideas generated by the Indian writers. Their works are contemplation of issues like patriotism, independence, realism, etc. Novelists have proved their literary eminence and expertise by depicting ethos. William Walsh was right when he commented about the novelists:

Distinguished not only for their own work but as the inaugurators of the form itself since it was they who defined the area in which the Indian novel in English was to operate, drew the first models of its characters and themes and elaborated its particular logic. Each used its own version of English freed from the foggy taste of Britain. (Walsh, 62)

It is said that some red-letter days or significant events/moments in a country’s history make the literature of that nation remarkable and create hallmarks of inspiration. In the historical evolution of Indian English literature also a flurry of historical events and nostalgic moments played their part in augmenting the aesthetics of fiction and were contributed lion’s share for the growth of Indian English Novel. The struggle for independence exerted a great impact in fostering national consciousness among the literary intellectuals and it displayed physical and mental prowess to recover liberty and freedom from the white masters. This motivated and guided the Indian public who also displayed national fervour towards their mother land-India. The freedom movement steered by Mahatma Gandhi aroused instinct for patriotism, focusing on the themes of India’s independence, patriotism, nationalism, Indian ethos, etc.

The Gandhian movement helped Indian writers to handle issues and concerns by using the style of realism. A few examples of writers and their works during the pre-independence era is noteworthy. Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* is in fact the first embodiment of Gandhiji’s ideals and philosophy painted very realistically in Indian English fiction. The novel revolves around the hamlet named Kanthapura and presents Gandhian values of non-violence, truth and curbing of caste discrimination. Both in form and content, the novels follow the Indian tradition.

K. S. Venkataramani, the novelist of pre-independent era emphasizes in his works the impetus of Gandhi and his vision. *The Tiller and The Patriot*, deals with the settings in ancient Indian History and captures the spirit of Gandhian ethos. Bhabani Bhattacharya examined the themes of partition, evils of poverty and squalor, the exploitation of the poor by the rich in his work *So Many Hungers*. The novel focuses on the motif of exploitation with quit India movement and the Bengal famine as its backdrop.

Mulk Raj Anand’s concept of social realism is undoubtedly great. Influenced by the caste bias of untouchability, Anand projected the struggles and problems faced by the labouring class and the downtrodden. The novel *Untouchable* is an outstanding work by Anand which describes the drama of the human beings enmeshed in the age-old caste system. While in

*Coolie*, Anand portrays the economic conditions of the central character. In fact, both novels are:

A plea for downtrodden, the poor and the outcaste, Who face economic hardship and emotional humiliation in a rigid social structure (Singh, Ramsewak & Singh, Charusheel, 6).

Thus like his contemporaries, Anand believes that literature should be able to solve the problems by creating awareness about human values. It is for this reason that Anand has been hailed as the champion of the downtrodden, the proletariat.

### **Creative use of English Language**

Language did not become a stumbling block to these writers. Nonetheless the Indian writers audaciously encountered the challenges while writing in an alien language and ultimately proved themselves to be 'Masters of Literature' and on par with their fellow writers from the USA, Canada, Britain, Germany and other countries have expressed to the world their creativity and novelty. The words of Meenakshi Mukherji are apt "twice born fiction" (The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English), since the critic takes a positive stand in describing writers who have made widespread contribution and produced a lion's share to world literatures. Thus, several novelists have made fiction as a distinguishing platform to project their feelings. Their works portray an Indian ethos typically and revolve around the subjects of Indian culture, tradition and heritage in a multidimensional approach. The analysis of contemporary novels reveals that Indian writers represent some event of national importance. Like their British counterparts, the Indian novelists in English too reacted to these historic incidents with sensitivity.

Soon after obtaining freedom from the British hegemony, India as an independent nation witnessed steady march scientifically and technologically. The advent of science led to perennial discoveries and inventions and eventually the economic condition of the country changed. This change technology had a very great influence on writers particularly the novelists. Indian authors found fiction as a genre became a reflection of the contemporary period which encompassed harsh realities that was prevalent. The publication of *Distant Drum* by Manohar Malgaonkar displays his maturity and artistry as a 'historical' novelist he believed in the theory of 'art for art's sake' and he took the stance of a historian in his novels. Next in line comes the novelist with a vision and mission in his works -Khushwant Singh who wrote in the crude 'realist' tradition of Jane Austen and others. He came to spotlight and public interest with his praiseworthy novel *Train to Pakistan*. The novel is true depiction of partition of India and Pakistan. In all his novels, Khushwant Singh paints the realism of the evils and aftermath of partition.

The progress of Indian Literature was growing over the years tremendously and advocated conventional methods of writing. With the outlook of post-colonialism, Indian writers employed tradition and modernity in their style to strike a balance between Indian and Western cultures. The new novelists experimented with novel techniques and treatment of subject matter. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee is a couple of novelists who became fine artists and delved deep into the problems encountered by the independent nation.

Salman Rushdie's works abound with use of mythology. The publication of *Midnight's Children* witnessed the poignant base laid by Rushdie through innovative stylistic devices. He

employed unbelievable imagination, comedy, magic realism, etc which have become hallmarks of contemporary fiction. Thus, Rushdie secured a staunch place in Indian fiction for his use madcap techniques, narrative style, character sketches in an eccentric manner, excessive use of symbols. Vikram Seth remembered today for his *A Suitable Boy*, became the cynosure in India. The central aspect of his novels are culture and politics of India. It is interesting to note that the themes and techniques of this epoch were focussed on social unrest, poverty, untouchability, exploitation, and political conflicts. Srinivas Iyengar remarked:

Some of the best studies of social life are, naturally enough, in the regional languages, and it is not easy to translate the racy idioms of everyday speech into English. This is particularly true of life in the countryside, the seaside, the hillside where life has, perhaps, changed very little indeed during the last two thousand years. Urban life in India attracts the novelists by its excitement, perversions, sophistications and violent alternations between affluence and poverty, splendour and squalor. but the interior, the areas of obscurity and inaccessibility have their attractions too and sometimes bring out the best in the creative novelist. (165)

### **Literature of the Post-Independent Era**

Post independent era saw the rise of women's writing who strengthened the quantity and quality of fiction. Women's writing added a new vigour and flavour, and the enriching experience could be felt only with the onslaught of women writers into the scene. Women novelists centred on female issues and concerns, and emphasized the important aspects of quest for identity, individual rights, women's rights and privileges, freedom from the bondage of social customs and traditional norms. In this context Anees Jung has rightly pointed in her best book *Unveiling India* the following:

In the complex pantheon of diversities, the Indian woman remains the point of unity unveiling through each single experience a collective unconscious prized by a society that is looked in mortal combat with the power and weakness of age and time. She remains the still centre, like the centre the potter's wheel, circling to create new forms, unfolding the continuity of a racial life, which in turn has encircled and helped her acquire a quality of concentration. (48)

Women's literature in recent times has been considered as a mighty medium of feminist proclamations. Their writings are exhortations of burning issues related to women. The whole world of women is described honestly and gives a glimpse of the unexplored areas of feminine psyche. Majority of women novelists elucidate the psychological anguish of the housewives who are frustrated. The words of the psychological novelist Virginia Wolf need to be quoted here. It is probable, however, that both in life and in art, the values of women are not the values of man. Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values – to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. (75-81)

Writers from India did never abstain from portraying the social milieu. This focus of shift in fiction is tangible in the works of Anita Desai and Arun Joshi handle the themes of condition of human beings. For instance, Anita Desai's fiction paints the pathos of human beings. Her novels delineate the psychological aspects like the British novelists. She delves into the female psyche the subconscious mind in terms of social and political truths.

Arun Joshi too has expressed modern man's pain and agonies like Anita Desai but with unique competence and force.

It is with the novels of Arun Joshi and Anita Desai that a new era in the Indo- English fiction began and witnessed a change in the treatment of themes. (Arun Joshi's Fiction: A Critique, 209-210)

Joshi's method of self-examination helps comprehend the reality behind the trauma of human beings and believes that this could be given a shape only by the creative artist. Thus, Joshi gained a place as a 'creative artist' in Indo-Anglican fiction. Some of his works are- *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Foreigner*, *The Last Labyrinth*, *The Survivor* etc.

A thorough study of the Indian literature origin and development indicates the great scope, depth, and richness of how Indian writers have participated in various literary genres. This long literary tradition, preserved in the oldest oral traditions and classical Sanskrit, also in the medieval bhakti and Sufi poetry, and in the modern writing in English and regional languages, has been an unremitting reflection of social, cultural, political, and historical change. Through aesthetic experimentation the long arc of Indian literature not only demonstrates a concern with aesthetic experimentation but also with a focus on philosophical inquiry, ethical values, and group identity. The establishment of English-language fiction in India did not become a new force of cultural expression until after the nation had gained its independence in 1947, but it became an effective one very quickly. The Indian fiction of the post-independence period signified a radical change in the subject matter, literary techniques, and ideological issues. Authors started to explore the truths of a newly independent state partition, nation-building, social disparities, gender dynamics, and caste system, and in so doing found their own literary voice that spoke not just to their own people but to the whole world, and which was met with readership and criticism outside the country. Indian fiction has received international coverage and this has led to increased awareness of the multifaceted socio-cultural environment in India. Literature has played the role of a medium through which the relationship between different communities is established as the readers all over the globe are able to share the experiences, history and sensibilities of an Indian.

Sense of patriotism and nationalism is entrenched in the achievements made by Indian writers. These sentiments are hidden instead of explicit in an overt political rhetoric, but they are expressed indirectly by means of cultural representation, social commentary, and re-established Indian identity. Such bi-polar focus highlights the role of literary work both in artistic as well as in nation-building in a subtle way. So, the Indian literary pilgrimage can be interpreted as a cultural and literary experience, as a chronicle of the past of the nation, questioning the present, and projecting its future, and asserting the Indian presence in the world literature.

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