

## Indian Literature in English: An Introduction

I

Indian Literature in English might as yet appear as a conundrum. India is of course, India, and English the language of England. English in India still reflects the stereotypical colonial hangover. But without resorting to such platitudes like English being an international language, and writing in English in India being one major way of getting noticed overseas etc, I might state that there is as yet little need for pleading the case for the existence and flourishing of Indian writings in English. But in festivals like this one where we are celebrating poetry from India under several sections like women's writing and Dalit Writing and writing in the regional languages, how do we envisage the situation of the writer in English? A fish out of water? Or a sore thumb? Barring the specific curio aspect of the language the experience of the Indian writer can unarguably be evidenced through this chunk of the Indian literary spectrum—this usually gets noticed in the west but sometimes for the wrong reasons. It is my argument in the following that the Indian writer in English is not a species apart but very much an integral part of the Indian literary scene. There is this feeling that writing in English from India is substandard and middle class, barring of course a few exceptional cases. This might be true primarily because the language itself is currently in use in living situations only among the educated upper middle class. the working class do not have easy access to this nor do they require it, and in the case of the upper class there is virtually very little self-reflexivity nor commitment to the literary.

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India is a land of violent contrasts—while the sweltering heat of summer blisters the Indo-Gangetic plains, perennial snow showers quietly on the calm heights of the Himalayas in the north; while the monsoon racks violently in the deep-south, the northwest regions reel under severe droughts. Similarly, there yet survives the fabled rich image of the India with turbaned Maharajahs riding on bedecked elephants, of snake charmers, sadhus, curry and carpets—of unimaginable riches, ease and wealth, of promiscuity and extravagance, while alongside there exists the contradictory image of heat and dust, of brutalizing want and agonizing poverty, of inhuman exploitation and barbaric ignorance. For the most—a wounded civilization, with a glorious heritage. (See Naipaul, *A Wounded Civilization*, and A L Basham, *The Wonder that was India*) Here is at once the sublime and the grotesque coexisting in one plane. Perhaps, this could also account for the multiplicity of voices in Indian writing. Of course, India is like any other country in the world with its own history of battles and conquests, of treachery and turbulence. Indian literature is like the literature of everywhere else, and yet it is like the literature of nowhere else. In its indigenous diversity of paradox and unpredictability, of reception and acquiescence, of adaptation and assimilation, it survives and prevails in its own identity. It is different and it is Indian. Multiplicity of languages is among the fundamental experience of being an Indian, and a plurality of cultural experience constitutes its underpinnings. There is this oft expressed view that Indian Literature is one though written in many languages—*Ekam sat vipra bahuda vadanti* (truth is one the sages express it differently). Here are nearly two dozen languages that have official status, and living literatures of their own, with equally highly evolved vocabulary and scripts! Small wonder then that English has been adapted with such skill and dexterity as in the present, so much so that the Indian writer in English is as much international as any other writer in that language. I believe that the Indian writer in

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English is just another Indian—just like the Indian writer in Bengali or Malayalam, in

Gujarathi or Tamil.

And yet there is something exotic and strange in the manner in which such writing is received in the West. Granted, Salman Rushdie and now Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy and even Chetan Bhagat are household names, but still there are more than a few frills attached to the brown person who wields the English quill. Though slightly on this side of poetic exaggeration and humour, I would like to draw your attention to this one instance: John Updike has a poem called "I Missed His Book, But I read His Name," with this epigraph: *The Silver Pilgrimage*, by M.Anantanarayanan...160 pages. Criterion. \$3.95—The Times."

Though authors are a dreadful clan  
To be avoided if you can,  
I'd like to meet the Indian,  
M.Anantanarayanan.  
I picture him as short and tan.  
We'd meet perhaps, in Hindustan.  
I'd say ,with admirable elan,  
"Ah, Anantanarayanan--  
I've heard of you. The Times once ran  
A notice on your novel,an  
Unusual tale of God and Man."  
And Anantanarayanan  
Would seat me on a lush divan  
And read his name -- that sumptuous span  
Of "a's" and "n's" more lovely than  
"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan"--  
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Aloud to me all day. I plan  
Henceforth to be an ardent fan  
Of Anantanarayanan--  
M. Anantanarayanan.

We have the diametrically opposite reaction in the unceremonious references to Indian English poets in the posthumously published letters of Philip Larkin. Either way—whether he/she is received in the west with a mixture of exaggerated exoticism and awe or dismissed with racial derision and ethnic contempt—the Indian writer in English continues to create an international readership or, most certainly, a market overseas, as the phenomenal success of *The God of Small Things* would reveal. The only question that often has bothered me is, who the Indian writer is writing for? And because this occasion does not needlessly warrant a critical perspective, I do not propose to struggle with such sociopolitical issues related to class, economy, production, publicity and marketing. I shall now proceed, albeit in a rudimentary manner, to outline the growth and development of Indian Writing in English.

## II

The end of the British Raj did not signal the end of English in India ; on the other hand, the language had by then very much seeped into the Indian creative psyche. By the time Prof. K.R.Sreenivasa Iyengar's comprehensive and detailed survey *Indian Writing in English* came out in 1962, there was no longer any necessity to debate the existence of a parallel literature in the English language arguably similar in more than one way to the various regional literatures. In the last four decades, the number of Indians writing in English has increased considerably so much so that a pressing need for creative appraisal and evaluation in terms of a pan-Indian aesthetic surfaced of necessity ( Many conferences and

Symposia like the one hosted by Prof. C.D.Narasimhaiah at *Dhvanyaloka* to develop a *Common Indian Poetic* for all Indian literatures have taken place in many parts of the country.) There has also been a similar rise in the percentage of readership as the huge number of publishers and distributors of books and periodicals in English that have emerged of late would reveal. The language has not died out in India but survived and prevailed in indigenous artistry.

In the context of Indians writing in English, as with many others in their regional languages as well, the process of coming to terms with tradition and the contemporary towards developing an indigenous sensibility has indeed been a large and complex historical process, which has evolved through a variety of phases. I have been able to discern four major phases in this trajectory, that are obvious and, for the main, largely accepted: the first phase is one of complete subservience and intellectual slavery, the second one of total defiance and a falling back on desperate nativity and national identity, the third a sort of internationalism and universalisation (*sadharanikarana*), and the last, almost concurrent with the third, one of creative integration. These are of course, generalized views and as such are not strict compartments; there are overlappings, anticipations, and retrospective movements as well. However, this way of mapping out the geography of Indian Writing in English, I believe, certainly has its advantages, especially when one approaches the terrain for the first time. In the history of this literature as with any other, there have also been phases of experimentation with content as well as form. For a language that has been implanted from a different locale and culture, and that which has been absorbed and assimilated by a once-colonized mind, writing in the English language in India exhibits a dramatic and dynamic history. It has also generated a whole new tradition fully immersed

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in indigenous values and culture. Writers of the stature of Gandhi and Nehru with their clear-cut prose, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao with their sheer individualized imaginative recreations of characters, locale and territory, Kamala Das and Nissim Ezekiel with their poetic voices, as well as the new generations of post colonials like Arundhati Roy who has been able to carve out a nativised idiom and language, have in their own individualized ways grappled with a living tradition while constantly renewing their tryst with modernity. In many ways too writers in the English language have concurrently struggled with their generative roots and inborn tensions similar to the ones confronted by their contemporaries writing in the regional languages. Perhaps, English language literature in India does have an edge over the others in terms of its comparatively easy marketability and reach overseas. I shall deal with this issue later.

### III

“Indian Writing in English,” wrote M.K.Naik, “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.” (M.K.Naik,p.1). 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. Postcolonial 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 subcontinent through its strategic deployment of such culture shocks. As we gather from Naik’s generalized statement, playing the Indian’s distorted psyche against its own self-styled superior order and culture, the British, unconsciously though at first, set in motion a new literature of the

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subject race. The birth of Indian writing in English could be traced to this paradox of

subjectivity and reclamation of the self.

Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in his, *An Autobiography* (1947)

I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. Perhaps my thoughts and approach to life are more akin to what is called Western than Eastern, but India clings to me as she does to all her children, in innumerable ways... I cannot get rid of that past inheritance or my recent acquisitions... I am a stranger and an alien in the West. I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile's feeling.

But much before Nehru felt this sort of alienation in terms of a national identity, Indian intellectuals of the early part of the nineteenth century were compelled by the pressures of the colonial propulsion to subject their own selves to the superior civilizing culture of their colonial masters. They were branded with the need to de-school themselves and build up a newer Western identity. Thus the reformist zeal of a Raja Ram Mohun Roy or a Vidyasagar could be accounted for by this compulsive colonial ideology. Alongside Macaulay's celebrated Minutes that drastically waved aside everything Indian as hardly of any worth, while simultaneously highlighting the civilizing force of everything English, Raja Ram Mohun Roy, gave a highhanded call to Indians to learn and master the English language. The need of the hour was felt to be a collective purging of the ill effects of a dormant and static culture coupled with a grafting of the Western culture and value systems on to the thus uncontaminated tree of Indian life. Of course the coloniser's intent remained distinct from the colonial's in this regard. K.N. Panikkar points out

The nineteenth century intellectuals were firm believers in the efficacy of enlightenment as a panacea. They traced the source of all ills in Indian society,

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including religious superstition and social obscurantism, to the general ignorance of the people. The dissemination of knowledge, therefore, occupied a central place in their programme of reform. Their ideas on education were different both in purpose and detail from the educational policy of the colonial rulers. While dissemination of the colonial ideology and utility for administrative needs were the main objectives of the educational policy of the British government, the educational programme of the Indian intellectuals was oriented to the regeneration of the country. (p.8-9)

As for the creative writers of this formative period, there was but one obvious option – to write in the “more elite” language, and find their continuities in the great English literary tradition. They easily succumbed to the prescriptive role played by English literary canons and thus the earliest Indian writers in English were more Anglo than Indian in that sense. Perhaps for them the second category never existed—for a non-English identity would have necessitated an ejection of a *civilized* image which was the last thing they wanted. Therefore, we have in these writings a double struggle: a struggle to find a different harmony and a struggle to infuse the English muse to accept and bless. The writers who could represent the first phase of colonial writing would be: Henry Derozio (1809-31) whom Iyengar dubs: “the marvelous boy who perished in his prime,” (p.40) Kashiprasad Ghose (1809-73), Toru Dutt (1856-77) [ “Beauty and tragedy and fatality crisscrossed in the life of Toru Dutt, and it is difficult, when talking about her poetry, to make any nice distinction between poetry and what C.S.Lewis would call ‘poetolatory.’—Iyengar p.55] and Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-73). It was natural for them to tune unto the nightingale's throat and gather the sheaves of the great British bards. They let themselves be most profoundly influenced by the nineteenth century Romantics.

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#### IV

It is certainly one of the noted paradoxes of history that the English language, originally the most powerful weapon of colonization would prove to be the equally powerful weapon of decolonisation in the hands of a few Indian litterateurs. It is now a recognized fact that the study of English literature stimulated literary creations in many Indian languages too. Notably in Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Gujarathi. Even newer literary forms like the novel were incorporated into other regional writings. In a similar manner there was the incorporation of Indian narratives into the English language writings. Most ambitious writers moved from the easily accessible lyrical form into the most complex *mahakavyas*. Almost every writer of any consequence has attempted a longer narrative in English. This however brought in a paradigm shift. The transition from the first docile phase to one of violent nationalism and self-willed individual identity is certainly a shift in sensibilities. The second discernable phase begins roughly from a point of speculative intersection—a meeting and passing of three phenomenal men of vision—in 1893 Sri Aurobindo set sail for India after his Cambridge exposure, the same year that Vivekananda set forth to preach his gospel of man-making to the Parliament of World's Religions, and Gandhi set off on his South African journey in pursuit of a career in law. Their vessels might have perhaps crossed. Anyway their destinies most certainly crossed. After the fateful First War of Indian Independence in 1857, Indians were undergoing a period of political and cultural fermentation. And now a new resurgent nationalism came into being. This forms the hallmark of the second phase of Indian writing in English too. In finally managing to free themselves from the cultural smokescreen of British colonialism, the Indian writers in English of this period take up a most ferociously

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defensive stance rooted in Indianness and Nationality. Condemned to be tongue-tied in English, the writer seeks a new voice conceived in the rich heritage and tradition of his motherland.

Me from her lotus heaven Saraswati

Has called to regions of eternal snow

And Ganges pacing to the southern sea,

Ganges upon whose shores the flowers of Eden blow. (Sri Aurobindo, *Envoi*)

Elsewhere Sri Aurobindo remarked that when the educated youth of Bengal bowed their learned heads at the feet of the childlike saint of Dakshineswar, Indian literary renaissance had begun (see *The Renaissance in India*, 1920). Nationalistic fervour gave more than sufficient impetus to a surge of creative activity—Indian poetry in English had started to breathe and come into its own. Non-fictional prose and fictional narratives underwent drastic political fermentation, and Indian drama in English began to make its presence felt. Although Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) would never have made any claims to be a writer in English, the coveted Nobel prize conferred on him in 1913, for his rough translation of *Gitanjali*, accord him a significant place among the writers in English. Tagore's was a vision founded on individual and universal levels at the same time. His ideal of a *viswamanava* was rooted in Indian culture and the Upanishadic tradition. Lines like

Where the mind is without fear and head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way in to the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

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Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action—  
Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake...  
ushered in a new sensibility that was at the same time not too foreign to the Celtic mind.  
No wonder W.B. Yeats showered praises on these fragments:

I have carried the manuscript of these translations with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on top of omnibuses and in restaurants and I have often had to close it lest some stranger should see how much it moved me. These lyrics... display in their thought a world I have dreamt of all my lifelong... As the generations pass, travelers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth. At every moment the heart of this poet flows outward to these without derogation or condescension, for it has known that they will understand; and it has filled itself with the circumstances of their lives. ( W.B. Yeats on Tagore's *Gitanjali*, see Iyengar, p.162)

Tagore identified himself with his bardic role, wrote primarily in Bengali, and remained an aesthete till his death, quite unlike his contemporary Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), who vanished like a meteor in the politically charged air only to reappear in the isolation of Pondicherry. The turn of the century produced the most disarmingly nationalistic of writings ever in the English language by Indians, while the long shadow of these two giants fill the literary scene. It may not be out of place here to venture to say that the oppressive burden of the English language together with its retinue of imperialistic cultural devices compelled the Indian psyche to "awaken" and seek total identity with what was considered at best Indian. While Tagore pursued the melodious strain of Baul mysticism, Sri Aurobindo sought the sublime in the Vedic and Tantric sources. Tagore's was a movement  
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towards the lyrical while the Aurobindian lean was towards the epic. Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, that like Goethe's *Faust* took about fifty years in the making, needs to be seen as the culmination of the nineteenth century spirit of synthesis and spiritual enterprise. *Savitri*, running into 23813 lines in three parts with 12 books and 49 cantos is presumably the longest single poem in the English language. I believe that this stupendous epic of multiple-spiritual dimensions, would characteristically reflect the entire epoch's psyche. Taking for its central theme the well-known tale of Satyavan and Savitri as narrated in the *Mahabharata* (*Vana Parva*) the poem has been transmuted into a modern Indian mahakavya in the line of Vyasa and Valmiki by the poet who made its poetic treatment an integral part of his life. (For a more detailed and an in-depth study of this epic poem see my *The Mantra of Vision: An Overview of Sri Aurobindo's Poetry*, Delhi: B.R., 1998 and *Sri Aurobindo's Aesthetics and Poetics: New Directions*. Delhi: Authorspress, 2014). However, it is equally unfortunate that the Indian Renaissance set into movement by the great nationalist awakening and pioneered by the spiritual luminaries, who for the most part, chose to write in the coloniser's language, should have been curtailed in midflight and not allowed to flourish the full circle towards its natural culmination. The post-Independence condition after 1947 was one rather of exuberance and irony in an equal measure than any soul-searching for individual values or national ethos. In fact after the political withdrawal of the British there was felt scant need for any further nationalizing spirit. What was required was an assessment and a looking back at the immediate past.

My tongue in English chains,  
I return, after a generation, to you.  
I am at the end  
Of my Dravidic tether...

(R.Parthasarathy, “*Exile*”)

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The force that woke a nation from two hundred years of lethargy and shook it to its very foundation petered into the mere baseless vainglory of the self confronted by the imported European modernist tropes and a new poetics liberally transplanted from the West. Modernism in Indian literatures did not develop out of any historical necessity but was intellectually incorporated as an aesthetic strategy, and hence lacked in natural vigour and creative energy to sustain itself. As for any nativised experience and indigeness, the post independence phase was more keen on breaking away barriers of all sorts than on negotiating such vital and crucial questions. For the pressing need for asserting one's cultural integrity was lost and now what appeared as desirable was to reach across to new cultures and continents in one's own right.

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In the transition from the nationalist to the post Independence phase, Indian English Fiction evolved a great deal, alongside non-fictional prose. M.K.Naik in his *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982) has chosen to entitle an entire chapter “The Gandhian Whirlwind- 1920-1947”. The withdrawal from the political sphere of both Balagangadhar Tilak and Sri Aurobindo, in the first decade of the twentieth century set the arena ready for the entry of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi fresh from his *satyagraha* triumph in South Africa. Political writing drew immense strength from the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence and soul-force, and Gandhi himself wrote in a deceptively simple English which had begun by then to achieve a national character.

What I shall do here would be to briefly site a comparison between the writing of Gandhi and Nehru—both unique instances of an Indian English style. It would be worthwhile to remember that both Gandhi and Nehru had their tremendous political images and hence

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their influence lay far beyond the mere literary. The men themselves were the influence. Their message was embedded in their life styles.

We read in Gandhi's introduction to *My Experiments with Truth* (1940):

The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him. Only then, and not till then, will we have a glimpse of truth. (xi)

This is a kind of humility that the Mahatma practiced in his own life. Nehru on the other hand was a pragmatist and towards the end of his *The Discovery of India*, we read:

Every culture has certain values attached to it, limited and conditioned by that culture. The people governed by that culture takes these values for granted and attribute a permanent validity to them. So the values of our present day culture may not be permanent and final; nevertheless they have an essential importance for us for they represent the thought and spirit of the age we live in. A few seers and geniuses, looking into the future, may have a completer vision of humanity and the universe; they are of the vital stuff out of which all real advance comes. The vast majority of people do not even catch up to the present-day values, though they may talk about them in the jargon of the day, and they live imprisoned in the past. (4th ed. London: Meridian, 1956.p. 573)

Suffice it to say that it is the combined vision of both these men that engineered the emergent postcolonial India. They were not *literary* in their writings and neither attempted the creative variety of writing, but their influence in the imagination of a people was so overpowering and far-reaching. More specially the influence of Gandhi reached deep down into the psyche, so much so that the greatest period of Indian fiction in English falls

under his shadow. The much acclaimed Indian trio—Mulk Raj Anand (b.1905), R.K.Narayan(b.1907) and Raja Rao(b.1908 )—were and continue to be , hard-core Gandhians, while they trace, each in his own individualistic manner, the graph of Indian

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fiction in English. Anand's fiction has been shaped by what he himself calls," the double burden on my shoulders, the Alps of the European tradition and the Himalayas of the Indian past." (Quoted by Naik, p. 155) His is a fiction drawn from the dregs of life, of Dostoevskian scale, of the insulted and the humiliated. Among the three, Anand's style is direct and less embellished, and his influence on regional literatures has been deep. For R.K. Narayan his fictional *Malgudi* affords a locale to explore and create variations on an indigenous scale; his characters are life-like, and many, like Swami, most refreshingly endearing. Narayan's narratives are like "the boy's will," fresh and free. Of the trio, Raja Rao is more philosophically and theoretically sophisticated. His concerns are also deeper and more intense than the other two. In his forward to *Kanthapura* (1938), Raja Rao writes: We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

Raja Rao gives utterance to the self-reflexivity of the Indian writer of English when he says that: "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own." This self-consciousness distinguishes his style and narrative. His passionate attachment to the Indian soil has been sharpened by his long self-chosen exile. Perhaps it is the distance that has emboldened his vision. Very much like the sensibility that shaped these writers, the form and style of their work, although couched in "a language that is not their own," thoroughly impinges on the Indian.

## VI

The writers who followed in the trail of the trio succeeded in keeping up the momentum of the Gandhian whirlwind. Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgoker, Kamala Markhandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee...the list of successful writers is endless. Perceptibly enough the woman's

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voice in Indian writing is most striking. The work of Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala especially ushers in a fresh sensibility to the sphere of Indians writing in English. The thematic and stylistic contours of this field are broadening day by day.

During the last three decades there has been a wild spate of publishing fiction in this country and so much of it has been marketed successfully overseas. After the phenomenal success of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, many Indian critics and columnists have taken upon themselves the role of investigators keying up to seek out the reason why Indian writers in English draw raving reviews and are quite successful in UK and the US while at home they hardly get noticed and often enough are severely discredited and derided. The reason, many Indian critics maintain, is precisely because much of the recent Indian English fiction fits in well with the west's preconceived notions of India, that so much praise is lavished on it by western critics. Either way, whether it is seemingly because of the big money involved in book business or whether there is a tremendous lack of knowledge about India in the West, the successful Indian writers in English often get the cold shoulder from their regional counterparts. Added to that is the sort of scalding remark regarding regional writing that a successful writer of the stature of Salman Rushdie makes in his now famous (or infamous?) Introduction to the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997* ( edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, London: Vintage,1997), that "the prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction—created in this period by Indian writers



working in English, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 official languages of India, the so called *vernacular languages*, during the same time; and indeed, this new and still burgeoning , Indo-Anglian literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books.” Such a claim, at the outset, certainly would go to the extent of proving only

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Rushdie’s own ignorance of the rest of India, however, the fact that such a claim could be made for a literature that has such a short history is something worthy of consideration. The Indian writer in English is not a creature from Mars or Jupiter, but just another writer using a different Indian language ! Because of the vagaries of India’s colonial history, English has developed to such an immeasurable magnitude in our country that we have to realize that we have given rise to a whole generation of men and women who speak in English, dream in English and write in English. How could we call them anything other than Indians like the rest of us?

As a unique instance of the postcolonial self-reflexive use of the language I shall but site the dedication that Arundhati Roy has given at the beginning of her book: “*To my mother who grew me up*”! Suffice it to say that this English is something that has been abrogated and appropriated to suit to the Indian say! We have indeed come a long way from *Matthew Arnold in a Sari*. Look, we have come through!

## VII

The new generation of writers who were born in the 1950-s and who followed Salman Rushdie, have ushered in a new phase of Indian fiction. What marks off these writers – Amitabh Ghose with his *Circle of Reason* and *The Shadow Lines*, Allan Sealey with his *Trotter Nama*, Upamanyu Chatterjee with his *English, August*, Shashi Tharoor with his *The Great Indian Novel*, and Vikram Seth with his *Golden Gate* and *The Suitable Boy*, is their peculiarity and distinctive otherness from all others and from each other as well. In our post technological world, the writer has long proclaimed her/his freedom and the political boundaries of state and country are simply privileged to survive on account of economic and administrative purposes. The sources of literature could never be kept at

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bay from any writer of any nationality, creed or culture. Now more than ever this process of reaching across cultures seems to prevail. Myth, legend, region, religion, symbol and image – all are ready for appropriation and marketing. Region and language proffer no disadvantage for the contemporary writer. In this phase of the Indian English writer the problems of the East-West encounter that so agitated earlier generations just do not exist. Such problems, according to a present day academic, “were constructed, the differences lay in peoples perceptions, and this generation belongs to the united urban world-- moving with ease from hamburgers at the Golden Gate to ice-cream at the India Gate.”

( “Really Imagined”, *Seminar*, 384, August 1991, p.23). We sure have come a long way from the first generation of Indian writers in English who had found it quite hard to distinguish between Anglo-Indian and Indo-Anglian. The postcolonial Indian is confronted with a vast library of books in English, published by Indians—books better in appearance, editing, proof reading, production, marketing and publicity.

## VII

There has been an unbroken tradition of poetic productivity in the English language in India for more than a hundred years now, and quite a lot has withstood and would easily stand the test of time still. The post-Independence phase which came too soon to supplant the earlier generation came on the wings of irony and equivocation. The sublime was lost sight of too soon and the ordinary and the commonplace became the objects of poetic quest. When Nissim Ezekiel sharpened his wits against the jagged edges of self-doubt and selfexile,

calling out for a “time to change,” P.Lal transcreated the great Indian epics and established the Writers Workshop for new Indian writing. His *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry: An Anthology and a Credo*, that he edited along with Raghavendra Rao, came out 19

in 1959. However, ambitious in scope and possibility it was, the anthology set the tone and temper of post Independence poetry. While R.Parthsarathy sought rough passage from England to India, to his roots, A.K.Ramanujan sought to interpret the interior landscape of Tamil and Kannada Poetry and frame a newer poetics from those. Ramanujan’s *Speaking of Siva, Hymns for the Drowning*, and *Poems of Love and War*, are in many ways reflective of the process of his coming to terms with his racial burden. Professionally trained as a linguist, Ramanujan’s insight into Indian folk and poetic narrative combined with his skill at translating from the Indian languages remains yet unmatched. Adil Jussawala, Dom Moraes, Gieve Patel, Keki N. Daruwalla, Aru Kolatkar and Jayanta Mahapatra are among the many successful poets of our times. Freed from the colonial burden as well as any compulsive need to build upon an existing and alien culture or even to counter any such oppressive tradition, these poets show no anxiety of influence. The English they use is riddled with its Indianness, the images they create are built on the strong edifice of a multilingual

culture. In his Introduction to his *New Writing in India*, (Penguin, 1974) Adil Jussawala wrote:

...it is one of India’s linguistic ironies that although the influence of the English language cannot be denied, and although a number of writers who write in the Indian languages teach, or have taught English literature at various colleges in India, contemporary writing in Britain has ceased to have much meaning for them....Perhaps the reason for the move away from British writing is not political. Indians will respond to a writer like William Golding but not to Allan Sillitoe. Still attracted to literature with a metaphysical or philosophical content, the Indian gravitates naturally to such European and Latin American writers as Voznesensky, Pablo Neruda, Borges, and Gunter Grass...It is no accident that the most potent foreign influences on Indian writing today are Camus, Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Sartre. (p.27)

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The Indian poet in English cohabits the same world of his contemporaries who write in the regional languages, and shares their anguish and anxieties. In the history of Indian English poetry, as I have pointed out earlier, there exists two major modes—one of the sublime as in the poetry of Sri Aurobindo and the other of the equivocal and conversational as in the poetry of Ezekiel and P.Lal. It is in Jayanta Mahapatra – the Physics professor turned poet from the state of Orissa—that these two contrary modes cease to be separate and opposing and integrate into one wholesome Indian poetic mode. Mahapatra’s Orissa, the Kalings of yore, the Mahanadi, the Jagannatha Temple and the Sun Temple at Konark, all speak through his verses. One is unsure whether his lines are couched in the English that Yeats and Eliot wrote in, or in his native tongue. He is undebatably the harbinger of the most fecund, holistic and integral phase of Indian writing.

The great tradition of Indian writing in English has in its evolutionary process, revealed the unconscious pulsations of the Indian creative psyche, in a remarkable degree of cohesiveness and integrity. That has certainly been its greatest achievement and value.

It now remains for the newer generation of poets to find their own voice.

In this short analysis of the origins, growth and development of Indian Writing in English I have been for the most guided by my own personal leanings, bias and of course, availability of sources. I have taken care to highlight the major writers, their prominence

adjudged solely from their publications and popularity. But then, is one justified in making value-judgements based solely on success at publishing and marketing alone? What about the less fortunate who do have great potential talent but who do not have the clout to get into the limelight? Perhaps when newer anthologies are brought out greater care would go into the excavation of such marginalized and silenced. Or at least newer publishers will dare take a chance with lesser known writers. If my introductions instigate sufficient interest in the field then I guess this modest effort will be justified.

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