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A succinct overview of the evolution of Indian English Literature

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Abstract: This article offers a concise outline of the evolution of Indian English Literature from its colonial origin to its present position in global literary discourse. Indian English literature underwent significant transformations, reflecting the historical, cultural, socio-political and intellectual reorientation of the subcontinent. The study presents the post-independence explosion of varied voices underscoring significant literary movements, thematic concerns like nationalism, diaspora, hybridity and modernity with distinctive narrative approaches. Indian English Literature has continuously redefined itself across generations with groundbreaking stylistic innovations. With this brief analysis, this paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the genre's aesthetic, intellectual and cultural importance within the comprehensive framework of postcolonial and world literature.

Key words: Literary Evolution, Narrative approaches, Post Colonial Studies, Diaspora, Cultural Identity, Tradition and Modernity.

Introduction

Along with global literature, Indian English writing stands as a vibrant and dynamic strand by offering rich, diverse and insightful descriptions that attracted the attention of the global readers. The beginning of Indian English fiction from its colonial genesis to its current status clearly demonstrates its spirit and pliability. It emerged overtime resembling the societal transformation in India and the rest of the world. The English Education, introduced through Macaulay's Minutes paved the way for a class of English educated Indians who began writing in the colonizer's language. Born out of colonial encounters and shaped by a myriad of socio-cultural forces, Indian English fiction has developed into a dynamic field that articulates the tensions between colonizer and colonized, tradition and modernity and regionalism and cosmopolitanism. It has become a powerful tool of expression for Indian sensibilities, meticulously representing Indian history, identity and nationhood. This article examines some of the prominent contributions, significant phases, socio-economic contexts and thematic preoccupations that have collectively shaped the esteemed status on the global literary canon.



The Early Phase – Pre-1857-1900

The early contributions to Indian English Literature were although initially marginalized, later they set the foundational values and they are now increasingly acknowledged as the key aspect in bringing recognition to the global literary stage for their pioneering role and hybrid literary synthesis. Writers like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Toru Dutt have significantly contributed to this formative period, amalgamating Indian sensibilities with Western literary forms.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, considered to be the first Indian poet to write in English with a unique reformist tone. He promoted rationalism and youthful rebellion and challenged orthodox social practices. In his works like *To India* and *My Native Land*, he emphasized enlightenment ideals with patriotic fervor and a zeal for India's past glory.

Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a pioneer, who initiated the fusion of Indian themes with Western literary forms, leaving a powerful indelible mark on Bengali literature and early Indian English. His writings often draw upon heroic narratives and Indian mythology in order to proclaim a proud national identity.

Bankim Chatterjee, a trailblazer in the early phase of Indian English literature. He is the first architect to integrate Western literary forms with Indian ethos. His one and only English novel *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), is notable for being the first and foremost Indian novel in English. Bankim Chandra's contribution remains noteworthy for introducing a literary tradition that blends resistance with renaissance.

Toru Dutt, the first Indian women poet who brought a unique lyrical depth and intellectualistic maturity to early Indian English literature. Though she lived a short life, she produced a worth mentioning poetry and translations that reflect the themes of nostalgia, exile and cultural memory. Her contribution continues to be indispensable in establishing a feminine presence in the early era of early Indian English writing.

Pre Independence Phase– 1900-1947

Pre-Independence contributions (1900-1947) in Indian English literature witnessed a surge in nationalist voices and Socio-political themes. Writers of this period like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Sarojini Naidu employed English to demonstrate India's struggle for freedom and identity. This period established a solid foundation for post-colonial Indian writing in English.



Rabindranath Tagore is the first Asian Nobel laureate in literature. He played a prominent role in modelling early Indian English literature by imparting it with spiritual depth and philosophical introspection. In his works, he often employs the ancient Indian wisdom while also integrating contemporary global ideas. His works such as *The Home and The World* and *Gora* Tagore examined nationalism, identity and the ethical dilemmas of modern life through nuanced narration and meticulous depiction of characters.

Sri Aurobindo, a literary luminary, whose works are an integration of mysticism and philosophical thought created a profound literary vision. His writings, particularly his essays and poetry, explored the themes of spiritual evolution and the divine potential of humanity. In works like *Savithri*, an epic poem of spiritual and cosmic dimensions, he employed English as a channel to convey India's spiritual heritage and its relevance to modern life. His pivotal contribution established literature as a means of national awakening and inner transformation

Sarojini Naidu famously known as the 'Nightingale of India,' brought lyrical grace and cultural richness to Indian English poetry. Her poems reflect the themes of social reform and nationalism while simultaneously celebrating nature, Indian traditions and feminine strength. Being a political leader as well as a poet, she brought literary expression and unyielding protest against colonial rule. Her eloquent and elegant use of English lent dignity to national identity through her literary expression and political activism.

Post Independence Phase - 1947 – 1970's

Pre-Independence Indian English literature (1947-1970) marked a shift from colonial concerns of subjugation and control to nation-building, socio-political reconstruction and identity formation. Writers of this era such as Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh, Nayanthara Sahgal, Kamala Das and Anita Desai continued to explore the Indian themes with reinvigorated cultural confidence. This era witnessed the strengthening of the Indian English novel as a serious literary form. The literary discourse of this period was characterized by realism and cultural transformations (Bahri, 2001).

Mulk Raj Anand, a radical voice who initiated social realism as a powerful literary genre to expose the stark realities of caste, poverty and oppression in colonial India. His writings were firmly rooted in empathy for the poor and marginalized community of the society. Anand in his novels such as *Untouchable* and *Coolie* portrayed the decline of human dignity, caste discrimination and economic exploitation with grim reality. His literary



legacy marked a striking shift from romanticism to realism, thereby substantiating literature as a medium for social reformation.

R.K.Narayan stands as a foundation stone for Indian English fiction. He is famously known for his light hearted humor and evocative storytelling. His creation of the fictitious town Malgudi, became a microcosm of Indian life. His narratives, was marked by gentle satire and simplicity. In *Malgudi Days* and *Guide*, R. K. Narayan skillfully blended realism with irony, capturing the cultural shift and ethical ambiguities of pre and post-independence India. Narayan gave Indian English literature an exceptional identity, through his idiosyncratic tone.

Raja Rao is an iconic figure in Indian English literature. He is a pioneer in philosophical fiction that combines Indian metaphysics with Western narrative forms. Vedanta and Gandhian thought greatly influenced his works. He explored themes of spiritual quest and the intricacies of colonial and post-colonial consciousness. In *Kanthapura* he depicted the influence of freedom struggle on a south Indian village employing Indianized English that resonated oral traditions and mythical features. Raja Rao's literary output gave Indian English fiction both stylistic authenticity and spiritual depth.

Kushwant Singh is a renowned figure, known for his satirical fiction, sharp wit and keen social commentary. His works often examined the complexities of post-independence Indian society, addressing the issues like politics, religious tensions and corruption with a frank irrelevant tone. In novels such as *The Company of Women* and *Train to Pakistan*, Kushwant Singh portrayed the tragedies of partition and the intricacies of human relationship with psychological complexity and critical insight. Defined by humor and uncompromising realism, his writings played a key role in shaping modern Indian literature, addressing social issues while maintaining literary approachability

Nayanthara Sahgal is an iconic figure in Indian English literature. She is celebrated for her politically engaged realist fiction that explores power, freedom, and women's status in postcolonial contexts. Sahgal critiques corruption, authoritarianism and gender responsibilities in her works *Storm in Chandigarh* and *Rich Like Us*. She is gifted with acute political consciousness, establishing her one of the most courageous voices in Indian English literature.

Kamala Das is a prominent personality, distinguished by her bold exploration of sexuality and female autonomy. Her works, often characterized by raw emotion and confessional intimacy that delves into the intricacies of the female experience, capturing the themes of love, search for self-identity and longing disillusionment. In her poetry *Summer in Calcutta* and novel *Alphabet of Lust* she surpassed the limitations of conventional Indian literature in exploring the complexities of gender and desire. Das remarkably expanded the scope of Indian English literature, establishing it as a space for unapologetic self-expression, through her intensely sensitive depiction of human relationships.

Anita Desai is an influential literary persona, acclaimed for her psychological and introspective nuanced fiction that explored the psychological depth of women and the emotional intricacies of human relationships. In novels like *Fire on the Mountain* and *Cry the peacock*, she portrayed female protagonists struggling with loneliness, selfhood and memory in a rapid transforming world. Her works marked a significant transition from social realism to psychological realism in post-independence Indian fiction. Anita Desai reinterpreted the scope and sensitivity of Indian English writing, particularly from a feminine perspective with her narrative artistry.

Modern and Experimental Phase – 1970 – 1990's

The era between 1970 and 1990's, signaled a transition towards modernist and experimental writing styles. The writers of this period explored fragmented narratives, urban alienation and psychological depth. The writers like Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolhatkar, Sashi Deshpande, Shobhaa De, Salman Rushdie of this era introduced new ideas in language, themes and style in their works. This period witnessed the elaboration of literary boundaries, embracing of individualistic expression and postmodern techniques.

Nissim Ezekiel, the Father of Modern English poetry is distinguished by his elegant precision and urban realism. In his poems *The Exact Name* and *Unfinished Man*, Ezekiel examines the theme of identity, alienation, and search for meaning in a rapidly transforming India. He attributed a signature voice to Indian poetry anchored in every day experience with opulent literary finesse.

Arun Kolatkar is a trailblazer in Indian English poetry. He is known for his modernistic style and vivacious portrayal of spiritual and urban life. His monumental collection *Jeruri* captures the polarities of faith and modernity through minute and acute verse. He employs colloquial language that often amalgamates the routine



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and ritual existential themes. His efforts lie in making poetry contemporary, accessible and deeply ingrained in Indian experience.

Shashi Deshpande is one of the prominent voices in Indian English literature, is famous for her contemplative feminine fiction that subtly examines the inner worlds and psychological depths of Indian women. Her works often delves into the themes of gender disparity, familial expectation and tension between cultural norms and personal aspirations. In her works *The Dark Holds No Terror* and *That Long Silence*, she depicts women protagonists struggling for autonomy and emotional restraint within patriarchal society. She has enriched the literary field through providing genuine voice to middle-class women, opposing conventional roles and underscoring the intricacies of womanhood in present society.

Shobhaa De, a radical and influential figure, known for her urban fiction that examines the themes of gender and sexuality. Her works *Starry Nights* and *Socialite Evenings*, depicts the lives of elite and middle class women traverse identity, love and ambition in modern Indian society. She also challenges the traditional norms around morality and marriage. Shobhaa De's contribution lies in bringing popular fiction into the mainstream of literature and also strengthening of modern Indian woman's voice with uncompromising truth.

Salman Rushdie is a transformative thinker, who is best remembered for his inventive magical realism and multi-layered intellectual narratives that combine personal identity with history. In his works *Midnight Children* and *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie adeptly blends myth with contemporary issues, that challenge selfhood, religion, and conventional beliefs of nationality. Rushdie's works redefined the existing narrative style, expanded thematic scope and brought Indian English literature to unprecedented world attention. Hence, critics often view Indian English fiction as 'before Rushdie' and 'after Rushdie'.

Contemporary and Global Phase 1990's to Present:

The contemporary and global phase signaled a surge in global recognition for Indian English authors exploring transnational identities and diasporic experiences. Globalisation, migration, cultural dislocation and hybridity are the dominant themes of this phase. Writers like Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Jeet Thayil, Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Chetan Bhagat, Arvind Adiga etc won worldwide recognition for their nuanced portrayals.



Vikram Seth is a distinguished figure, renowned for his narrative flexibility across genres. His masterwork *A Suitable Boy* offers an expansive portrayal of post-Independence India's cultural and socio-political landscapes through nuanced characterization and intricate narrative detailing. Seth's role lies in elevating Indian English writing to world literary standards through his artistic acumen and a profound connection with human relationships.

Amitav Ghosh is an influential persona in Indian English fiction. He is popular for his exploration of colonialism, migration, environmental predicaments and thorough research on historical fiction. His works *The Shadow Lines* and *Ibis Trilogy* dexterously weave the personal stories with global histories, navigating the borders between fact and fiction. Ghosh is instrumental in expanding Indian English fiction, making a striking balance between universally significant narratives and cultural specificity.

Jeet Thayil is a unique voice in Indian English literature, famously known for producing unflinching experimental style. Trauma, addiction and the complexities of modern urban life are some of the themes he often explores. Thayil's debut novel *Narcopolis*, delves into Mumbai's underworld drug culture, offering a surreal portrayal of societal degeneration. Jeet Thayil's writing is defined by courageousness, stream of consciousness narrative technique that challenges conventional storytelling. His efforts lie in presenting a gritty perspective to Indian English literature, in addressing the taboo subjects with emotional intensity.

Arundhati Roy, a Booker prize winner, acclaimed for her strong political consciousness and lyrical prose. In her debutant novel *The God of Small Things*, which won her global recognition, Roy blends the broader themes like caste, social injustice and gender with personal trauma. Arundhati Roy in her works critiques the structural inequalities while examining the ephemeral beauty of human relationships. She has enriched the place of Indian English literature on the global stage through integrating of artistic brilliance with political activism.

Amit Chaudhuri is a distinguished contemporary writer, notable for his subtle, nuanced introspective poetic prose that explores the intricacies of middle-class life in urban setting. His writing style is often characterized by close attention to mundane details of ordinary everyday existence. In his novels *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Freedom Song*, Chaudhuri masterfully portrays the intersection of tradition and modernity, the cultural spaces, and regional sensibility in his works.



Jhumpa Lahiri a much celebrated literary persona, famous for her nuanced exploration of identity, migration, diaspora and cultural displacement. In her works *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*, Lahiri subtly portray the realist emotional sensibilities of Indian immigrants traversing life between two worlds one the homeland and the other the host land. Lahiri's prose demonstrates an elegance, evoking the complexities of intergenerational conflict and alienation. She plays a key role in elevating the Indian diasporic experience to global attention.

Kiran Desai is the most influential voice, distinguished by her insightful depiction of globalization, migration and fractured identities. The Booker prize winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, explores the emotional and cultural dislocation experienced by individuals in Postcolonial India as well as in the West. Kiran Desai's writings are a combination of sharp social commentary and poetic elegance. Through her complex narratives, Desai has prominently contributed in elegantly expanding the global reach of Indian English fiction.

Chetan Bhagat, a commercially successful writer, is popular for his youth centric fiction. Love, ambition and societal ascent are his recurrent themes. Chetan Bhagat's out spoken prose and his emphasis on contemporary issues have made him one of the most influential writers of India. His novels *Five Point Someone* and *2 States* attract large readership, particularly young readers who are navigating the challenges of present-day life. Chetan Bhagat brought a widely appreciated popular dimension to Indian English fiction (Bhagat, 2004, 2009).

Aravind Adiga, a significant contemporary figure, is known for his incisive social commentary. Adiga's writing adeptly blends reality with satire and his characters traverse a world marked by inequality and moral ambiguity. *The White Tiger*, Adiga's debut Booker Prize winning novel offers a gritty look at the India's, class division corruption and the struggles of the marginal sector of the society (Adiga,2008). Adiga, through his provocative writing style offers socio-political lens on the nation's transforming landscape.

Conclusion

To conclude, the evolution and growth of Indian English literature has been shaped by wide-ranging contribution from numerous authors who have brought unique richness and global acclaim. Originating from earliest exponents like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore, whose works paved the way for literary exploration to contemporary writers from Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, the saga of Indian English literature has traversed several stylistic and cultural innovations marked by consistency and

transformation. Be it through Mulk Raj Anand's social realism or R. K. Narayan's satire or the panorama of present-day urban realities of Vikram Seth and Jeet Thayil, these writers have employed English language to surpass cultural boundaries and unveil the interwoven complexities of Indian society.

| Name of the Writer | Type of Genre | Notable Works | Themes Employed |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|---|--|
| Henry Louis Vivian Derozia | Poetry | The Fakeer of Jungheera | Nationalism, Reformist Zeal, Romanticism |
| Michael Madhusudan Dutt | Epic Poetry | Meghnad Badh Kavya | Cultural Fusion Mythological reinterpretation |
| Bankim Chandra Chatterjee | Novel | RajMohan's Wife | Social reform, Cultural identity, Nationalism |
| Toru Dutt | Poetry | A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields | Nostalgia, Cross cultural identity |
| Rabindranath Tagore | Poetry, Short Stories, Novel | Geethanjali, Gora, The Home and the World | Spirituality, Tradition Vs Modernity, Humanism |
| Sri Aurobindo | Poetry | Savithri | Mysticism, Spirituality |
| Sarojini Naidu | Poetry | The Golden Threshold | Patriotism, Lyricism Indian Culture |
| Mulk Raj Anand | Social Realism | Coolie, Untouchable | Human dignity, Caste system, Exploitation |
| R.K.Narayan | Satire, Fiction | Malgudi Days The Guide | Humor, Indian middle class, Everyday life |
| Raja Rao | Philosophical fiction | Kanthapura, Serpent and the Rope | Cultural roots Independence Movement |
| Kushwant Singh | Fiction | Train to Pakistan | Secularism, Patriotism, Realism |
| Nayantara Sahgal | Fiction | A Time to be Happy | Feminism, Politics |
| Kamala Das | Poetry, Short Stories, Novel | Summer in Calcutta My Story | Identity, Female Sexuality |
| Anita Desai | Philosophical fiction | Cry the Peacock, Clear Light of Day | Family dynamics, Feminine identity, Alienation |
| Nissim Ezekiel | Poetry | A Time to Change | Modernism, Urban life, irony |

| | | | |
|-----------------|---|---|---|
| Arun Kolatkar | Poetry | Jeruri | Post Modernism, Every day spirituality |
| Sashi Deshpande | Feminist fiction | The Dark Holds No Terrors, That Long Silence | Patriarchy, Gender roles, Family |
| Sobhaa De | Fiction | Socialite Evenings | Glamour, Urban elite life |
| Salman Rushdie | Magic Realism Post Colonial fiction | Midnight's Children, The Satanic Verses | Migration and diaspora, politics and religion |
| Vikram Seth | Poetry, Epic fiction | The Golden Gate, A Suitable Boy | Tradition, Class, Interpersonal relationships |
| Amitav Ghosh | Historical fiction | The Glass Palace, Sea of Poppies | Diaspora, Colonialism, Migration |
| Jeet Thayil | Fiction | Narcopolis | Urban decay, Addiction |
| Arundhati Roy | Social Realism | The God of Small Things | Socio-Political Critique, Family dynamics, Caste inequality |
| Amit Chaudhuri | Literary fiction | A Strange and Sublime Address, Freedom Song | Cultural Spaces, Diaspora, Regional Sensibility |
| Jhumpa Lahiri | Fiction, Short stories | Interpreter of Maladies, The Namesake | Cultural dislocation, Diaspora, Family |
| Kiran Desai | Postcolonial fiction | The Inheritance of Loss | Economic inequality, Cultural Conflict, Immigration |
| Chetan Bhagat | Popular fiction | Five Point Someone The 3 mistakes of My Life | Aspirations, Modern relationships, Youth Culture |
| Aravind Adiga | Contemporary fiction | The White Tiger | Corruption, Class divide, Economic inequality |

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