



## THE GROWTH OF INDIAN FICTION BEFORE INDEPENDENCE

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### ABSTRACT



The nineteenth century marked the beginning of the Indo-English Literature. When compared to the other literatures of India, it is the oldest in age and the smallest in volume. But it made significant strides and has occupied a substantial place not only among the national literatures but also in the Commonwealth Literature.

In the recent decades, Indian English literature has evoked a widespread interest in both India and abroad. Although it began as a hot-house plant, "it has taken firm and deep roots in the Indian soil" (K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, 1961:140). It has now attained a luxuriant growth, scaling unprecedented heights. It is in the area of fiction that Indian Writers in English have made the most significant contribution and as Mulk Raj Anand pointed out, "it has come to stay as part of world literature". The development of English novel seems to follow a definite pattern and consists of well-defined evolutionary stages. Initially, Indian creative writing in English was not taken seriously; rather it was ridiculed and debunked piously. For example, Uma Parameswaram categorically declared that "Indo-English literature seems destined to die young" (1976:1-2).

The Indian English novel is now slightly less than a century and a half old, though hardly fifty years have elapsed since it blossomed. During this short span, it has certainly given to the world at least some major novels which could only have been produced in modern India. David Mc Cutchion once asked "whether a truly Indian novel is at all possible?" (1968:84). On more than one occasion, *Untouchable*, *Kanthapura*, *The Guide* and *The Serpent and The Rope* have provided a clear answer to this question, each time in an unambiguous affirmative.

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To briefly remember and recollect the beginnings, Raja Rammohan Roy strongly advocated the Western instead of Oriental education. The founder of English literature in India was virtually and indirectly Lord Macaulay, Raja Rammohan Roy has inculcated in the native minds love for the English language and later a passionate zeal for literary creation in it. With the passage of time a handful of eminent writers emerged on the Indian literary scene who produced literary specimens of considerable standard that blazed a new trail and guided many young aspiring writers. Therefore, the appearance of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Toru Dutt, and others on the literary horizon is not an event that can be described as fortuitous but a natural corollary. Ever since the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864, the Indian novel in English has grown by leaps and bounds in respect of bulk, quality, variety and maturity. Bankim deftly blended romance, comedy and humour in his novels. As K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar remarks:

Apart from their absorbing story interest Bankim's novels were seen to be in some measure the testaments of a seer's wisdom, and readers did not hesitate to infer from them the Bible of the new patriotism. (1995:316)

The 1930s were of a golden period when numerous historical events had occurred in modern pre-independent India. To name a few are the Salt Satyagraha Movement by Mahathma Gandhi, the three Round Table Conferences, and the Movements for the upliftment of the harijans. Anand too could not but respond to the impact of events in India with him, however, as with Bankim Chandra before him, political action took the form of writing novels. Being a Leftist, he became the champion of the down trodden and a voice of the voiceless. He wrote of the people, for the people and as a man of the people. Some of his famous works are: *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), *The Sword and the Sickle*, *The Barber's Trade Union*, *The Big Heart*, *Seven Summers*, *Private Life of Indian Prince* and so on.

In writing of the pariahs, the downtrodden and the under dogs rather than of the elite and the

sophisticated, he had ventured into a territory that had been largely ignored till then by Indian writers. For all the nationalistic fervour, Bankim Chandra's novels were somewhat imitative of Sir Walter Scott, with a historical or mystical slant. Rabindranath Tagore was chiefly interested in the upper and middle classes, yet his fiction dealt with social problems though small in bulk, deals with social problems. *The Wreck*, *Gora* and *The Home and the World* are his chief full length novels. His most ambitious work of fiction was undoubtedly *Gora*, written at the height of his powers with a view to projecting his vision of the individual's role in renascent India.

It has been described by Krishna Kripalni as 'the Epic of India in transition at the most crucially intellectual period of its modern history.... It is to Indian fiction what Tolstoy's War and Peace is to the Russian' (qtd. by Iyengar, 1995:105). Sarat Chandra was interested in the lower middle classes and Munshi Premchand selected his themes from the peasantry and humble folk of Uttar Pradesh. It was Mulk Raj Anand's objective to stray further lower still than even Sarat Chandra or Premchand, to show to the West that there was more in the Orient than could be inferred from Omar Khayyam, Li Po, Tagore, or Kipling. Therefore, Anand described a waif like Munoo in *Coolie*, and an Untouchable like Bakha, and indentured labourer like Gangu. He set them right at the centre of the scheme of cruelty and exploitation that held India in its vicious grip.

Most of the early novels in English by Indians were almost invariably imitative and immature. Although the earliest novels were not of much artistic worth, they struggled to carve out a niche for themselves. Of course, 'these early novels have for us today no more than an antiquarian or historical interest'. (Ibid). After the First World War, the Indian English novel became determinedly more realistic and less idealized. The novels between the two world wars were primarily concerned with the contemporary society and were greatly influenced by the Gandian ideology and ethos. It is during this phase that Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Nrayan and Raja Rao popularly known as *The Great Trio* shaped the destiny of Indian English fiction and consequently Indian English novel attained the status of artistic uniqueness and fullness. William Walsh maintains



that 'It was in 1930s that the Indians began what has now turned out to be their very substantial contribution to the novel in English and one peculiarly suited to their talents' (1978:66). Anand was born rebel and his *Untouchable* (1935) is the first authentic Dalit novel in English. His novels *Coolie* and *Untouchable* reflect the reality of class-conscious and caste-ridden Indian society. Venkataramani's *Kandam the Patriot* was well received by the public and gained importance because it was the very image of the excruciating times India was then passing through.

As K.R.Srinivas Iyengar points out :

If all the roads ultimately lead in Murugan to the teller's way of life in rural surroundings, in Kandam all roads lead at last to 'Satyagraha' to a defiance of the 'Satanic' government through the power of suffering and love. (1995:231)

R.K. Narayan writes with ease and his fiction highlights the dilemma of average men and women. His novels are charged with gentle irony and humour. As P.D. Mehta remarks: 'In his novels he has handled his characters with humour and tolerant irony, smiling all the while at their follies, the conflict between what they want to appear and what they are actually.' (1968:115,116). Narayan carried the Indo-English novel towards an achievement that goes beyond mere aspiration. He is the child of the Gandhian Age. His artistic exploitation of the rich resources of India's past in relation to the complex present is strikingly evident in *Kanthapura*. It is the story of how the Congress for India's freedom came to a small south Indian village Kanthapura. Therefore, the first remarkable feature of post-Independence Indian English fiction is the consolidation of their reputations by the leading trio Anand, Narayan, and Raja Rao. The graph of Anand's achievement has never followed a steady course, exhibiting instead bewildering ups and downs; and it is possible to maintain that his first novel *Untouchable* still remains his finest work; but his long autobiographical saga of which three volumes so far appeared (*Seven Summers* (1951); *Morning Face* (1970); and *Confession of a Lover* (1976)) have promise to be an impressive fictional statement.

In *The Financial Expert* (1952); *The Guide* (1958) and *The Man-eater of Malgudi* (1962), R.K. Narayan was finally able to enlist his good-humoured irony as a firm ally of serious moral concern, thus creating thoughtful fiction which has its centre in Malgudi that has a circumference embracing the entire human condition. All the three novels treat the theme of nemesis impressively, while raising significant questions such as the role of the cash-nexus in modern society (*The Financial Expert*) appearance and reality (*The Guide*), and the fate of evil in human life (*The Man-eater of Malgudi*).

Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) is one of the greatest of Indian English novels. As an enactment of East West confrontation and as a philosophical, spiritual novel it stands unchallenged in the annals of Indian English fiction.

While the momentum gained by fiction during the Gandhian age was thus sustained even after Independence by these major novels, the new writers that now appeared on the scene brought not a little individual talent to the established tradition. With the exception of a solitary masterpiece like *All About H. Hatterr*, the achievement of the post Independence novelists cannot on the whole be said to match that of Anand and his two major contemporaries. Bhabani Bhattacharya, whose first novel was published within a few months of Independence, continued the tradition of social realism, stressing like Anand the necessity of social purpose in fiction. However, his tendency to rest content with presenting too neat and machine-made contrasts to settle for easy romantic solutions blunts the edge of his social purpose even in a novel like *So Many Hungers* (1947) – a starkly realistic study of the Bengal famine of the early forties. S. Menon Marath has no ideology to preach, but the vignettes of Kerala life are evocative, especially his study of the disintegration of a traditional matriarchal Nayar family in *The Wound of Spring* (1960).

Anand's novels are deliberately designed to throw the suffering of the peasants and weaker sections of Indian society into the most lurid relief. Anand was at his height of powers in the thirties when he planned to write his first four novels. His very first novel which appeared in 1935 has been described as a minor classic. The novel records the



events of a single day in the life of a sweeper boy Bakha, who emerges as the hero of the novel. Although the protagonist Bakha is young and able bodied, he is treated contemptuously by the high caste Hindus. Bakha is condemned to the sweeping of latrines. While giving a vivid account of his nauseating job, Anand draws our attention to the generations of exploitation and suffering that have been his lot. Bakha is awakened by his father Lakha to clean the latrines. Thus starts the day of a sensitive sweeper boy of eighteen:

At last when he had got to the end of the third row of latrines for the second time during the morning, he felt a cramp in his back and stretched himself out from the bent posture he had maintained all the while. (Untouchable, Orient Paperbacks, 1970: 17)

Later Indian English fiction, however, appears to be chary of this kind of experimentation involving a total or modified return to ancient Indian literary methods. On the contrary, it seems to be trying to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicament, while frankly modelling itself on Western originals. Another notable writer and one of the leading personalities of the Gandhian age was K.A.Abbas who wrote *Inqilab* (1955). Although written during 1942 to 1949, the novel actually covers the earlier period commencing from Rowlatt Bill and the Jallianwalla Bagh tragedy to the Salt Satyagraha and the Gandhi Irwin Pact of 1931. The novelist's ambitious intention is to project the Gandhian Revolutionary Age in its entirety. *Inqilab* means revolution. Gandhi, Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, C.R. Das, Subhas Chandra Bose, Vallabhai Patel, Rajagopalachari, Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Ansari, Maulana Azad, Dr. Sapru, Abdul Ghaffar Khan and other eminent leaders are depicted in this novel, with all their selfless endeavours for getting freedom from the British rule. In C.F. Andrew's words, 'in a sudden movement India's fetters began to be loosened, and the path-way of freedom was opened.' (qtd. By K.R.S.Iyengar, 1995:248).

It was the Phoenix hour, and Gandhi the Mahatma gave the signal, and the whole nation awoke from its suspended animation and felt the blood-streams of a new life coursing through its

veins. It was as though Gandhi had said: 'Awake, arise and realize this truth. I give you Abhaya, fearlessness. You are slaves no more, Awake and realize the truth that you are! (Ibid.250). After the publication of the novels under the influence of Gandhian philosophy, life in our country could not be the same as before. Every sphere of activity and every segment of our national life – politics, economics, education, religion, social life, language and literature – acquired a more or less pronounced Gandhian era. Gandhi, the staunch nationalist and a crusader for freedom exercise a potent influence on literatures, both directly by his speeches and through his own writings. He believed in passive resistance, Satyagraha, truthfulness and ahimsa (non-violence). After thirty-five years of relentless struggle, Gandhi was to tell the British in 1942 'Quit India' and leave us to God or anarchy. The germs of the Gandhian political, economic, educational and ethical thought were elucidated in *Hindu Swaraj*. The 1930s were the most tumultuous years in Indian history. It was the decade when the Indian struggle for independence was at its peak. Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao could not remain uninfluenced by the Gandhian Movement.

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