



English

History of Indian Writing in English

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A brief overview of major themes and works

The earliest known book by an Indian in English is *Travels* by Din Muhammad published in Ireland in 1794. Muhammad's book marks the inception of a body of writing now identified as Indian Writing in English (henceforth IWE), also known as Anglo-Indian writing. Armed with linguistic and cultural heterogeneity, the earliest IWE writers carved out a space for themselves in colonial discourse and paved the way for modern IWE. Thus, "literature" produced by people like Muhammad presented a counter-narrative that questioned British Writing on India.^[1]

IWE found its first serious home in Bengal which was a hub of literary production in the early 1800s. Writers like Raja Rammohun Roy(1772-1833) Krishna Mohan Banerji(1813-85), and Ram Gopal Ghose(1815-68) focused more on social reform and criticism rather than style. In Bombay and Madras too, men like CV Boriah(1176-1803) produced early works in English. The first generation of IWE writers used English mainly to shun social evils or make veiled attacks at the nascent British Raj. This period ended in the 1850s. The Revolt of 1857 led to a change in attitude and aims of the Indo-Anglian writers so that "[IWE] slowly struggled during the next two generations from psittacism to authentic artistic utterance."^[2]

The Revolt further fractured the native-colonial relationship which had already begun to strain by the late 1820s. As the sense of alienation grew among the natives, there was an increasing tendency to appreciate ancient Indian culture. Out of this "resurgence" emerged writers like Romesh Chunder Dutt (1848-1909) who produced shortened translations of the *Ramayana*(1899)and

the *Mahabharata*(1895). The primary poets of this age were Aurobindo Ghose, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu who combined western classicism with ancient Indian mythology, medieval bardic traditions and romanticism. The prose activity of this period was “prompted by the twofold impulse of the re-discovery of the Indian past and a strong awareness of the problems of the day”.^[3] Political activists like Dadabhai Naoroji and MG Ranade published important works in economics and history. Novel-writing gained traction around the turn of the century with novelists emerging in Madras and Bengal and short stories had begun to appear as early as in 1885. However, “drama was yet to establish a tradition.”^[4] Nevertheless, this period of IWE development, poised between the Revolt and the Non-cooperation Movement, for the first time produced works in IWE which were not merely reformist. A genuine taste for aesthetics coupled with nationalism ruled the corpus of this period.

The next phase of development is the Gandhian phase, in which Gandhi’s socio-political ideas had a direct bearing on this era’s literature.^[5] Gandhi was an important prose-writer himself, with works such as *Hind Swaraj*(1910) and *My Experiments with Truth* (tr. by M. Desai in 1928) to his name. Many leaders of this period, such as Chakravarti Rajagopalachari (1879-1972) and Jawaharlal Nehru(1889-1964) were also prolific writers besides being regular contributors to journals and newspapers. The Indian novel is this age’s most remarkable achievement. RK Narayan(1906-2001) and Raja Rao(1908-2006) brought to life, with considerable richness, rural India in books such as *Malgudi Days*(1942)and *Kanthapura*(1938).^[6] These novelists continued using Indian myths in their works, affected by the new Gandhian consciousness^[7]. The notable feature of this age is that IWE swells with substantial production in a vast array of genres hitherto unexplored. Travel literature, criticisms and even dramas abound, although their literary value might not match that of the novels.

The next phase is that of post-independent literature. India’s decision to remain in the Commonwealth of Nations provided an impetus to English as a language of administration and culture.^[8] The setting up of new journals such as *The Indian Literary Review* and *The Literary Criterion* provided an avenue for critical studies in IWE. Newfound independence freed Indian writers from Victorian and Romantic mores and there began an active effort to diversify this literature. This was most marked in Indian poetry, which attempted to deal with themes of alienation, multiculturalism, multilingualism through modernist tropes. A frank

treatment of sexuality and gender was also done by women poets such as Kamala Das and Eunice D' Souza.

Salman Rushdie's (b.1947) *Midnight's Children*(1981)completely changed the direction of Indian fiction.^[9] Diasporic fiction bloomed in the post-colonial period with notable writers like Jhumpa Lahir(b. 1964) and Rohinton Mistry(b. 1952) producing important works on immigrant identity. Besides, this period also sought inspiration from other literary traditions in world literature, be it Latin America's magic realism in Rushdie's writings or Vikram Seth's debt to Alexander Pushkin in *The Golden Gate*(1986). One major boon for recent IWE is that it has been receiving both popular and critical attention.

Although Dalit literature in English is a recent phenomenon, Dalit writings can be traced back to the anti-caste movement led by BR Ambedkar.^[10] An important Dalit writer in English is *Meena Kandasamy*(b.1984). A lot of Dalit writing is autobiographical. For a long time, Dalit literature in English only existed as translations of original works in indigenous languages such as Marathi. However, contemporary Dalit writers are showing interest in English after receiving Western training in creative writing.^[11]

Now that we have provided a gist of the historical development of IWE, we present brief analyses of IWE with respect to poetry, drama, and novels.

Poetry

The pre-Revolt phase (beginnings-1857)

“English poetry, it might safely be surmised, arrived in India from about the seventeenth century onward in the knapsacks, trunks, bags, and portmanteaus of traders and adventurers...” writes Rosinka Chaudhuri. ^[12] The earliest literature on India was produced by British writers, especially by merchants and missionaries.^[13] Aliph Cheem and Anna Maria were two such British poets who wrote on India.^[14] Perhaps Ramaswami's English version of '*Vishwa-gunadarsana*' (1825) was the first work of poetry in English by an Indian.

The two most important Indo-Anglian poets from this period were Henry Louis Vivian Derozio(1809-31), a mestizo lecturer at the Hindu College, and Michael Madhusudan Dutta(1824-73) whose major contributions are in Bengali literature. Also notable is Kasiprasad Ghosh's *The Shair*(1930).

The post-Revolt, nationalist and Gandhian phases (1857-1947)

The next age of Indian poetry included Toru Dutt(1856-77) whose works like *Legends of Hindustan*(1882) borrowed heavily from Indian mythology and showed great range in poetic skill. She was fiercely original in her style with Victorian romantic diction.^[15] One of the most important poets from this age was Aurobindo Ghose(1872-1950). His magnum opus is the 23,813-line-epic *Savitri*(1954) which elaborates on the legend of Satyawana and Savitri from the *Mahabharata*.

Rabindranath Tagore(1861-1941) is the other great Indo-Anglian poet of these times. His 1913 work *Gitanjali* is suffused with medieval bhakti themes and won him the Nobel prize. With *The Gardener*(1913) he entered the terrain of love poetry. Although he continued to write in English, his later collections of English poetry lacked quality. Sarojini Naidu's(1879-1949) works were charged with Romanticism and sought to combine elements of various traditions to represent India in a new idiom.

The Gandhian age marked a decline in Indian poetical production in English. Naik remarks that "it is surprising that the impact of the Gandhian whirlwind produced no outstanding poetry of any kind."^[16] The poets of this age invested their energies mostly in mystical or romantic verses with a few strokes of modernism. J. Krishnamurti(1895-1986) and Armando Menezes (1902-1983) were the most prominent. Aurobindo Ghose's brother Manmohan Ghose's (1869-1924) posthumous work *Songs of Love and Death* (1926) heralded "new beginnings of modern Indian poetry in English".^[17]

The post-independent phase(1950-2000) and after

The preceding period of relative stagnancy was followed by an astonishingly fervent one in which the most celebrated Anglo-Indian poetry was produced. The publication of *A Time to Change*(1952) by Nissim Ezekiel(1924-2004) marked the “annus mirabilis” of this phase.^[18] Chaudhuri writes, “here[in this phase] the modernist aesthetic commingles with regional and local traditions, American beat poetry, Goan inflections and indigenous landscapes”. An important element of this poetry, therefore, is its negotiation with the west. Hence, a sense of alienation and exile is palpable in this poetry. Even though the Bombay School comprising Moraes, Jussawalla, Arun Kolatkar, Gieve Patel, and Dilip Chitre dominated the literary scene in this period, poetry in English was produced from other centers also. Keki N Daruwalla(b.1937) from Delhi and Jayant Mahapatra(b.1928) from Cuttack decentralised Anglo-Indian poetry which had been the monopoly of the Bombay poets.^[19] Meanwhile, AK Ramanujan (1929-) and R Parthasarthy(1934-) wrestled with the “inner” Indian ethos and the “outer” instrument of the English language.^[20] Women poets emerged as important voices. Kamala Das(1934-2009) wrote with an unprecedented feminist zeal which was deeply inspired by her own personal experiences. One novel aspect of all these poets is that they show greater flexibility in rhythm and make use of free verse more effectively.

A number of expatriate poets also came up in this period such as Vijay Seshadri(b. 1954) and Agha Shahid Ali(1949-2001)who explore the relationships between boundaries and shared cultures.

The contemporary scene is exciting and filled with various strands of poetry. Ranjit Hoskote(b.1969), Jeet Thayil(b.1959), Meena Kandasamy(b.1984) and Arundhati Subramanyam(b.1973) are only few of the many notable Indo-Anglian poets. A newfound interest in language and its “Indianness” seems to be a dominant concern of this poetry.^[21]

Drama

The 19th-century social reformers brought Western values with them and ideas of modernity and nativisation clashed. Against this backdrop, the first full-length play in English appeared in 1831 – *The Persecuted* by Krishna Mohana Banerjea^[22]. Banerjea in his *The Persecuted* critically examines various aspects of Hinduism. Two more plays in this period were Dutt’s *Rizia* (1849) and *Kaminee* (1974) whose

writer is anonymous. *Rizia* is based on the life of Razia Sultan and *Kaminee* is set against the backdrop of the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.

These plays represented the advent of new ideas and compelled people to rethink their own religious and spiritual inclinations from the viewpoint of modernity. Clearly, drama posed a challenge to both the Colonial administration and the narrow-minded nativists. The drama was a powerful cultural force and the Colonial authorities had to resort to censorship in the form of the Dramatic Performances Control Act of 1876.

Pre-Independence Indian drama in English

After the dramas of the 19th Century, there was a hiatus before the plays resurfaced again. Sri Aurobindo made important contributions to Drama. Aurobindo wrote numerous plays between 1891 and 1916, like *The Viziers of Bassora*, *Rodogune*, *Perseus The Deliverer*, *Vasavadutta* among many others. Another playwright was T.P. Kailasam. His English Plays are *The Burden*, *Fulfillment*, *Karna*, *Keechaka* and a monologue, written between the 1930s and 1950s. While Aurobindo derived inspiration from the Western context, Kailasam tried to amalgamate the concerns of the Indian Context by taking plots from Indian epics. Thus, his plays were more popular among the public.

It was also a period of consolidation and community building around a shared set of ideas that culminated in the formation of the Progressive Writers Association (PWA) and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). Plays performed by IPTA focused on creating greater interaction with the audience. Another important playwright was Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, a member of PWA. Then there was Rabindranath Tagore who himself translated various Bengali plays into English.

But during the pre-independence period, Drama focused more on capturing the interests of the reader rather than the spectator of the drama.

Post-Independence Indian drama in English

This phase of Drama explored various new themes. After Independence, Drama was developed by G.V. Desani who wrote the play *Hali* in 1950. *Hali* is an interesting drama that follows a new style which gained it the title “prose poem”. *Hali* explores a journey of spiritual awakening following the loss of Rooh. Nissim Ezekiel was also an influential dramatist. One of his important plays was *Marriage Poem* in which he revealed the fissures in the relationship between man and woman.

Among the many other writers of this period, Asif Currimbhoy, Girish Karnad, Kiran Nagarkar, Gieve Patel, Ramu Ramanathan, Ninaz Khodaiji, Annie Zaidi and Mahesh Dattani are worth mentioning. This was also the period when women’s voices in this field could be heard clearly. Manjula Padmanabhan wrote *Lights Out*, a play based on a real incident of gang rape and the insensitivity of the general bourgeoisie towards the incident, which received international fame.

Drama has now gained an independent character, largely free from the influence of the West

Novels

The formulation of fiction in India happened pretty early on, around the same time when Macaulay introduced his “Minute on Education”. In May 1845, Soshee Chunder Dutt, published a short piece of narrative fiction entitled *The Republic Of Orissa: A Page From Annals Of The 20th Century*. Kylas Chunder Dutt also published his work called *A Journal Of Forty-Eight Hours Of The Year 1945* marking the beginning of Indian Fiction Writing in English. Both the works are historical accounts. In the beginning, English novels were overshadowed by novels in regional languages.^[23]

Many Early novels were written keeping European readers in mind, suggested by the great detail with which they not only portrayed Indian life but also the domestic circle, largely hidden to the colonizers. An important mention in this regard is Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Rajamohan’s Wife*(1864) that largely explored village life, emphasizing women’s life. Then he moved away from the description of the domestic sphere and returned to the sort of historical fiction that was being

written, culminating in *Anandamath* (1882). This work largely inspired the fight to protect the 'motherland'. Around the same time, *Ghare Baire* was translated into English by Tagore's nephew, which was a critique of the Indian anti-colonial movement because of its Hindu bias.

By the late 19th Century, we witness the emergence of educated women, in the wake of social reformations. Most of these writings were done secretly and in the form of autobiographies, with *Amar Jiban* by Rassundari Debi being one of the earliest such works. The most important work of fiction in this period by a woman was produced by Rokeya Hossein's *Sultana's Dream*(1905), a 'witty utopian fantasy of gender role inversion'.

In the time when the Independence struggle was in full swing, IWE bore the influence of Gandhian ideals. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* was the main swaying element. Although many works inspiring struggle against the British had already been written, the works that were inspired by Gandhian ideals did not focus on any armed conflict or victory for one religion, rather it imagined various communities living together in harmony. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, and R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Bhabhani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*, Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time To Be Happy*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, are a few books inspired by Gandhian ideals. Literature became the main medium of expression. Khushwant Singh's *Train To Pakistan*(1956)and Salman Rushdie's *Shame*(1983)covered Partition trauma.

Midnight's Children and *A Suitable Boy* were novels that clearly gathered fame for IWE worldwide. The current faces of IWE are writers who are, among other themes, exploring domesticity and gender in their works. Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Sashi Deshpande and Rohinton Mistry are notable.

Conclusion

IWE was once seen as "alien" to Indian culture. It represented the colonizer's "socio-cultural modernity". Many vernacular writers were sceptical of the ability of 'anglophone' writers to write in a language that did not match the one dominating their thought process, communication and imagination. With Dalit and

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LGBTQ+ writings becoming more important and IWE diversifying to include non-metropolitan and rural perspectives in its purview, it can no longer be argued that IWE is elitist or written only for a select minority of Indians. However, questions of representation and snobbery are pertinent and should not be overlooked. Like other literatures in indigenous languages of India, IWE too can encompass the whole fabric of the nation, with sensitivity and nuance.