



Research Paper

A brief review of the inception of Indian English Poetry, Fiction and Cinema

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ABSTRACT: This paper attempts to briefly trace out the evolution of poetry, fiction and films in the domain of Indian English Literature. Initiating its journey with poetry, English had spanned its wings over various genres like fiction, drama, folktales, and now even over the vast realm of cinema, in India. The article is divided into three subsections, each dedicated to Indian English poetry, fiction and films, respectively. The first section touches upon poets ranging from early poets like Toru Dutt to Post-Independent era poets like Nissim Ezekial. The second section enrolls the pioneers during the dawn of Indian English fiction, especially the so-called "Big Three". The final section provides a comprehensive vision of the onset of Indian English films.

KEYWORDS: Indian writing in English, Indian English poetry, Indian English fiction, Indian English cinema.

Received 25 August, 2021; Revised: 07 September, 2021; Accepted 09 September, 2021 © The author(s) 2021. Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

English is not just a foreign language that had been handed over to Indians in an attractive gift-wrapped box but rather, it emerged as a strong weapon, which aided the colonizers to dissipate the Western culture and ideologies in the Indian soil. The seed that was planted by the colonizers had found ample nourishment in this country and thus English became a status- symbol in India. Soon Indians, who had exposure to English education began to adapt and imbibe the essence of the language and thereby had begun to formulate a kind of English that reverberated in Indian society through its words, ideas and concepts. Thus, as Kachru has rightfully pointed out, English had become acculturated and nativized in India, giving rise to a new version of the language – Indian English.

Indian writings in English took off much before the Independence and the writers set their feet in the genre of poetry at first. Thereafter the Indian English writers experimented with fiction and so it went on by establishing Indian English Literature as a discipline. Now that it has spread into the more commercial and popular realm of cinema. This paper endeavours to remember those foundations on which Indian English has set its roots affixed. Starting with the first and foremost Indian English poetry, the essay tours through the founding fathers of Indian English fiction and finally concludes by reminiscing on certain prime milestones of Indian English Cinema.

Indian English Poetry

Under the wide umbrella called Indian English literature, Indian English poetry is the oldest form that has achieved fruitfulness. It depicts the development of our countless cultural and national life; right from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the mid-nineties of the twentieth century. In fact, the Indian English poetry was the earliest body of verse, which were composed in a European language by writers of non-European origin, and to enter print outside the Western hemisphere. Though the phases of development in Indian English poetry had given rise to various classifications, mainly it has been categorized as Early Indian English poetry and Modern Indian English poetry.

One among many recognized classifications is that the Early Indian English poetry is divided into Age of Pioneers and Era of Indian Renaissance. This age spans between 1820 and 1870. The ascension of poetry and imaginative writing in English was because, most of these poets received formal education in language. Though people like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Kashi Prasad Ghosh, Michael Madhusudan Dutt were regarded as the early pioneers of this age, the major poet was Toru Dutt. Toru Dutt (1856-1877) could be dignified as the pioneer spirit of Indian English poetry. "A Hindu by birth and a Christian by education, this illustrious daughter of Bengal, while waging a grim and yet heroic battle against her delicate health and foul disease started a hectic

literary activity by the sweep of her imagination” (Agarwal). Within a short period of three years, she produced four literary volumes, some illuminating essays, letters and even translations of some speeches in French. But she is mostly remembered for *Savitri* and shorter poems. *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) — a collection of nine ballads, is considered to be her magnum opus. Though she had these much works to her credit, only one work called, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Field* (1875) got published, when she was alive. Toru’s perception of life had been pessimistic and gloomy, which eventually became themes for her poetry. The captives, the vanquished and the sufferers easily attracted Toru and they indeed inspired her to write. Her poetry revolved around themes like Nature, Christian and Hindu thoughts, Indian traditions and myths, etc. Technically, her verses were refined and faultless and they possessed a musical quality too. Though Toru Dutt lived in this era, most of her works were published in the next age.

The second phase is the Era of Indian Renaissance, in which major poets were Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950), as a writer and a critic, is told to have touched connotatively on various sides of Renaissance in India. Aurobindo, born in a rich Bengali family, was educated in London. To his credit, he had a massive body of prose and verse in English. Aurobindo wrote in blank verse, that too in a masterly fashion. His most famous work is the poetic collection, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. There is a vast difference between Sri Aurobindo’s early poetry and the poetry of the *Savitri* period. His early poetry had been written under the influence of the Decadent poets and Romantics, whereas his poems like *Ahana*, his last poems, including *Savitri* conduct in a completely new world of poetic creation. His poems are dealt with the exploration of the Divine Self and with the revelation of the Real and the True. He makes man endeavor for the realization of the Self. Sri Aurobindo has told that true poetry “comes always from some subtle plane through the creative vital and uses the other mind and other external instruments for transmission only” (Dwivedi 12). His dealing with themes like mysticism and spirituality complicates his poems, and hence some critics have found it vapid and unreadable.

Another major writer of this age, who first gained a place for modern Indian, on the world literary scene was Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore (1861-1941) principally wrote in Bengali, but having been educated in abroad, he had a mastery of English too. Many of his poems and plays had been translated into English by himself. He also wrote poems like *The Child* in English, occasionally. Next only to Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, he has been the supreme inspiration to millions in modern India. His master piece, *Gitanjali* (1912), was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. The phenomenal success of *Gitanjali* bolstered Tagore and his English publishers. Some of his original writings in English are: *The Crescent Moon, The Gardener, Lover’s Gift, Crossing, The Post Office*, etc. *Gitanjali* is a book of songs of ¹bhakti in the great Indian traditions. The poems are “half a prayer from below, half a whisper from above: the prayer evoking the response, or the whisper provoking the prayer, and always prayer and whisper chiming into song” (Iyengar 111). Tagore was highly influenced by Romanticism, and just like Sri Aurobindo, Tagore was a mystic poet. Tagore was regarded as the first writer, who tried to bring Eastern Culture into Western Intellectual Life. But the harmony seen in between the East and the West in his works, has made him an enemy of nationalists.

Sarojini Naidu (1879 -1949) brought out a change in the then existed trend of poems that talked about mysticism and philosophy of life, through her poetic *oeuvre*. Her first collection of poems, *The Golden Threshold* was published in 1905. Her poetry had a musical quality within it that lies submerged, bringing up the strong emotions in it. In between 1905 and 1917, Naidu published four volumes of poetry. Her last collection of poems was *The Broken Wing*. Sri Aurobindo, in 1935, has commented upon Naidu’s works saying, “Her work has a real beauty” (Iyengar 222). Though Naidu’s works never went in search of the bizarre, the exotic and the exceptional, they neither lacked variety nor the taste of veracity. Naidu attempted on children’s poems, nature poems, patriotic poems, poems of love and death, even poems of mystical transcendence. Naidu was less interested in wild experimentation. Her poems were often compared and equated with that of Toru Dutt. Sarojini Naidu was essentially considered as an embodiment of femininity.

In the Post-Independent Era, there generated mainly two bodies of Indian-English poetry with diverse orientations towards India and Indian materials and themes. The first kind of construction of Indianness emerges especially in the poetry of Nissim Ezekiel that possessed resemblances with the poetry of Dom Moraes, Keki. N. Daruwalla, Eunice de Souza, Meena Alexander etc. Ezekiel, in his poetry, tried to discover methods and ways of poetically representing India and Indians through characters, situations, motives, desires, beliefs and speech. As his monolingualism in English as well as his ethnic and social background was liable to ostracize him from his immediate environment, these representations cannot take a merely positive stance towards India and Indians. This situation was same with Dom Moraes and Eunice de Souza. These poets had to create ironic, ambiguous and even estranged visions of the subcontinent because, they appeared to have limited access to Indian-language worlds around them. The second kind of construction of Indianness facades in the works of people like A. K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre, Jayanta Mahapatra, R.

¹ Devotional worship directed to one supreme deity.

Parthasarathy etc., who were well-versed in English as well as in at least one native language. Ramanujan's literate multilingualism attributed to him, a commendable access to Indian-language sensibilities and experiences, which enabled him to build up a poetic Indianness. Kamala Das, in her collections such as *Summer in Calcutta* (1965), *The Descendants* (1967), etc., had attempted boldly to explore female desires within and outside of a conventional marriage. She wrote about themes such as homosexuality, female fidelity, women's bisexuality and lesbian identity, motherhood, etc. The modern poets tried to express their personal lives and have also attempted to address the social evils. This can be evidently seen in poems of Arun Kolatkar and Jayanta Mahapatra.

When compared to the poems of Sri Aurobindo and Toru Dutt, these poets' works were more inclined towards existentialism and appeared more rational. The early poets like Toru Dutt, Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Sarojini Naidu possessed a common colonial heritage. In fact, none of them were directly involved in the National struggle. The attitude towards literature and especially poetry was different for these early poets, when compared to the later poets like Ramanujan, Kolatkar, Ezekiel, and Daruwalla. In the earlier phase, it was more leaned towards Romanticism and Victorianism, and it was with advancement of poets in the later century that the Indian-English poetry turned over a new leaf.

Indian English Fiction

Usually, it is being said that Indian writings in English are a product of historical encounter between Indian culture and Western culture. In the beginning, Indian English novels were written from different parts of India. Though the cultural lives were different both socially and geographically, the medium of expression was the common thread and British rule was the common context. Though the novel form of literature was new for India, this form was easily accepted by Indian writers in English as well as by writers of regional languages. Historically speaking, the origin of Indian English fiction is owed to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864). But its foundation was laid by Mulk Raj Anand by the publication of his novel, *Untouchable* in 1935. Indian English novel ripened in the hands of "Three Big"—Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao. It was William Walsh who suggested the title "the Big Three" to them. The epoch-making political, social and ideological tumult that originated as an effect of the Gandhian movement had profoundly influenced the Indian English novel in the first two decades of twentieth century. Between the late 1920s and early 1930s, writers like K. S. Venkataraman, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan have started their writing career. In terms of innovations in themes and techniques, the trio has broken new grounds in Indian English fiction. They re-created their characters in their own situations which were social as well as psychological.

It was found that after the First World War, some of the novelists were inclined towards those ideologies that challenged capitalism and colonialism and Mulk Raj Anand was the most prominent among them. In his novels, the functioning of ideology could be experienced in the background of Anand's novels. His novels, *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Village* (1939), and *Across the Black Waters* (1940), all are faithful documents of the lives of the downtrodden. His characters also resembled real persons of the Indian society. He himself had told that all the men and women that appeared in his stories were the reflections of the real people he had known during his childhood and youth. In his writings, he avoided the highways of romance and classiness. Instead, he explored some alleys of the outcastes and the peasants, the sepoys and the working people. In short, he preferred the familiar to the fancies. *Untouchable* is the most condensed and artistically convincing novel, out of all his works. Moreover, it is the shortest and the most revealing and rewarding of the lot. As the novel covers the events of a single day, it maintains the unities as in a classical play. Anand had created literature out of our own environment and he always attempted to highlight indigenous culture and art. His major concern was social realism. Even in his first novel *Untouchable*, he made innovations by making an untouchable a hero or an anti-hero. The lead character 'Bakha' was taken from contemporary life, which have been deprived of his rights by his oppressors. Though he had spent more than twenty years abroad, unlike the diaspora writers, he did not have a nostalgic feeling towards the home land; rather he was always closer to the concept of "home". Hence, he never lost touch with Indian reality and social conditions. His art was more devoted to expose social injustice, economic exploitation and the troubles of suppressed castes and classes in India. Moreover, with its heap of swear-words and expressions plainly translated from the vernacular idiom, the language often produces an unsophisticated or farcical effect.

Like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan too has somehow handled to remain a writer. But unlike Anand, Narayan did not have any kind of political axes to grind; instead, he was pure and simple. Narayan published his first novel, *Swami and Friends* in 1935 and this novel re-created the now famous 'Malgudi', an imaginary small town in South India which comes to be felt as a living ambience in his fiction. Narayan narrates the story of Swami, an average school boy with his usual rounds of pranks and punishments with such a good-humored mockery and understanding. After his first novel, there came two—*Bachelor of Arts* (1936) and *The Dark Room* (1938) in a rapid succession. *The Guide* (1958) is regarded as the finest novel written by Narayan. Here,

through an effectively woven pattern of ironic complications, Raju—the protagonist is transformed from a railway ‘guide’ into a half-disinclined and half resolute guru is worked out. Narayan’s style is that of resolved limitations and conscientious exploration. Narayan was more concerned about Indian tradition than Indian reality. His characters were deep-seated in Indian tradition. He being a comic genius, in his novels, comic is sprinkled with humor and relief. This imposes upon the readers, a sort of necessity to contemplate on issues such as appearance and reality, the man and the mask. His art of story-telling is commendable, which include evocation of Indian myth.

The last of the ‘big three’, Raja Rao was close contemporary with Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan. As a writer, he had a high sense of dignity upon it. He was termed as a religious or philosophical novelist of the three and he dived deep into the Indian metaphysics. He treated his work with utmost care and dedication and literature was not a profession but a vocation for him. Like Narayan, Rao is also deep-rooted in Indian tradition, but he is different in his treatment as he referred to great epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata while narrating his stories. Like Chinua Achebe, he was a forerunner of postcolonial criticism. He has written only about four novels, and so unlike Anand and Narayan, he has not been a prolific novelist. He began his writing career as a novelist with *Kanthapura* in 1937, which turned out to be the finest evocation of the Gandhian age in Indian English fiction. Rao through this novel was able to create a living Gandhi myth through the struggle for independence. But his novel, *The Sergeant and the Rope* (1960) is regarded as his best novel and one of the greatest of Indian English novels. Rao promoted writing fiction in English with new idioms and new themes, based on his own nation. The idioms suited the characters and they are re-created in their own situations. He in his novels made use of a whole range of idioms like “as honest as an elephant”, “heart- it beat like a drum”, etc. to create a group of Indian English idiom.

These three pioneers of Indian English fiction—Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao had many things in common. These three were very much influenced by Gandhi and they attempted to weave a myth around him in their novels. Moreover, all the three lived abroad and were exposed to the Western life and culture, but in spite of that, all the three were firmly rooted in the grounds of India. Other than these three, there have been writers such as Bhabhani Bhattacharya, G. V. Desani and Khushwant Singh, whose debut works date from the 1940s. Today, there are a handful of Indian English novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markandeya, Anita Desai, Arundathi Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie and many more, who with their works have considerably enriched the Indian literature. With the advent of modernity, many narrative techniques such as magic realism and use of hybrid language instigated by Rushdie in his novel, *Midnight's Children* began to attain popularity in Indian English writings. These new writers mainly narrated stories from the perspective of an elite or upper-middle class person. Modern Indian writers, who had settled abroad have engaged themselves in writing fictions that foregrounded their longingness for homeland and their detached feeling from the surroundings. Most of these writings can be grouped under Diaspora Literature.

Indian English Cinema

English language crept into India during the time of colonial rule and a passion towards the language flourished from then onwards. It first affected poetry and then novel. Like Indian English poetry and Indian English fiction, there began to develop a genre called Indian English cinema.

The origin of Indian English Cinema can be traced back from earlier kind of films which could be categorized as English-language Indian films. Earlier, there emerged Indian cross over films in Indian cinema. They were internationally produced movies built upon Indian themes. The first venture in this category was the Merchant Ivory’s productions’ movie, *The Householder* (1963). This movie was based on an Indian story and the setting and casts were Indian. The casting included Shashi Kapoor, Leela Naidu and Durga Khote. Then many films carrying Indian themes were made and most of these films were impelled by the Indian-born, Ismail Merchant. It took some long time for an Indian director to engage in producing films in English language. Such a film came up for the first time with Aparna Sen’s *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981). But this category was able to stand on its own with Dev Benegal’s movie, *English, August* (1994). The film was a huge hit and was widely accepted by the urban audience. This movie actually lined the way for other directors consider English language as a viable medium in Indian cinema. Therefore, many directors such as Nagesh Kukunoor, Kaisad Gustad, Rituparno Ghosh came forward with their films such as *Hyderabad Blues*, *Bombay Blues*, *The Last Year* respectively.

Indian English cinema came much later as a genre, when it became sure and confident about what the film makers were doing. Indian English cinema was established as a genre with movies produced by film makers of Indian-descent like Gurinder Chadha, Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, Aparna Sen, etc. They continued to make films based on Indian themes and also focused on gaining international reputation for these films. All these film directors are people who live in diaspora. Their films more or less helped in establishing Indian English cinema as a creatively and commercially successful genre. By examining some of the films of Gurinder Chadha, Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta, some of major characteristics of Indian English cinema could be explored.

The Kenyan born Indian, Gurinder Chadha, has immigrated to Great Britain. Her first major film was *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and through this, she had attempted to exhibit the images of Indian society in Great Britain, to the wider public. Moreover, she tried to scrutinize the cross-cultural conflict as well as the generation gap and sexism. But it was with her another film, *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), she became a brand name in this genre. The film was a huge commercial hit. Chadha, through her films, tries to challenge the images of Indian culture, which could be absorbed by White public. In her films, she converses, what it is like to be situated within two cultures at the same time and through her lead characters, she shows how such people manage to live in such a condition. In short, she posits her characters in a bicultural world. In order to bring in the flavor of India and its culture, Chadha pinpoints at certain aspects such as family, food, ceremonies, rituals, and festivals etc. Chadha works with her films in such a way that they work for both Indian and non-Indian audience. Chadha included both the Indian and the Western society so that they are well-received in both of them.

Mira Nair, another Indian film director, whose production is based in New York, made her entry into this field with her debut, *Salaam Bombay!* (1988). She has received many awards and honors for her works and her films are basically based on Indian themes. Her another film *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) attained a cross-over success due to the skill with which the film accustoms a Western audience with sights and sounds of a new global India. The film uses a lavish Punjabi wedding as a juncture for dramatizing the reunion of family members who are scattered across the globe. But the notion of global India does not simply indicate the large numbers of Indians living in diaspora, but it also implicates the social and cultural transformation that India has undergone since 1991. The film exposes a post-modern world in which cell-phones and e-mails coexist with ancient rituals, customs and traditions. It portrayed an India where the earlier tabooed things like sexual topics were now openly discussed as a result of the influence of television channels. The film reveals that at the core of the struggle between tradition and modernity, what stands is a woman's right to select those things that are withheld for them by this double standardized society. An example could be the case of Aditi, the heroine, who represents a new generation of Indian women, forced to live a double life in order to satisfy her desire and also to fulfill the wishes of her parents at the same time. She secretly meets the man she loves, the night before her engagement to the Houston NRI, her parents have arranged for her to marry. In foregrounding the clash of modernity and tradition, Mira Nair points at the anxieties about a national identity underlying the commercially successful films of Indian cinema.

Deepa Mehta is an Indo-Canadian film director and screenwriter, famous for her Elements Trilogy, *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998), and *Water* (2005). All these movies discuss social issues in India. Unlike the above discussed movies of Chadha and Nair, the mode of language is not English, but Hindi. The movie *Earth* addresses the issue of communal riot and violence in pre-partition India. Hence the question of how this could be categorized as an Indian English cinema arises. This gives a different dimension to the features of Indian English cinema. Not only the language, but the background of its technicians and the director herself, the point of narration of a Parsi, all these might have gone into while categorizing this film as an Indian English movie. It features the communalization of people, which is evident in the character of Dil Navaz, the Ice Candy Man. In the beginning, he being a part of the gang of friends who belonged to various communities did not treat them distinctly according to their classes. Mehta shows how the riot has inflicted upon him a savage mentality to take revenge on Hindus and Sikhs, no matter what they really meant to him. Such a situation is also visible in Aparna Sen's *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer*. Another film, *The Japanese Wife* actually critiques the non-material relationship connoted by the Indian society, through the concept of marriage. The Indian concept that the relationship between a husband and wife is lot more than physical; it is spiritual bond is being criticized here.

Through the medium of cinema, the emergence of lots of public spheres such as transnational can be experienced. Even if it is a vernacular film, by adding ingredients that are Indian in nature, invites a wide range of audience.

And cinema being a carrier of ideologies becomes a culturalist-nationalist public sphere. In the case of these films too, they convey a lot of ideologies. Indian films convey patriotic feelings, even if they are meant to be commercial and entertaining in nature. The characters' persistence in retaining the Indian culture and its values regarding the concept of marriage and life partner and physical relationship are illustrations of this. Moreover, some films explicitly exhibits certain things like salute to the Indian tri-coloured flag, listening to patriotic songs as a part of nostalgia and to evoke nationalist feelings, all these demonstrates the perpetuation of patriotic feelings.

In Indian movies, the story used to be centered on a man, who got alienated in a foreign society. But now, in the movies of Chadha and Nair especially, the story was that of women, who became secluded both in the Western society as well as in the family. Revathy's *Mitr, My Friend*, Chadha's *Mistress of Spices* are good examples of this. Thus Indian English cinemas talk about nations and alienations. Sometimes theses alienations are shown in a philosophical sense in some movies. Another interesting feature visible in these movies is the mode of language used. Though they use English for most of the times, vernacular dialects and certain

colloquial usages often step into the scene, which do not have hazardous repercussions on the international reputation of the film.

With the advent of diaspora filmmakers like Gurindar Chadha, Mira Nair, and Aparna Sen, Indian English films became purely either Punjabi or Bengali in nature. Their films provide an aura that the whole nation called India can be capsuled into a Punjabi or Bengali community. The customs and traditions of Bengalis and Punjabis are being generalized as that of the whole Indian society that includes many communities. Hence it could be seen that these filmmakers impart their notions and feelings into these films and what is shown is from the point of view of their communities and themselves. To conclude, Indian English cinema converses the issues of identity especially of people living in diaspora, issue of relationships, immigrant dreams and fantasies etc., which are mostly concerned with the people producing these films. The recruitment of films to this genre can be done, based on variant things like the filmmakers and technicians, the mode of language, the point of narration, the cultural spheres depicted, etc. But needless to say, the films claim to feature a hybrid variety of Indian and Western.

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