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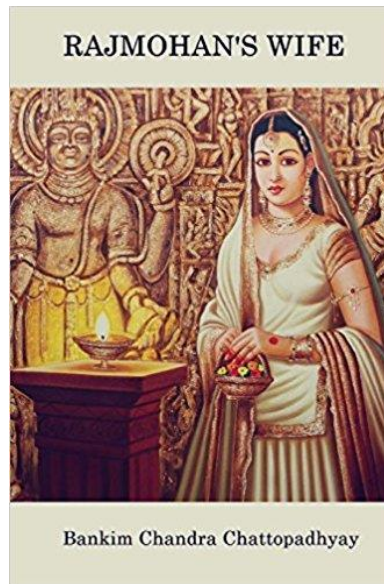
Dr. V. Rajasekaran, Editor

Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching and Research in
English Language and Literature

VIT, Chennai

A Study of the Societal Reflections in the Literature of
Indian Writing in English

Dr. Inayat Chaudhary, M.A., Ph.D.



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Rajmohans-Wife-Bankim-Chandra-Chattopadhyay/dp/1981262431>

Beginnings of Indian Writing in English

Literature of any language dramatically demonstrates the myriad of tensions, happenings, turbulences, transitions of its Age. Literature then becomes a strong representative of reality by becoming the Mirror of the society. In this paper a thorough understanding will be made on this context with particular reference to literature of Indian Writing in English and how it shapes and reflects upon its surroundings.

To begin with, attempts must be made to trace when exactly literature of Indian Writing in English began in the Indian context. It is believed that the Language of English was introduced in India in the 19th Century by the Colonizers-the British and its purpose could be well comprehended through 'Macaulay's Minutes' which clearly stated: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a

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class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” Therefore, the purpose as can be seen was solely self-seeking. Soon, English began to be disseminated through the field of education in Schools and Universities and one can say that the development of Indian English began to take place. It is for this, M.K Naik defines Indian English literature as “literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality”.

Earliest Adoption of Indian English

Amongst the earliest proponents who adopted the medium of Indian English in their writing was Henry Derozio who made its use to write poetry. In fact, poetry was the earliest genre to adopt English whereas fiction came a bit late. This became evident in the efforts of Kyalash Chunder Dutt’s “A Journal of 48 Hours of the Year 1945” which was published in The Calcutta Literary Gazette in 1835. Similarly, Shoshee Chunder Dutt’s “Republic of Orissa: Annals from the pages of the Twentieth Century” appeared in the Saturday Evening Hurkaru in 1845. All of these were in the form of tales and it was only in 1864 that Indian Writing in English got its first novel serialized in the Calcutta Weekly - The Indian Field journal. This novel was *Rajmohan’s Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee which was his first and only novel written in English. Interestingly, one also notices several women writers writing in the nineteenth century be it Raj Lakshmi Debi’s “The Hindoo Wife or The Enchanted Fruit” (1876), Toru Dutt’s unfinished novel – “Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden” (1878), Krupabai Saththianadhan’s “Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life” (1895) and “Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life” which was largely autobiographical (1895); and Shevantibai M. Nikambe’s “Ratanbai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife”.

Crucial Role in Shaping the Society

Therefore, the 19th century became a critical period which led to the beginning of literature being written in Indian English. Such is the beauty of literature that the works were not only shaped by the society of its time but also played a crucial role in shaping the society. The Societal reflections of the 19th century demonstrated the position of women which began to exemplify a seed of change due to gradual adoption and awareness of western cultures and its philosophies of individualism, rationalism. Works like BankimChandra Chatterjee’s “Rajmohan’s Wife” which brings forth the rebellion of the Indian woman towards the ill treatment of society. Similarly, Krupabai Saththianadhan’s autobiographical work-“ Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life” powerfully reflects the emergence of the idea of ‘New Indian Woman’ who is educated ,conscious of her rights and defies the patriarchal ideologies due to the British influence of socio-cultural reforms and other radical changes. Literature then becomes a powerful medium to reflect upon the society of its times and attempts to imitate the very transitions of that period and its realities.

Twentieth Century – Call for Freedom

Similarly, as one moves into the 20th century, the call for freedom became a prominent theme in many works. This was marked by several other sub themes of rural vs. urban divide, East-West relationship, communal problems, discrimination on the basis of caste (plight of the untouchables), color, gender and the hardships of the economically poor. In fact, it was the novel

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“Murugan, the Tiller” by K. S. Venkataramani which first depicted in a breathtakingly realistic manner one among the many sub-themes cited here wherein one finds a contrast between the destructive city life with village life which represents our traditions.

Pioneers of Indian Fiction in English

However, it is the trio of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao who can be considered the founding fathers as well as the pioneers of Indian fiction. It is this trio which dives deep into the metaphysics of what is an Indian and reaches the very root of the Indian tradition. They, then, powerfully depict the presence of various social elements echoing throughout the pre-independence period. For instance, Mulk Raj Anand’s – “Untouchable” and “Coolie” are painted with colors of ‘Social Realism’ wherein the work “Untouchable” deals with the burning problem of the society – untouchability or social alienation through the character of Bakha. Dr. P. K. Rajan sums up Anand’s literary achievements stating, “The achievement of Anand as a novelist in Indian English literature has a three-fold significance. First, he is the forerunner of the protest novel in India and the third world with the underdog in society at the very centre of the narrative delineating the suffering of the poor in a colonial situation projecting the hope of a change at hand in terms of the desire image...” Next comes the writer of “Kanthapura” – Raja Rao who has delineated the microscopic picture of Indian politics, culture and societal concerns from roughly 1919-1930. Similarly, R. K. Narayan, the last of the *trimurtis*, also contributes through his works like “Swami and his Friends”, “The Guide”, “The Man-Eater of Malgudi”, “The Vendor of Sweets” and many more to offer to his audience a realistic panorama of the Indian society. In fact, Raja Rao himself speaks of the distinction between the three – “Mulk Raj talks of poor people disinherited, Narayan talks of the middle classes, Raja Rao talks of the metaphysical”. Therefore, the early decades of the twentieth century were well represented by the writers in a realistic manner. Indeed, literature then becomes a true reflection of the society and its contemporary times.

Post-independence

As one moves beyond the period of Independence, one observes the emergence of a motley of collage of various realisms- social realism, psychological realism, historical realism, mythical realism and magic realism in Indian English fiction. Social Realism is well evident in the works of women writers- be it Nayantara Sehgal through the theme of politics, in Kamala Das who talks openly about carnal love, Shashi Deshpande and Kamala Markandaya who demonstrate it through human relationships. In fact, Shiv Kumar had once rightly observed regarding the work ‘That Long Silence’ by Shashi Deshpande “Jaya the protagonist, resents the image of a wife ‘yoked’ to her husband – ‘a pair of bullocks yoked together’. This is the image that haunts her all the time.” Thereby, displaying the true miserable status a woman occupied in the Indian Society. The aspect of psychological realism is used by most of the women writers, but it is Anita Desai who becomes one of the best representatives of it who much like Kamala Das or Virginia Woolf dives deep into the human psyche to provide a true portrayal of human character. In fact, Anita Desai herself states in the article, “The Indian Writer’s Problems”, “By writing novels that have been catalogued by critics as psychological and that are purely subjective, I have been left free to employ simply, the language of the interior. Even when two characters meet, they use this particular type of language – the language of their thoughts, their

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interior selves – which has nothing to do with geography and can be written in any language”. The next category of Realism which is mythic realism is used extensively by Shashi Tharoor visible in his work “The Great Indian Novel.” Others like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh have woven their work together by making use of Magic Realism.

Literature as Powerful Tool

Overall, literature becomes a powerful tool to pinpoint the miseries, traumas, advantages, shortcomings of the real society to which we all belong. Literature portrays reality as it is with no idealization or romanticizing the same. For critic Coles, “As a manner of writing, realism relies on the use of specific details to interpret life faithfully and objectively.” Many also consider it to be three dimensional, encompassing within itself characters, human relationships and an independent life. Realism challenges the very notion of ‘Art for art’s sake’ and rather promotes ‘Art for Ourselves’. Realism in literature helps in launching various progressive and evolutionary movements. No wonder, the true panoramic view of the society and its social awareness and consciousness helps in making literature a true medium of societal reflections.

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