



Indian English Fiction: Seeding to Efflorescence

Sami Ullah Bhat

Research Scholar

Email: sami99064.ss73@gmail.com

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Abstract— *Indian English literature began as an interesting by-product of an eventful encounter in the late eighteenth century between a vigorous and enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India. As a result of this encounter as F.W. Bain puts it 'India a withered trunk... suddenly shot out with foreign foliage'. The first problem that confronts the historian of Indian English literature is to define its nature. The question has been made rather complicated owing to two factors: first this body of writing has, from time to time, been designated variously as 'Indo-Anglian literature', 'Indian Writing in English' and 'Indo-English literature'. Secondly the failure to make clear-cut distinctions has also often led to confusion between categories such as 'Anglo-Indian literature', literature in the Indian languages translated into English and original composition in English by Indians. Thus, in his A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature (1908), E.F. Oaten considers the poetry of Henry Derizio as a part of 'Anglo-Indian literature' the same critic in his essay on Anglo-Indian literature in the Cambridge of English Literature includes Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore and Arvindo Ghose among 'Anglo-Indian writers along with F.W. Bain and F.A. Steel.*



Keywords— *Indian literature, Anglo-Indian literature, Drama and Fiction.*

Indian English literature may be defined as literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality. It is clear that neither 'Anglo-Indian Literature', nor literal translations by others (as distinguished from creative translations by the authors themselves) can legitimately form part of this literature.

The former comprises the writings of British or Western authors concerning India. Kipling Foster, F.W. Bain, Sir Edwin Arnold, F.A. Steel, John Masters, Paul Scott, M.M. Kaye and many others have all written about India, but their work obviously belongs to British literature.

Similarly, translations from the Indian languages into English cannot also form part of Indian English literature, except when they are creative translations by the authors themselves. If Homer and Vigil, Dante and Dostoevsky translated into English don't become British authors by any stretch of the imagination there is little reason why Tagore's novels, most of his short stories and some of his plays translated into English by others should form part of Indian English literature. On the other hand a work like *Gitanjali*

which is creative translation by the author himself should qualify for inclusion. The Crux of the matter is the distinctive literary phenomenon that emerges when an Indian sensibility tries to express itself originally in a medium of expression which is not primarily Indian. There is, of course, that infinitesimally small class of Indian society called the 'Anglo-Indian', i.e. the Eurasians who claim English as their mother tongue but with notable exceptions like Henry Derizio, Aubrey Menen and Ruskin Bond, few of them have tried to express themselves creatively in English. But even in their case, the Indian strain in them is bound to condition the nature of both their artistic sensibility and their way of expression. (In fact, the poetry of Derozio is a copybook example of this.)

It is obvious that Indian English literature, thus defined is not part of English literature, any more than American literature use and can be said to be branch of British literature. It is legitimately a part of Indian literature, since its differentia is the expression in it of an Indian ethos. Its use of English as a medium may also give it a place in Commonwealth literature, but that is merely a matter of

critical convenience, since the Commonwealth is largely a political entity and, in any case, this does not in the smallest measure affect the claim of Indian English literature to be primarily a part of Indian literature.

Another problem which the historian of this literature has to face is that of choosing from among the various appellations given to it from time to time viz, 'Indo-Anglian literature', 'Indian Writing in English', 'Indo- English literature' and 'Indian English literature'. The first of these terms was used as the title of the *Specimen Composition from Native Students*, published in Calcutta in 1883. The phrase received general currency when K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the pioneer of this discipline, used it as a title to his first book on the subject: *Indo Anglian Literature* (1943). The advantage with 'Indo-Anglian' is that it can be used both as adjective and as substantive, but 'Indo-Englishman' would be unthinkable. 'Indo-Anglian', as pointed out by Alphonso-Karkala, is that it would suggest 'relation between two countries (India and England) rather than a country and a language'. Indo- Anglian is thus hardly an accurate term to designate this literature. Apart from that, 'Indo-Anglian' also appears to be cursed with the shadow of the Anglican perpetually breathing ecclesiastically down its slender neck, and threatening to blur its identity. (In fact, Professor Iyengar has noted how, in his book, *Literature and Authorship in India*, 'Indo-Anglian' was changed to 'Indo-Anglican' by the enterprising London printer who, puzzled at so odd an expression, transformed it into something familiar.) For his first comprehensive study of the subject, published in 1962, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar used this phrase, 'Indian Writing in English'. Two pioneering collections of critical essays on this literature, both published in 1968, also followed his example: *Indian Writing in English*. But the term 'Indian Writing in English' has been accused of having a rather circumlocutory air, and while 'Indo-English literature' possesses an admirable compactness, it has, as noted earlier, been used to denote translations by Indians from Indian literature into English. The Sahitya Akademi has recently accepted 'Indian English Literature' as the most suitable appellation for this body of writing. The term emphasizes two significant ideas: first that this literature, which though written in different languages, has an unmistakable unity and secondly, that it is an inevitable product of nativization of the English language to express the Indian sensibility.

The British connection with India was effectively established in the beginning of the seventeenth century, though the first Englishman ever to visit India did so as early as A.D. 883, when one Sigelm, as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle notes, was sent there by King Alfred on a pilgrimage, in fulfilment of a vow.

The rise of Indian English literature was an aspect of this Indian renaissance. As Sri Aurobindo points out, the Indian renaissance was less like the European one and more like the Celtic movement in Ireland, 'the attempt of a reawakened national spirit to find a new impulse of self-expression which shall give the spiritual force for a great reshaping and rebuilding'.

More than two decades prior to Macaulay's Minute of 1835, Indians had already started writing in English. Cavelly Venkata Boriah's *Account of the Jain's* published in Asiatic Researchers or Transactions of the society in Bengal for inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Art, Sciences and Literature of Asia, Vol. IX (London, 1809, written in c. 1803) is perhaps the first published composition in English of some length by an Indian Boriah (1776-1803), as assistant to Col. Colin Mackenzie (1753-1821) the first Surveyor General of India and well-known in South Indian history for the collection, Mackenzie Manuscripts was described by Mackenzie as a youth of the quickest genius and disposition.

Raja Rammohun Roy's essay on 'A Defence of Hindu Theism' (1817) may be regarded as the first original publication of significance in the history of Indian English literature. Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), aptly described by Rabindranath Tagore as 'the inaugurator of the modern age in India' was indeed the morning star of the Indian renaissance. Rammohun Roy wrote extensively in Bengali and English. [His collected writings *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy* (6 vols, 1945-51) were edited by Kalidas Nag and Debajyoti Burman. Selected Works of Raja Rammohun Roy, in 1977]. The earliest of his writings on religion were in the form of translations: *An Abridgement of the vedant* (1816) and renderings of the *Kena and Isa Upanishads* (1816).

In Bengal, Krishna Mohan Banerji (1813-85), a pupil of Henry Derozio, the poet, and one of the prominent Christian converts of the day, wrote strong articles exposing the errors and inconsistencies of Hinduism in *The Enquirer* in 1831. His *Dialogues on Hindu Philosophy* (1861) is a potted handbook for missionaries and his *Aryan Witness* (1875) seeks to prove that the Prajapati of the Vedas in Jesus Christ.

The first name that comes to mind when one turns from Bengal to Bombay is that of Bal Shastri Jambhekar (1812-46), a great pioneer of the new awakening in the Bombay presidency. Perhaps the first Sanskrit pundit of note to study English. Jambhekar is best remembered as the founder of the first English-cum-Marathi journal in Maharashtra. The *Durpan* (1832), the aim of which as described in its Prospectus was, to encourage among their countrymen the pursuit of English literature.

In contrast with Bengal and Bombay the north India of the period shows little sustained interest in Indian English literature. But as if to compensate for this, it can boast of having produced the first extensive Indian English autobiography (Rammohan Roy's autobiographical sketch is an all too brief affair): *Autobiography of Latufullah: A Mohamedan Gentleman*. Latufullah's book is the expression of a man enterprising, observant and broad-minded. His boldness of judgement is revealed in his description of the character of the English literature.

The first Indian English poet of note, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-31). In his all too brief poetic career lasting hardly half a dozen years, Derozio published two volumes of poetry: *Poems* (1827) and *The Fakeer of Jungheera: A Metrical Tale and Other Poems* (1828). The shorter poems show a strong influence of British romantic poets in theme (e.g. 'Sonnet: To the Moon'. 'The Golden Vase'. 'Sonnet: Death, My Best Friend'), sentiment, imagery and diction, with some traces of neo-classicism (e.g. 'The heart... Where hope eternal springs', with its obvious echo of Pope). His satirical verse (e.g. 'Don Juanics') and the long narrative poems (*The Fakeer of Jungheera*) clearly indicate his special affinity with Byron. In sharp contrast to the writing sentimentality of his romantic lyrics Derozio's satirical verses give evidence of energy and vigour, as in the lines: 'That sponging is the best of all resources/ For all who have no money in their purses'. *The Fakeer of Jungheera* is an extremely competent narrative of the tragic life of Nuleeni, a high caste Hindu widow, rescued from the funeral pyre by a young robber-chief, whose love she returns. Her relatives, however, are determined to reclaim her. In the ensuing battle, the lover is killed and is finally united in death with the heart-broken Nuleeni. In this fast moving tale, Derozio skilfully employs different metres to suit the changing tone and temper of the narrative. He uses the iambic four-foot couplet for straight-forward narration, but adopts a slower line for the descriptive passages and the anapaestic metre for the spirited account of the battle, while the choruses of the chanting priests and the women round Nuleeni's funeral pyre are in trochaic and dactylic measures.

The first period of Indian English literature may be said to end in the 1850's, a few years before the Indian Revolt of 1857- that great watershed in the relationship between India and Britain. During this period British rule in India was generally accepted by most Indians as a great boon divinely delivered. The holocaust of the Revolt ushered in different ideas. Winds of change soon began to blow over the land, affecting accepted attitudes. It was ultimately as a combined result of these changes that Indian English literature slowly struggled during the next two generations from psittacism to authentic utterance.

During the period from 1857-1920, the Indian ethos gradually underwent a sea-change from the shock of defeat and frustration and the trauma of inferiority feeling to a new-found self-awareness and self-confidence. It is against this background that the work of the prominent writers of this period must be viewed and it now becomes clear why the different psittacism of Kashiprasad Ghose should make room for the confident authenticity of Toru Dutt, Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore, and also why, while we have a solitary Rammohun Roy a genius well ahead of his times before 1857, the next sixty years produced a Ranade and a Gokhale, a Tilakananda and a Vivekananda. Indian English literature really came of age after 1857, when India's rediscovery of her identity became a vigorous all-absorbing quest and when she had learnt enough from the West to progress from imitation and assimilation to creation.

The Indian renaissance of the nineteenth century produced prose of many types of which, as in the earlier period, the two most prominent were historical-political and religious-cultural Prose., and understandably, what was earlier only a thin trickle has by now become a steady and even flow. The Prose was prompted by the two fold impulse of the re-discovery of the Indian past and a strong awareness of the problems of the day. Biography, autobiography, belles-lettres and criticism still remain areas comparatively sparsely cultivated.

Indian English drama dates from 1831, when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote *The Persecuted* or *Dramatic scenes illustrative of the present state of Hindoo society in Calcutta*. In his preface, Banerjee claims that 'inconsistencies and the blackness of the influential members of Hindoo community have been depicted before their eyes. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, a poet translated three of his own Bengali plays into English: *Ratnavali* (1858) a version of Harsha's well known Sanskrit play, *Sermista* (1859) and *Is This Called Civilization?* (1871). Another play of his, *Nation Builders*, was posthumously published in 1922. Ramkinoo Dutt's *Manipura Tragedy* (1893) completes the all too brief tale of Indian English drama published in Bengal in the nineteenth century. In fact, even in Bengal the fountain-head of most forms of Indian English literature drama in English failed to secure a local theatrical habitation, in sharp contrast to plays in the mother tongue (both original and in the form of adaptations from foreign languages), and the appetite for plays in English could more conveniently be fed on performances of established dramatic success in English by foreign authors. For instance, the first Bengali play to be staged (27 November, 1795) was an adaptation of a musical farce *The Disguise* by Jodrell and the Hindoo Theatre established by Prosannakumar Tagore on 21 December 1831 staged

portions of Julius Caesar. Owing to the lack of a firm dramatic in Bengal, as elsewhere in India, grew sporadically as mostly closet drama., and even later, only Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya produced a substantial corpus of dramatic writing.

As compared to Bengal, the story of early Indian English drama in Bombay is much briefer. Though the first theatre in Bombay. The Bombay Amateur Theatre, was built in 1776, dramatic activity was almost exclusively limited to performance by visiting European touring companies. With the rise of modern drama in Marathi and Gujarati heralded by Annasaheb Kirloskar's epoch-making production of *Shakuntal* in Marathi in 1880, the vernacular stage soon posed a formidable challenge to English drama. The only available examples of Indian English drama in Bombay during the nineteenth century are C.S. Nazir's verse play *The First Par Baronet* (1886), and D.M.Wadia's *The Indian Heroine* (1877), based on the events of 1857. And P.P. Meherjee's *Dolly Parsen* (1918) is the only other effort of note before 1920.

Madras began later than Bombay but soon surpassed it in playwriting. The most productive of the Madras dramatists of the period was V.V.Srinivasa Aiyangar (1871-1954), author of *Blessed in a Wife* (1911). *The Point of View* (1915), *Wait for the Stroke* (1915) and *The Bricks Between* (1918).

This brief chronicle of the growth of early Indian drama may be concluded with a mention of what is perhaps the only known English play to come from North India during the period: *Death or Dishonour* by an anonymous author published in Dehradun in 1914.

Though its growth in the later years far exceeded that most other forms, fiction was actually the last to arrive on the Indian English literary scene. The earliest fictional efforts—tales rather than novels properly appeared in journals, *Kylash Chunder Dutt's A Journal of 48 hours of the Year 1945* was published in *The Calcutta Literary Gazette* on 6 June 1835. In this literary fantasy, the author narrates the story of an imaginary unsuccessful revolt against the British rule a hundred years later. Cast in the same mould, *Shoshee Chunder Dutt's Republic of Orissa: Annals from the pages of the Twentieth Century* appeared in the *Saturday Evening Hurkaru* on 25 May 1845. Set in the second decade of the twentieth century, this fantasy depicts a British defeat leading to the establishment of a democratic republic in Orissa. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's (1838-94) first and only novel in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* was serialized in the *Calcutta Weekly, The Indian Field* in 1864, though it appeared in book form only in 1935, (In this version, the first three chapters are translated from the author's later Bengali version by B.N. Banerji, since the English original

could not be traced the rest constitutes the author's serialized English text). An interesting feature of style is the liberal use of Indian words, creating local color.

From the sixties up to the end of nineteenth century, stray novels continued to appear mostly by writers from the Bengal and Madras presidencies, with Bombay, strangely enough, lagging far behind. (Some of these novels were, however, published not in India, but in London). And there are no novelists with a sizable output to their credit. A majority of these novels are social and a few historical, and their models are obviously the eighteenth and the nineteenth century. British fiction, particularly Defoe, Fielding and Scott. An interesting development is the surprisingly early appearance of women novelists, though female education took a long time to spread. Novels by as many as three novelists appeared before the turn of the century. Toru Dutt's unfinished novel, *Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden*, a romantic love story set in England (Calcutta, 1878., *Krupabai Sathianadhan's Kamala, A Story Of Native Christian Life* (Madras and Bombay, 1895) both thinly veiled exercises in autobiography and *Shevantibai M. Nikambe's Ratanba: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Young Wife* (London, 1895).

B.R. Rajam's Iyer's fragment of a religious novel, *True Greatness or Vasudeva Sastri* (serialized in *Prabuddha Bharata*, 1896-98., published in book form, London, 1925).

With the turn of the century, novelists with a somewhat more substantial output began to appear. Romesh Chunder Dutt, whose verse and prose have already been considered, translated two of his own Bengali novels into English.

The Slave Girl of Agra, an Indian Domestic Life (London, 1902) is set in the Mughal period. Sarath Kumar Ghose's *Verdict of the Gods* (N.Y.) 1905. Later published under the title, *1001 Indian Nights: The Trails of Narayan Lal*. (London, 1906).

Apart from these novelists, there are again stray novels by many stray novels by many writers mostly from the Bengal and Madras presidencies with Bombay and the north bringing up the rear.

This survey of the period between the Great Revolt of 1857 and the first countrywide. Non-cooperation movement of 1920 has shown how these sixty-odd years produced a number of mature works in verse and prose, though drama was yet to establish a tradition and fiction still remained swaddling clothes. The Indian resurgence, which had already borne considerable fruit by now, was to receive an unprecedented momentum in the 1920's when the star of Tilak set and the sun of Gandhi rose on the Indian horizon.

The winds of change blowing steadily across the Indian subcontinent during more than a half century after the Great

Revolt of 1857 had left tell-tale marks on the political and social geography of the country. The end of the First World War a watershed in European history proved to be an equally significant period in Indian life, when the Gandhian whirlwind began to sweep over the length and the breadth of the land, upsetting all established political strategies and ushering in refreshingly new ideas and methods which shook Indian life in several spheres to the core. As Nehru puts it, Gandhi... Was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths.

The tempo of political agitation was admirably kept up after the War by Tilak, who emerged from the temporary retirement after his release from prison in 1914, rejoined the Congress, and founded the Home Rule League in 1916.

The entire period of nearly three decades of the Gandhian age was one of far-reaching changes of the Gandhian age was not only in the political scene but in practically all areas of Indian life also.

In the social sphere, the Gandhian movement led, among other things, to an unprecedented awakening among women, who responded whole-heartedly to Gandhi's call. This was unique in the entire history of India.

Indian English literature of the Gandhian age was inevitably influenced by these epoch making developments in Indian life. A highly significant feature is the sudden flowering of the novel during the thirties, when the Gandhian movement was perhaps at its strongest. It is possible to see the connection here. If one remembers that by this decade, the nationalist upsurge had stirred the entire Indian society to the roots to a degree and on a scale unprecedented earlier, making it acutely conscious of the pressures of the present in all fields of national life and it is out of this consciousness that fiction, in Lionel Trilling's words, 'for it, is constituted of 'very web and texture of society as it really exists' and hence finds a fertile soil in a society in ferment. The work of K.S.Venkataramani, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao would not perhaps have been possible had the miracle that was Gandhi not occurred during this period. In fact, it was during this age that Indian English fiction discovered some of its most compelling themes: the ordeal of the freedom struggle, East-West relationship, the communal problem and the plight of the untouchables, the landless poor, the downtrodden, the economically exploited of prose, however, do not seem to keep pace with the great strides the novel took during this period., and that this should be so is an apt illustration of the fundamental irony of literary history which demonstrates time and again how the process of literary creation can be understood up to a certain point beyond which the logic of critical analysis begins to flounder. Thus, while the novel flourishes (to be followed by the short story soon), Indian English poetry

unaccountably fails to register any signal gains, though bliss it was for a poet in the Gandhian age to be alive, as the example of the poetry in many Indian languages of the period (like the fiery lyrics of Kusumagaraja in Marathi, for instance) conclusively demonstrates., and drama with a few exceptions continues to be the Cinderella it was earlier. Only prose especially political prose shows that continuing vitality which had already produced a number of notable works during the earlier periods as well.

As in the previous decades, political prose inevitably continues to predominate during the Gandhian age also. This pride here naturally goes to Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948).

Gandhi's English writings fall into three periods. To the brief early London period (1888-91) belong to London Dairy, a chronicle of his sojourn in London, written at the age of nineteen, and ten brief essays contributed to The Vegetarian and The Vegetarian Messenger on subjects like 'Indian Vegetarians', 'Foods of India' and 'Some Indian Festivals'. To the aftermath of this period may be ascribed the Guide to London written probably during 1893-94 after his return to India. This essay of 55 pages is a rather colorless document based on Gandhi's own experience in London. None of these early writings is marked by an literary distinction.

The South African (1893-1915) reveals Gandhi blossoming, out as a disputationist, journalist and author. In the pamphlets, 'An Appeal to Every Briton in South Africa' (1895), 'The Indian Franchise' (1895) and 'Grievances of the British Indians in South Africa' (1896), Gandhi argues vigorously for the amelioration of the lot of the South African Indians. The Indian opinion (published in Gujarati and English 1903-14) was the first of the journal launched by him. Gandhi's first major work, Hind Swaraj appeared in its columns in 1909. Originally written in Gujarati, it was translated by the author himself into English in 1910. Hailed by John Middleton Murry as 'one of the spiritual classics of the world' and the greatest book that has been written in modern times.

During the thirty-three years of the Indian period (1915-48), Gandhi ran the two well-known journals, Young India (1919-32) and Harijan (1933-48), and all his writings henceforth appeared here in serial form. Most of these were written originally in Gujarati and were translated, not by the author, but by others into English, though the translation was mostly revised at places by Gandhi. It is therefore a moot point whether, unlike Hind Swaraj, they can legitimately form part of Indian English literature. Among these his autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth (Vol. I, 1927 Vol II, 1928 translated by Mahadev Desai).

Gandhi's writings are a mine of stimulating thought on political, social, economic, cultural and spiritual issues.

Unlike prose, the poetry of this period gives no evidence of any new major voices, the most significant verse being produced by earlier poets like Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore, who had consolidated their reputation before the advent of the Gandhian age. In fact, as already pointed out, it is surprising that the impact of the Gandhian whirlwind produced no outstanding poetry of any kind, though numerically the poetic scene remains as thickly populated as earlier.

These writers of verse may conveniently be considered in two groups, practitioners of religious, mystical, philosophical and reflective verse, including the disciples of Sri Aurobindo, and poets mainly in the Romantic-Victorian tradition, who have a wider range of themes and who occasionally also try, rather half-heartedly, to experiment with modernism. The two groups are obviously not mutually exclusive, since the romantic banner flutters equally prominently over the heads of the poets of the first group also.

To the school of Sri Aurobindo belong K.D. Sethna (*The Secret Splendor*, 1941), Punjalal (*Lotus Petals*, 1943), Nolina Kanta Gupta (*To The Heights*, 1944), Nirodbaran (*Sun-Blossoms*, 1947) and Nishikanto (*Dreams Cadences*, 1947). Their verse faithfully echoes the master in theme and sentiment, diction and imagery, but hardly succeeds in transmuting the echo into individual voice.

Those who derive their light mainly from the sun of British Romanticism from a much larger group, many of them being academicians of note. G.K. Chettur (1898-1936) published five collections of verse including *Sounds and Images* (1921), *The Temple Tank and other Poems* (1932) and *The Shadow of God* (1934). S.K. Chettur (1905-1973), brought out a solitary collection: *Golden Stair and other Poems* (1961). Armando Menezes (1902-1983) experimented with the mock epic in *The Fund* (1923) and satire in *The Emigrant* (1933) before he found his lyrical voice in *Chords and Discords* (1936) *Chaos and Dancing Star* (1946) and *The Ancestral Face* (1951).

The variety and fecundity of the post-Independence novel are hardly evinced in the field of the short story, the writing of which still continues to be mostly a by-product of the novel workshop. Of the novelists, Bhattacharya, Khuswant Singh, Malgonkar, Nahal and Joshi have produced short story collections, while among the women writers, apart from Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Negril Dalal and Attiah Hosain, the number of the practitioners of this form is not very large, as compared to the novelists.

Among other short story collections of the period may be mentioned N.R. Deobhankar's *Hemkumari and Other*

Stories (1949), A.D. Gorwala's *The Queen of Beauty and Other Tales* (1971) K.B. Vaid's *Silence and other stories* (1972), translated by the author himself from his Hindi original and Shiv K. Kumar's *Beyond Love and Other Stories* (1980).

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