

Contemporary Indian English Fiction: Experiences and Reflections

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For any discussion of Indian English Fiction (IEF), the dynamics behind the term 'Indian', and how this term has been applied to the cultural history of India have to be explored in some detail. Since the term 'India' itself is a broad term and has to be perceived against various relevant considerations of histories and cultures, it becomes almost mandatory to refer to the sources that explain of the term 'India' for the present contexts of discussion. Subsequently, a debate of the notion of 'Indianness' as a problem as well as a source for the Indian English authors has helped in considering the literary culmination of the notion of 'Indianness' in IEF in its two hundred years of literary history. It is then very useful to understand how the motifs of 'Indianness' have been developed by the Indian English authors, both Resident and Non-resident, who seem to know about India well through constant travel and frequent visits to and in the country.

Involved in the discussion of 'India' in contemporary times is also an awareness of the nature of Indian civilization, the Indo-Western encounter, and the contemporary nationalist politics of identity formation. Available records show that the representation of 'India' and its possible 'Indian' character were driven by the needs to legitimize the very business of 'construction' by the Western scholars during the 19th century. Considered in terms of IEF, such ideas work as necessary prerequisites to show how certain generalizations can help in understanding the dynamics of knowledge-formation in India. However, knowledge-formation is also political as well as cultural, as Makarand Paranjape writes that one need not specify what constitutes an accurate representation or spell out what the 'real' India is. One is only to identify and expose what one considers inaccurate or distorted representation, because India is 'constructed' out of a politics of inclusions and exclusions. Paranjape's main preoccupation here is with certain prerequisites of the Indian English novels. He believes that Indian novels have to be perceived against the backdrop of our rich and continuous narrative tradition which had helped in the construction of the idea of 'India' (16).

In this context, I am also reminded of A. K. Ramanujan, who stated in his essay "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?" that "[t]here is no single Indian way of thinking. There are great and little traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban, classical and folk. Each language, caste and region had its special worldview" (qtd. in Chattarji and Chakravarty 143). Such opinions clearly suggest that there has never been a single definition of 'India', and that the context in which reference to 'India' is made, helps in defining 'Indianness' in a particular period. Placed in a very specific socio-political milieu of the nineteenth century, the English language became instrumental in bringing remarkable changes in the realm of Indian Writing in English. So, any discussion of the later twentieth century IEF will necessitate a re-reading of India's literary and cultural history before and after the entry of the English language. It was found so interesting and challenging to read IEF against such a backdrop following which the Indian writers were constrained to define their 'Indian' experiences through an alien language. However, K. M. George in his *Masterpieces of Indian Literature* has done an excellent literary mapping of Indian literature written in many Indian languages. This book is one

of the very few endeavours to familiarize, through a link language like English, the readers of the world with the rich repertoire of language literatures from India.

There still remains an answer to the question – What is so ‘Indian’ about IEF? There cannot be any single acceptable answer to a query like this, although a survey of the last three decades of the 20th century is very useful in this context. However, such a survey also encompasses, within its periphery, works of Indian poetry and drama by different ‘Indian’ authors who are found to be working with the idea of ‘Indianness’ in their own ways. While discussing the notion of ‘Indianness’ in the context of IEF, other three questions remain very vital: What is ‘India’? What does ‘India’ represent? and What represents ‘Indianness’? Some answers to these questions can be drawn from the attempts made by a fiction writer like Naipaul who sees India as a ‘wounded’ civilization, and India’s failure as a nation during the Emergency, according to him, is a deep crisis in civilization. Such views help in assuming that studying ‘India’ as an ‘idea’ also entails many of the imminent problems of definitions. Because, critics like Eric Hobsbaum would like to state that the nation as a set of ‘invented tradition’ also comprises national symbols, mythology and history. It is against such a background that one needs to reflect on the idea of Indian Writing in English in general.

Any serious discussion of the ideas of ‘India’ and ‘Indianness’, can be traced back in nearly two hundred years of scholarly renderings over sources, histories, influences, formal aspects, narrative traditions, and so on. But the generic formation of IEF and the evaluation of its aesthetic values find themselves entangled with the Nativistic expression and articulation of identity. The expatriate Indian English authors, whose main literary language is English, find themselves in a privileged position to deal with such a situation more effectively. Although, the Western critical theories have rendered powerful influences by providing methods to analyse a text written by an author of Indian origin, the tendency to explore the inner sources of criticism in India has resulted in a re-newed concern over Nativism around 1970s and 80s. Following this, ‘Indianness’ in the discussion of the Nativist critics like Bhalchandra Nemade and G. N. Devy denotes a search for roots in the Indian narrative traditions that establish connections with India’s cultural past. This is important, as such an examination helps in rejecting the views of discontinued traditions propounded mainly by the Orientalist histories of India and Indian culture.

One way to examine the idea of ‘India’ in IEF, is to consider the synthesis between India’s past and present. Historical survey informs that IEF, since its formative stage, has gone through a process of socio-cultural cross-fertilization, and following decolonization, this cross-fertilization had become very enriching. So, the examination of the English language to narrate Indian experiences in fiction, and how it has synthesised the East and the West, from which Indian Writing in English had actually emerged, help in discussing ‘Indianness’ in the present times. Such realizations also ensure an understanding of Europe’s scholarly quest for Asian civilizations as a tool for the consolidation of power and imperial control which indirectly helped in ‘othering’ the East from a fundamentally different and necessarily superior West (Ray Choudhury, x-xii). Then, the kind of response that had evolved out of such processes reflected the problematics involved in concept-formation. Consequently, the roots of ‘Indianness’ could be located in the ways Indian intellectuals perceived Orientalism which helped them to delve deeper into their own Indian heritage. Although Orientalism in some way became instrumental in the ‘discovery of India’, the silent and continuous flow of pan-

Indian cultural elements had the power to even dismiss all the claims on the ‘discovery’ made by the Indologists and Orientalists.

The first reference to the idea of ‘India’ can be traced in the Vedas and the Hindu epics. But the first reference to the term ‘India’ as a definable entity is to be traced in the narratives of the Muslim travelers to India. As Sanskrit was a major pan-Indian language till the 11th century, the two Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were constantly being appropriated to newer contexts in subsequent times. Even after the advent of the Urdu language, the unifying ethos in literature remained Hindu with Sanskrit as its source language. An Indian author, whether native or immigrant, while producing a fictional text should never ignore the fact that he derives the symbols, images, and references from the same stock of cultural forms unified through the processes of assimilation in the political history of India. But a major rift with such a tradition was caused by European influences which divided the consciousness of the Indians. Following this, the fictional representation of ‘Indianness’ in the works of the fiction writers too got divided between an inclination towards tradition and an obsession with the modern world of specification, alienation, and separation.

However, along with a reference made to the Hindu traditions, one should also recognize the religious and linguistic diversity within India by acknowledging the contributions of even the non-Hindu traditions to India’s rich cultural heritage. However, with the emergence of the Nativist critics the discussion over the issue of traditions and its impacts has undergone further changes. One must be cautious that no discussion of Nativism can be apolitical. On the one hand, the ideas of ‘India’ and ‘Indianness’ had almost been hijacked by the religious Hindu jingoists following the rise of BJP in the Indian political scenario around the last decade of the 20th century; on the other, one is fast moving towards a consumerist market society whose interpretations of ‘political freedom’ does not connote ideas of autonomy. K. Satchidanandan in his essay “Indian Literature: Nativism and Its Ambivalence” states that any discussion of Nativism in this context will have to be conducted against political separatism, because it may degenerate into a form of rustic revivalism and an unconditional valorization of the feudal values. The Nativistic task of ‘deconstructing’ the Indian narrative tradition must also be a part of the greater project of constructing unity at a higher and more realistic conceptual level, of the plurality within the nation, and of interconnectivity within the cultures (29-30).

Against such a background, the study of ‘Indianness’ in IEF both as a source and a problem should be considered significant. Also important is the exploration of what constitutes the main research agendas of the authors. In India, where certain class and caste identities are taken to be representative of some essential Indianness, those excluded from such identities risk marginalization and victimization. A study of the fictional works of authors like Salman Rushdie, who in fact shaped Indian Writing in English a distinguished literary genre since 1980s, are useful in this context. Because the experience of ‘marginality’ is quite explicit in the fictional works of such authors who find it quite difficult to conform to the contemporary definition of what this ‘marginality’ should be. Also important is their discussion of the ‘constructed’ nature of facts, reality, ideas, histories, and traditions. It is observed that unlike the first generation Indian English authors thriving for a kind of international exposure, Rushdie and his followers often replace that exposure with the idea of travel, dislocation, mass

movement and settlement, and the problem of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Keeping these in mind, the discussion of IEF can be most productively conducted.

It is needless to mention that English was legitimized by the early Indian English novelists as a tool to homogenize the spirit of India under the idea of Indian Nationalism. This aspect also laid the foundation of the modernist ideology of pan-Indianism. For example, Raja Rao despite the individual differences with his contemporaries, subsumed their literary world under the grand narrative of the nation—a strategy that continued till 1960s. But it was none other than Rao who inculcated among his fellow writers a sense of national identity and cultural revivalism. Consequently, both in temper and tone, IEF during that time, continued to nostalgically revisit the Raj with a borrowed notion of an identity that was needed to be forged. But, paradoxically the emergent notions of Indian nationalism continued to plague Indian writing till 1970s when a new kind of writing, followed by Salman Rushdie and his contemporaries, brought about a fresh creative breakthrough (Nanavati and Kar 13). But, in the process, the West has also been recreated as a psychological category from where there is no escape for the Indian English authors like Rushdie. Simultaneously, there continues a resistance to such forms of ‘colonial’ impact. Thus, it is interesting to find out how the authors of the IEF are trying to deal with the problem of identity and articulation. But they have to make choices too. Those who have chosen their alternative within the West have also re-evaluated the ‘occident’ to discuss their relationship with the ‘orient’ which as a course of action has enriched their own oeuvre.

With such available critical baggage in mind, the contemporary fiction writers from India provide a thread on the different notions of ‘India’ which are both political and cultural. It seems that these authors have subscribed to the idea of ‘India’ both as a metaphorical construct and as one based on minute observation of the particularities of Indian life and history. By providing an alternative reading of Post-colonialism itself, these authors are perhaps trying to articulate the paradoxical discourse on ‘marginality’ in Postcolonial discussions which can be seen as yet another major intellectual rendering in IEF. However, one also needs to seriously consider the fact that the notion of ‘Indianness’ in the works of author like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Choudhury, Vikram Seth and others, is to be discussed in terms of specific representative periods, traditions, languages, and literary cultures. However, this is also important to examine the ways they have presented their own specific views on ‘India’ and ‘Indianness’ at various phases of their intellectual life. Besides, their being Non-Resident Indians has also helped them to address their spatial dislocation from India and the consequent socio-cultural displacements.

Several attempts have gone into analyzing the narrative strategies or the representational modes adopted by the authors of IEF which underwrite the politics of cultural representation in the arena of Indian Writing in English. Critics like Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty tend to argue that in the processes of British Imperialism, the making of the Indian national narrative from within India are shifted, appropriated, and redeployed in the forms of new experiences of the emerging Indian nation. But the ‘historical’ and ‘cultural’ are not to be deemed as matters of false consciousness. Instead, they actively influence the shifting and re-ordering of events from the vast array of traditional source materials. It is interesting to note that the authors are often seen to engage themselves in asserting their standpoints by intertextually referring to the historical and cultural traditions of India. Such a shifting

and re-ordering of events from India's traditional source materials become very relevant to the discussion of a text under IEF in the later part of the 20th century.

The theoretical tools like Deconstruction have provided the methods for analyzing an Indian English text written in the present times. But, the various shifts and trajectories in Cultural Studies, that registered itself as a discipline under the auspices of Stuart Hall, have been influencing the Indian intellectuals of the 1990s and afterward since 1970s. Posing a challenge to the old centers and discourses of humanities, they privileged storytelling and popular culture both as a source of value and as an area of study. This provides a valid background to study the Indian authors' adoption of storytelling as a technique to explore India. According to Amit Choudhury, the British Cultural Studies of the 1970s was almost repeated in India during 1990. But, by 2005, it was almost difficult to ask where it was going. As he further states, Indian Cultural Studies became a rewriting and extension of British and American Cultural Studies by defining itself in terms of its relationship to Western humanities through specific lens and angle. Following this, 'Indianness', Postcoloniality, and popular culture were conflated into a single entity recuperated against the humanist assumptions of Western liberal arts (15). But the important point Choudhury raised is that Indian Cultural Studies' emphasis on conflating postcoloniality with popular culture also meant that it effectively refused to recognize, engage with, and most importantly, explore the formative history of tension with its own 'high' cultural space (15).

It seems from the substantially large number of critical discussions that the contemporary expatriate Indian English authors have been particularly attractive to postcolonial critics who often take cultural 'hybridity' as an important and necessary given. For example, Salman Rushdie seems to share ideas with Edward Said when the later supposes that the whole notion of crossing over or moving from one identity to another is extremely important for 'hybridity'. On the other hand, Homi Bhabha in his essay "Dissemination: Time, Narration and the Margins of the Modern Nation" projects culture as a hybrid form. He elaborates culture, its members and its sign, all in terms of the tensions of differences followed by the meeting of past and present which he calls 'Disjunctive temporality'. This is analogous to Rushdie's 'Broken Mirrors' about the migrant (11). Rushdie generalizes the excitement of the homeless like this: "But human beings do not perceive things whole. We are not...wounded creatures, cracked lenses, capable of fractured perceptions" (12).

Another example may be Amitav Ghosh who also shares some similarities with Bhabha with what the later seeks to argue in his *The Locations of Culture* that the psychic relation between the colonizer and the colonized has the potential to prevent the formation of any stable unchanging identities. Following Bhabha's ideas of resistance being the result of the ambivalent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, the aesthetics of resistance, deconstruction of national historiography, reconstruction of the past following Nativistic tendencies, and most importantly, articulation of identities become the guiding forces in his fictional works of Ghosh. After reading his novels, it becomes clear that Ghosh took British colonialism, predicaments of the colonised Indians, and the postcolonial India as his chosen areas of investigations. While supporting the idea of travel, which is an unavoidable condition in the life of a modern human being, Ghosh presumes that it gives him a chance to nostalgically consider India as his 'home'. However, like Edward Said, he also draws attention to the East-West binaries implicit in the ideas of Orientalism; like Homi Bhabha he demonstrates the

hybrid interstitial nature of cultures; and like the Subaltern Studies scholars, he endeavours to make the silenced voices speak in most of his fictional works.

A number of attempts have been made in Indian Writing in English to trace its origin in the secular ideas that prevail in India. Both writers and scholars alike seek to address IEF in terms of secularism which is also because they implicitly or explicitly endorse the Nehruvian notions of a secular nation that might work as an antidote to the current problems of pluralist politics. They often take Indira Gandhi's National Emergency (1975-77) as an important event that destroyed Nehru's vision of a secular India. Subsequently, a host of authors like Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor and Amit Choudhury, often sought to find out what does 'being Indian' actually mean in today's context of political turmoil. This also indirectly means that one feels far more comfortable defining oneself in the context of the secular—a notion, the Indian constitution has helped to realise. Thus, the fictional works of such authors, which try to narrate the story of Post-independence India, can be seen as specific responses to the political situation of their time. But, most of these works mark out an important phases in Post Independent India's political history—the breakdown of the Nehruvian secular consensus that began with Indira Gandhi's imposition of the National Emergency from 1975–7, and the subsequent rise of an alternative national ideology called Hindutva based on the supremacy of Hindu religion and culture. Hence, it has been experienced that the works of these authors allegorise the idea of an Indian nation by incorporating into the fictional space different versions of the national past. In this sense, they represent patterns of specific historical events in India's colonial and postcolonial history.

In another context of the 'secular' in IEF, Neelam Shrivastava opines that the novels that represent the Indian secular canon in English are 'historical' in the sense that they respond to specific moments of India's historical and political context at the time of publication. In her book *Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel*, Srivastava explores the connection between a secular Indian nation and fiction written in English by a number of postcolonial Indian writers like Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, and Rohinton Mistry since 1980s. She investigates the different aspects of postcolonial identity within the secular framework of the Anglophone novel. In particular, this book examines how these authors have used the form of the novel to rewrite colonial and nationalist Indian history, and how they radically reinvent English as a secular language for narrating their state of mind. Ultimately, Srivastava delineates a common conceptual framework for secularism and cosmopolitanism, by arguing that Indian secularism can be seen as a located indigenous form of a cosmopolitan identity. Besides, the works of the authors in question create an 'imagined community' of readers who are not defined by national boundaries, but by the transnational scope of English. The novels like *Midnight's Children*, *A Suitable Boy*, *A Fine Balance*, *The Great Indian Novel*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Shadow Lines* are some examples that narrate the radical shift in the perception of the public sphere in India. These novels have adopted different approaches to address the idea of the state, which indeed had undergone an important evolution between the end of the Emergency and the beginning of the 1990s.

Authors like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Choudhury, Shashi Tharoor have almost gained the status of celebrity mainly because of their postcolonial 'juggling' of literary forms and genres. These novelists have ignored a kind of cultural essentialism which is also the basis of grand narratives that accommodates diverse cultural significations. That is why perhaps, Rushdie's 'chutnification' and Ghosh's

‘weaving’ are to be seen as significant strategies in their fictional narratives about India. Hype created by Western media and publishers, the observations of critics on the representation of India by immigrant writers, the supposed advantages of the Non-Resident Indians, the Indian intellectuals joining hands with the Westerners, the recent fad around the use of deconstructive mode of writing—all these have rejected the views of India being based on essentialism. Thus, most of the works under IEF become part of their attempt at narrativising experiential reality, suggesting at the same time that Indianness is a ‘continuum’ and ‘India’ is an ‘imagined community’.

Thus, how often an Indian or a Desi writer in the West returns to India in what he/she writes is the other important question that is to be meaningfully addressed. This is because, it is not merely a case of nostalgia followed by a terrible intellectual dilemma and a shift in perspective. The immigrant writers are discovering not only a new country but also the place they have left behind. Thus, a “New” India is being explored and mapped in the imagination of the writers abroad. However, while discussing the transformations in IEF in the 21st century, one cannot but refer to the Post-millennial Indian Fiction in English. I am at once reminded of writers like Arvind Adiga, Amish Trivedi, Chetan Bhagat and a host of other writers whose works are being sold in millions. The global economic upsurge and its impact on “New” India of the 21st century are bound to affect the culture of IEF. The ‘newness’ in this body of fiction and the future of the English language in India will clearly impact how English fictions in India will develop further. In this context, the Indian Diaspora will always keep influencing future publishing trends.

Thus, it is difficult to project the future of Indian English Fiction on the basis of a comparison of the 21st century trends of fiction writing in India with the last 50 years of fiction writing by India English authors. What is important is how the authors of the ‘New’ IEF are telling ‘new’ stories, not necessarily in the ‘old’ ways, and how they have beautifully explored ideas of ‘Indianness’ in the 21st century. Although IEF is enjoying a stage of much higher yield today, still with the global economic liberalization affecting India more significantly, it is questionable whether some production and consumption of this type of fiction will remain at the same level of popularity it currently enjoys in the future days to come.

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