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Indo-English Novels before and after Rushdie

This study examines the growth of the Indo-English novel from its origins in adversarial circumstances to the era of postmodernism.

IN ITS EARLY STAGES, Indian writing in English met disapproval and disbelief. It was argued that no alien language could express the Indian ethos. As such, Madhusudan Datta and Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the earliest practitioners of Indian writing in English, gave up their pursuit and turned to their mother tongue. Some Indian writers doggedly used English in their creative endeavours, but they were few and far between.

Fortunately, Indian writing in English got a shot in the arm with the arrival of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R. K. Narayan, the stalwarts of this initiative. They encouraged other talents to shed their nervousness and continue their efforts, and Indian writing in English began to take shape.

These writers took their profession seriously. They adhered to modernist concerns and dealt with social, political, and existential problems of the day. As Raja Rao's foreword in *Kanthapura* clearly shows, they were aware of the difficulties of using a foreign language for creative purposes.

All this restricted the writer's freedom and strained their novels. However, postmodernism gave them freedom from the consideration of form and style. It was followed by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which was published in 1981.

The novel was a sensation because it was written with a light touch, humour, and wit. Rushdie begins his book by describing how a doctor treats his female patient by examining her through a hole made in the veil that covered her from head to toe and how an old boatman talks of having met Jesus Christ and his descriptions of Indian streets crowded with peeps, well-fed, and bearded sadhus. He wrote it by mixing Indian and Western techniques and using English as a native speaker. This novel is free from the gravity of modernism and concerns about the purity of style and the emotional life of the characters. It received the Booker Prize and was registered for a record sale. It encouraged other aspiring novelists like Arundhati Roy, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Chandra, Tejpal, and many others, to follow suit, and they too met success in the international market and won literary prizes. The change in style, attitude, and perception catapulted the Indian novel to the centre stage.

The novels written before and after Rushdie are distinguished from each other and are divided into two distinct categories.

R. K. Narayan's *Guide* was published in 1955. Graham Greene considered Narayan not only an inimitable and charming interpreter of the Indian way of life but also a great contributor to English literature. In the *Guide*, Narayan charts the life of an ordinary person from childhood to death. His life takes unexpected turns and twists, from being a tea vendor at Malgudi Railway Station to Railway Raju, to a famous guide, to a lover, to a criminal, and to a saint. He ascribes it to fate. Narayan gives an

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authentic picture of life in villages. He describes how his characters form relationships, excitement, ambitions, and failures.

Through these tales, he tells his readers about innocent people and how they believe in fate and are driven by faith. He presents the most characteristic traits of the Indian ethos. But V.S. Naipaul thinks otherwise. He says, "For all their delight in human oddity, Narayan's novels are less the purely social comedies I had once taken them to be than religious fables and intensely Hindu." Yes, they are not social comedies for Indian life. It is not restricted to comedies and tragedies. They are specific and transcend the forms and concepts of art forms of the West. Yes, they are intensely Hindu. But that is what India is.

Another novel from another category that deserves attention is *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor. Published in 1989, it received high praise in India and abroad and has been published in several editions. Khushwant Singh called it one of the most significant books of recent times. *The Washington Post* reviewed it on its front page, and *The Times* called it a tour de force.

This view is based on the fanciful idea that the current political situation is the reenactment of the Mahabharata epic.

Shashi Tharoor doggedly pursues his idea and perceives the Pandavas as the Janata Party and the Kauravas as the Congress Party, Pitamaha Bhishma as Mahatma Gandhi, Dhritrastra as Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi as Duryodhan, and likewise, other characters. The reader cannot connect the two by any stretch of the imagination. However, this is what the novelists of the postmodern era set out to accomplish, and it is accepted worldwide.