



## India's Contribution to World Literature: Contemporary Indian Authors Carry on the Legacy

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There is no denying the fact that India's contribution to world literature is very old, vast and diverse. It started as early as the spiritual texts like Vedas, philosophical texts like Upanishads, verse epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata – all in Sanskrit. While it is impossible to compress in this short piece, all that the Indians in the past have contributed in Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali or other languages, we can focus our attention on the English literature of our times, since English is the widely prevalent medium of literary expression in the world today and India is the third largest producer of books in English.

Writing in English by Indian authors started in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when English was introduced as the medium of instruction in education here by colonial Britain and Indians took to it easily. There were many in the West who were fascinated by Swami Vivekananda's commentaries on Hindu scriptures. Aurobindo wrote beautiful verse plays in which he dealt with the western and eastern myths and legends. Rabindra Nath Tagore became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in 1913 for his poetry collection *Gitanjali*. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the philosopher President of India, charmed the world with his beautiful commentaries on Indian philosophy.

Coming down, the great Indian trio (Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao), who started writing in the 1930s, communicated with the West through their aesthetically appealing novels. A large number of poets and novelists followed them – all of whom cannot be recounted here. They wrote in their individual artistic style about India and its people, their culture and their problems. What is of interest here is the fact that these writers also revealed

the Indian style of writing in the kind of English language which could compete with the best writing coming from the Anglophone world.

However, the anglophone world took serious note of Indian English literature with the publication of *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie in 1982 which won the Booker – later also its upgraded versions. His fictional art of “chutnification” of language and history, magic realism, incessant word-play, juxtaposing highly ornate with the mundane “Mumbaiya” language, besides the Indian narratological style with its swoops, spirals and repetitions makes him sui generis. Rushdie’s popularity made the western readers aware of the value of literature penned by Indian authors.

Writers like Booker-winners Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga and Pulitzer-winner Jhumpa Lahiri have naturally been noticed by the world. There are a large number of authors who have won other prestigious awards and are likewise favourites with the international readership. They include Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Shashi Tharoor, Ashok Banker, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Nagarkar, Manju Kapur, Amit Chaudhuri...the list is long!

Another development that took place in the field of Indian English literature was the launch of Chetan Bhagat’s *Five Point Someone* (2004) which was path-breaking in the sense that he was the first author to achieve high-volume sales in the range of a million copies. This revolutionized the domain of popular literature, mainly light fiction dealing with romance, campus, crime, etc. and inspired a large number of writers. The proof of the exuberance lies in the figures thrown up by a survey conducted by the writer of these lines in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: some 1500 novels were published by writers of Indian origin. These dealt with all sorts of themes: individual, family, women, social, political, history, myths, diaspora, multiculturalism, travel, adventure, regional, etc. The newer categories of auto-fiction, science, corporate fiction, etc. are also picking up fast.

Indian English authors have based their stories not only in an Indian village, town, or city, but also elsewhere in the world. The works published could be realistic or fantastic, but with a philosophical undercurrent that has been characteristic of Indian literature through the ages. The western ideologies and philosophes like existentialism, feminism, postcolonialism, postmodernism,

etc. also influenced the literary production in India which made the interface with the western readership even smoother.

Presently, there is craze among authors to re-tell stories from Ramayana, Mahabharata and different Puranas, Jataka tales, etc. These indeed present to the writer an ocean of stories. That is important, because as a British publisher told an interviewer at Hay Festival sometime ago, there are no more new stories coming from the British writers, and so they look to the Indian authors. Every other day, one finds a new or existing author coming up with his/her take on these ancient tales.

Interest in fantastic stories apart, as more and more people travel the world, literature becomes via media to understand other people and their culture. In the context of India, there is a lot more available in regional languages which is considered more authentic than the literature being produced in English. This corpus is being translated into English providing, thus, another treasure trove of new stories.

Indian English literature has given a glimpse of life and culture of India and also made world more aware of the Indian sensibilities and added to the world literature in no insignificant way. More and more departments devoted to the study of Indian literature and Indology on the whole are opening up in foreign universities. The globalized world demands what Goethe called “World Literature”, and the Indian author, through his multicultural background in India and various locations in the world is surely a cosmopolitan who can give to the world what it needs today.

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