



Indian Contribution to Contemporary English Literature

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Abstract

As we know, England is not the only place in the world where literature in English language is produced. India happens to be the third largest producer of books in English. Indians' contribution to English literature is significant considering the fact that post-1980 Salman Rushdie phenomenon; hundreds of writers have written novels in English. Quite a few of them have won awards at the international level. My paper classifies the themes of 327 novels written after 2000AD by Indian authors, residing in or out of India, and apart from underlining the issues taken up by these writers' deals in detail with three works by different authors, covering three important dimensions of Indian society, viz., youth, family and Diaspora.

Keywords: Indian Literature, Indian English Fiction, Chetan Bhagat, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, Indian family system

This conference proposes to study the different genres of English literature, in particular the contemporary literary process and production in which the cultural interaction moulds the English literary tradition. Now, English literature is widely produced in the world in our times and India is the place whose contribution to the collective English literature has been rising greatly. In fact, it happens to be at present the third largest producer of books in English. Indians' contribution to English literature is significant considering the fact that post-1980 Salman Rushdie phenomenon; hundreds of writers have published novels in English. The objective of this paper is to analyze the major themes and styles taken up and to showcase some key texts representing aspects of Indian life, viz., family, myths, and Diaspora. This is to give this scholarly audience an idea of the scale of contribution of Indian writers as also a brief glimpse of the type of writing that Indian novelists have to their credit.

Early Impact

I must refer in passing to the contribution of early writers and thinkers of India who drew worldwide attention through their writings in English. It is understandable that during the British colonial rule, the master race should view the colony with a biased mind. But if we leave the ruling class out, we find that there had been people in the West, who studied India seriously and admired it. Whether these were the transcendentalists from America, viz., Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau or the German philosophers Schopenhauer and Max Mueller or the French writer Romain Rolland -- they talked



glowingly of ancient Indian spiritual literature. Some Indologists translated secular Sanskrit literary texts like those by Kalidasa into English.

There were many in the West who had been fascinated by the discourses of Swami Vivekananda in the US during the last decade of the 19th century and read with interest his commentaries on Hindu scriptures. There are other writers like Aurobindo who, besides writing beautiful plays and prose, took up western as well as eastern myths and legends to create what he called 'poetry of the soul'. Rabindra Nath Tagore became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for his poetry collection *Gitanjali* which is suffused with mysticism. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, the well-renowned philosopher President of India, wrote impressively on the ancient philosophical treatises of India. Mahatma Gandhi's prose was simple but pregnant with meaning. His candid autobiography impressed many including Leo Tolstoy.

Current Scenario

Switching over to the contemporary scenario, it is a reality that the genres of poetry, drama and criticism have not registered remarkable performance, but fiction has more than compensated the lacuna in other genres. Salman Rushdie's bagging of the Booker prize in 1981, was a momentous event for Indian English novel because it instilled confidence in the Indian writers. He went on to win the 'Booker of Bookers' prize in 1993 and the 'Best of Booker' in 2008. His fictional art with the 'chutnification' of language and history in *Midnight's Children* (1981) has much to do with his success. His carnivalesque humour, incessant word-play, engagement with the bizarre and the unexpected, juxtaposing highly ornate with the mundane 'Mumbai' language places him in sui generis category. He employs the Indian narratological style with its swoops, spirals and repetitions. Rushdie has written more than a dozen novels till date and continues to interest the readers worldwide.

There are other authors who have won awards at the international level and are well known like the Man Booker awardees Arundhati Roy for her novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Kiran Desai for *The Inheritance of Loss* (2005), Aravind Adiga for *The White Tiger* (2008) and the Pulitzer awardee Jhumpa Lahiri for *The Interpreter of Maladies* (2000). Here, I shall like to mention some other contemporary Indian novelists whose works have drawn admiration from readers and critics alike. They include V. S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Shashi Tharoor, Ashok Banker, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Nagarkar, Manju Kapur and Amit Chaudhuri.

While Rushdie is a serious and canonical author, Chetan Bhagat is a writer of the popular kind who is no less important in the Indian context. His first novel *Five Point Someone* (2004) was path-breaking in the sense that he was the first author to achieve high-volume sales in the range of a million copies, whereas before him, no Indian author could sell more than a few thousand copies. (Palande) His novels appeal to the young and the



old alike and the habit of reading English texts has got a spur because of his novels. He is a pioneer because following him; so many young authors from various fields came up and wrote novels of the popular kind. Popular novel today forms the biggest segment of the thousand-odd novels produced since 2000 AD till date, some 844 of which I have been able to document in my books¹.

Contemporary Themes

The various themes that the contemporary Indian English long fiction touches upon can be classified as: family, individual psyche, socio-political problems, diasporic life, history, environment, etc. Besides, the popular category of novel deals with campus life, romance, adventure, crime, myth, career, etc. An analysis of some 327 of these novels published between 2011 and 2015 throws up the following break-up

Sr. No.	Theme	Number
1	Romance	63
2	Thrillers (adventure, crime...)	48
3	Socio-political issues	29
4	History	26
5	Individuals & Relationships	22
6	Myths & Legends	21
7	Multicultural	18
8	Family & Woman-centric	18
9	Science & Fantasy	13
10	Campus	12
11	Bildungsroman	11
12	Space/Region-specific	11
13	Philosophy	8
14	Career	7

Clearly, popular novel comprising of romance, thrillers, chick-lit, myth, etc. is on top. Having said this, I would like to add that it is the serious fiction which brings credit and glory to the genre of Indian or any other category of literature. I shall now like to showcase three texts which represent three different and important aspects of Indian reality; these are: family, youth and Diaspora.

Indian Family

Indian family system is the basic social structure and is a traditional one in which certain values like patriarchy and respect for the elders are highly valued. However, times are changing and the western impact is straining the traditional mores. A well-known name in the domain of Indian English Fiction is Shashi Deshpande, a Sahitya Akademi and Padma awardee and a feminist in her own right. A prolific writer, Deshpande has been known for weaving in great detail the web of family against which she marks the



position of individual women bearing the burden of traditions. In almost all her novels, in addition to the emotional aspects, women's sexuality – within and outside marriage bonds – has been dealt with. Style-wise, her novels form a separate category which can be called 'reflective novel'.

In her very first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), the narrative portrays the trauma that the female protagonist which Saru undergoes. To bring out the contrast between the external world and the internal one, Deshpande uses different tense forms -- present is in the third person and the past is in the first person – and also stylistic devices like dreams, flashbacks, reminiscences, etc.

Saru is an educated, economically independent, middle-class wife who is made conscious of her gender as a child and whose loveless relationship with her parents and strained relations with her husband lead to her agonizing search for herself. The novel opens with Saru's return to her parents' house fifteen years after she left home with a vow never to return. After being disappointed with her husband, she had to return for some quiet and the chance to think over her relationships with her family members.

As a child, Saru was always ignored in favour of her brother, Dhruva. No parental love was showered on her and she was not given any importance. Her brother's birthdays were celebrated with much fanfare and performance of religious rites, whereas her own birthdays were not even acknowledged. Her mother constantly reminded her that she should not go out in the sun as it would darken her complexion and that would be a negative feature when it came to her marriage. Saru also joined a medical college much against the wishes of her mother thus antagonizing her because the mother, like any ordinary Indian woman, wanted to marry her daughter off at the earliest.

When Saru wants to get married to Manohar, with whom she is in love, her mother admonishes her thus: "I know all these 'love marriages.' It's love for a few days, then quarrels all the time. Don't come crying to us then." (69) It is true that in India, arranged marriage is the norm even though the young, educated people are opting out of it now. Marriage, it is said, is not between two persons but between two families who have to deal with each other. So, the advice of the elders must prevail over the desire of the couple. Now, Manohar belongs to a caste (a kind of hierarchy determined on the basis of birth) that is lower than that of her family, for which crime she is boycotted by her family.

Unfortunately, the relationship between husband and wife too is not on even keel. Saru, a doctor, earns more than her husband who is a teacher. This fact torments him particularly when people around him make him conscious of it. In India, an individual hardly has any privacy. Not only in villages, where a person and his life would be known to others, even in metropolitan cities, voyeuristic pleasure is derived by people through peering into the affairs of others. It's common, as Nirad Chowdhary has mentioned in his



Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, for a bus passenger to demand a sheet of newspaper even when you are reading it and take it without saying 'Thank you'!

The plight of a married woman is no cake-walk. Manohar tries to overcome his inferiority complex through inflicting pain on his wife and raping her at will. Deshpande is against such suppression of women. While talking of the prevalent practice of religious fasting on certain days, it is seen that womenfolk even though fasting themselves, have to prepare meals for other members of the family who are not fasting. In Saru's words: "Going on with their tasks, and destroying themselves in the bargain, for nothing, but a meaningless modestly. Their unconscious, unmeaning heroism, born out of the myth of self-sacrificing martyred women..."(107).

Finally, when Saru visits her father to condole the demise of her mother and tells him about her married life, the father shows his inability to sort out things for her. She realizes that it is she who is responsible for her life and must share the consequences of her actions. "All right, so I'm alone. But so is everyone else. Human beings ... they're going to fail you. But because there's just us, because there's no one else, we have to go on trying. If we can't believe in ourselves, we're sunk" (128). Thus, there is self-realization for her which is a message from the novelist to the womenfolk in India.

Indian Diaspora

It is a fact that the genre of Indian English Fiction is dominated by the Indian writers settled or working mostly in the US or Europe. It is natural for them to write of the plight of the fellow immigrants. Jhumpa Lahiri, a second generation Indian immigrant to US, is praised more for her stories than for her novels. Her Pulitzer Award-winning book *The Interpreter of Maladies* has nine stories most of which touch upon various aspects of married life of Indian immigrants in America, but there are a few which focus on life in India also. It must be said, however, that the stories have the universal humanistic flavour about them.

Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* was a resounding success and was turned into a movie. The theme of the novel is based on the identity crisis faced by the son of an immigrant couple Ashoke and Ashima due to the queer name 'Gogol' given him because it was the name of the Russian author whose stories Ashoke loved. However, the plot has much more than this only. Starting with Ashoke's wedding and leading to the divorce of his son Gogol aka Nikhil, the plot covers a span of 38 years. The story-line sustains after Ashoke's death and the novel takes on a sombre tone with Gogol showing more responsible nature even though there is no end to his misfortunes. The different aspects of immigrant life like maladjustment in the adopted country, concern for and tenuous contacts with the people back in the country of birth have all been touched in a realistic manner with economy of language, which, surprisingly, is successful in creating empathy in reader.



When it comes to naming the new-born, the Gangulis want Ashima's grandmother to "do the honours". In India, the elders in the family are respected and seeking their guidance in such a matter is considered to be obligatory for the young people. Mr. Wilcox, the compiler of the hospital birth certificates, is at his wits' end in understanding the reason for the Gangulis not naming their child themselves.

The racial bias in America finds mention in a fictional incident, which shows how neighbourhood ruffians, driven by prejudices of colour and race, wreak havoc on the immigrants. In case of the Ganguli family, it starts with the removal of the letters 'ULI' from the name 'GANGULI' written on the mail box of the Ganguli house on Pemberton Road, and addition of the suffix 'GREEN' to it to denote 'GANGREEN' -- a dreaded disease.

But the grown-up Americans are different. They love to sound informal even when they are not. So, before leaving house, Judy advises the tenant Ashima to "holler" if she needs anything. (34) As Ashima goes about the market with her infant in the perambulator, she is accosted by many an American who smilingly congratulate her on being a mother and ask about the baby, its name, sex etc. (34). Thus, the American experience is noted minutely by the author.

The young Gogol falls in love with an American girl Maxine. He goes steady with her for a long time and is supposed to marry her. However, Gogol feels at times that "his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (141) which shows he is not totally apathetic to the feelings of his parents, and moreover, confirms his in-betweenness with regard to the two cultures.

Unfortunately, Ashoke dies due to a heart attack and Gogol has to make arrangements for the final rites. When Gogol leaves Cleveland for Boston with the ashes of his father, his state of mind is described by Jhumpa Lahiri: "He knows now the guilt that his parents carried inside, at being able to do nothing when their parents had died in India, of arriving weeks, sometimes months later, when there was nothing left to do" (179). Gogol is so much absorbed in sadness that his fiancée Maxine wonders if it's worth it, and that becomes the point of their separation.

After Ashoke's death, Ashima is left alone because her son Gogol works away in New York and her daughter too is married off to a French man. She does fix the marriage of her son to a compatriot Bengali girl Moushumi but it fails because the girl is culturally more of an American than an Indian. Gogol is unable to appreciate her libertine ways after marriage. Ashima now decides to divide her time between India and America, spending six months in both countries. Thus, there are various shades of immersion in the culture of the adopted country.



Lahiri's representation of the cultural difference for a diasporic finds resonance in Homi Bhabha, the postcolonial theorist, who believes that "The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (Bhabha 2). So far her style is concerned, it can be said that she economizes on words. Aptly comments a critic, "Lahiri's incisive, detailed prose of small and big tragedies, in the intense minimalist style of Raymond Carver, which lands like snowflakes without leaving traces of water, builds in momentum only as decades go by in the novel" (Lasdun).

Indian Youth

As pointed out above, Chetan Bhagat's novels sell in millions in India. It would be interesting to note that these novels have themes which appeal to youth and have constituents akin to those of the popular Hindi films – the most visible form of popular culture in our times. His novels have simple stories which do not require any mental exercise to reveal hidden layers of meanings – a feature of canonical works. Like a Hindi *masala* (Hindi for spices) film, Bhagat's novels too bring together disparate elements like fancy, facts, idealism, suspense, crispy dialogues, humour, sex etc. that appeal to the youth.

One of the main reason for the popularity of Bhagat's novels is that they take up issues close to the heart of the youth. Thus, his first novel *Five Point Someone* was a campus novel; his second *One Night @ the Call Centre* dealt with the BPO (Business Processes Outsourcing) business that had touched heights and attracted educated youth. His novel *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* dealt with the cricket fixation of Indian people. Likewise, *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* had the issue of love marriage vs. arranged marriage at the core which affects most Indian youth of marriageable age.

Bhagat's novel *Half Girlfriend* (2014) runs precisely along the popular romantic Bollywood (Bombay, the movie capital of India, referred to as Bollywood after Hollywood) movies. It was recently turned into a feature film also. Besides the central love theme, the novel also touches upon the problem of inability to communicate fluently in English which is a common problem among the Indian youth belonging to the rural areas.

The protagonist Madhav, hailing from a backward state of India, Bihar, has come to join the elite St. Stephen's College in Delhi. He is born into a family that once belonged to the ruling elite but has lost money and status with the passage of time. His mother runs a school in a decrepit building in a village in Bihar. Madhav is not qualified on the basis of grade secured by him at school but then he is able to make it through the sports quota because he is good at playing volleyball. Here he meets Riya Somani, a Delhi-based girl who comes from a rich family. She is tall and beautiful and is also a volleyball player.



Madhav faces the problem in communicating fluently in English which is mainly the medium of instruction as also of communication among the young students of the college. Thus there are two lines of division between them – money and language. But there is the common bond of volley ball. Thus the story is set for a romantic trajectory.

Riya is willing to learn more of the game from Madhav. The two come closer. At this stage, Rohan, a rich NRI youth (Non-resident Indian: a person of Indian origin settled abroad, valued in the Indian marriage market for his riches). He also happens to visit Riya in college, where he is noticed as “over the top and a bit of show off” with his Bentley car and suave demeanour. The girls seem to swoon over him. “I think when rich guys say something, girls find it extra funny” (55), comments Madhav’s friend. Madhav is meanwhile declared “sick” in love with Riya, who finally agrees to being his “half girlfriend” (67)! There are the usual hide-and-peek games with the guards of the girls hostels where boys keep track of and manage to meet their girls! Episodes like these resonate with the young readers.

On the advice of his friends, Madhav makes a crass comment in native Bihari language which offends Riya and there is a break-up. In this, Madhav has forgotten Riya’s advice given to him some time ago: “Madhav Jha, Learn about girls, or figure it out. But don’t ruin it” (44). This is something that most Indian young men would have to learn even as they struggle with understanding girls’ ‘mysterious’ behaviour!

Not long thereafter, Madhav gets the invitation to Riya’s wedding with Rohan. Understandably, he is shattered and is changed into the “Silent Saint of Stephen’s”. He passes the exam and is selected for a post in the bank but refuses it in favour of going to his native village Dumraon in Bihar, where he helps his mother to run the school. So, the essential good child’s obedient nature appeals to the moral sensibility of Indian readers.

Over there in Bihar, Madhav tries to arrange funds to help renovate the school building. He learns about the humanitarian project of the software giant Bill Gates who is visiting India. He writes to Gates inviting him to visit school in the hope of getting some help from him. Next, he starts attending English coaching classes in Patna, the capital of Bihar, where he bumps into Riya. It is a happy coincidence for him to know that she is separated from her husband, who turned out to be a tyrant. The two have some good time together (that’s essential for a Hindi movie) and both work successfully for Gates’ visit. Riya also coaches Madhav to improve his English language capability.

There is another twist in that Riya escapes from there leaving behind a letter which says she suffers from terminal cancer and was going away from him. So, the movie-watchers or the novel readers, in this case, have some anxious moments, but then this kind of self-inflicted victimhood is essentially the old moral code which was probably practiced in India at one time. Now, a Bollywood movie also has some scenes picturized in exotic



locations of the West, so here too, the heroine escapes to New York. Madhav is able to find about her in a hard way, and once sure, he loses no time in flying off to the Big Apple.

In New York, he gets help from a compatriot, so that we have a good picture of the Indian Diaspora, different from the fate which the cook's son in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* had to face at the hands of Harry! At this point, Bhagat tries the tested Bollywood formula of prolonging the search period to the extent that the reader might believe in the impossibility of success, but those who have read Bhagat's novels know too well that this cannot happen. After a real filmic chase in snowing night, Madhav runs race against time to reach the bar where Riya, an amateur singer, is now regaling audience as a professional singer. So, the ending is a happy one which finds favour with the Indian audience of movies.

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