



Indian Literature in English: New Introductions

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ABSTRACT

Indian Literature in English might as yet appear as a conundrum. India is of course, India, and English the language of England. English in India still reflects the stereotypical colonial hangover. But without resorting to such platitudes like English being an international language, and writing in English in India being one major way of getting noticed overseas etc, I might state that there is as yet little need for pleading the case for the existence and flourishing of Indian writings in English. But in festivals like this one where we are celebrating poetry from India under several sections like women's writing and Dalit Writing and writing in the regional languages, how do we envisage the situation of the writer in English? A fish out of water? Or a sore thumb? Barring the specific curio aspect of the language the experience of the Indian writer can unarguably be evidenced through this chunk of the Indian literary spectrum—this usually gets noticed in the west but sometimes for the wrong reasons. It is my argument in the following that the Indian writer in English is not a species apart but very much an integral part of the Indian literary scene. There is this feeling that writing in English from India is substandard and middle class, barring of course a few exceptional cases. This might be true

primarily because the language itself is currently in use in living situations only among the educated upper middle class. the working class do not have easy access to this nor do they require it, and in the case of the upper class there is virtually very little self-reflexivity nor commitment to the literary.

KEYWORDS: monsoon, exploitation, Indian literature, multiplicity of language

India is a land of violent contrasts—while the sweltering heat of summer blisters the Indo-Gangetic plains, perennial snow showers quietly on the calm heights of the Himalayas in the north; while the monsoon racks violently in the deep-south, the northwest regions reel under severe droughts. Similarly, there yet survives the fabled rich image of the India with turbaned Maharajahs riding on bedecked elephants, of snake charmers, sadhus, curry and carpets—of unimaginable riches, ease and wealth, of promiscuity and extravagance, while alongside there exists the contradictory image of heat and dust, of brutalizing want and agonizing poverty, of inhuman exploitation and barbaric ignorance. For the most—a wounded civilization, with a glorious heritage. (See Naipaul, *A Wounded Civilization*, and A L Basham, *The Wonder that was India*) Here is at once the sublime and the grotesque coexisting in one plane. Perhaps, this could also account for the multiplicity of voices in



Indian writing. Of course, India is like any other country in the world with its own history of battles and conquests, of treachery and turbulence. Indian literature is like the literature of everywhere else, and yet it is like the literature of nowhere else. In its indigenous diversity of paradox and unpredictability, of reception and acquiescence, of adaptation and assimilation, it survives and prevails in its own identity. It is different and it is Indian. Multiplicity of languages is among the fundamental experience of being an Indian, and a plurality of cultural experience constitutes its underpinnings. There is this oft expressed view that Indian Literature is one though written in many languages—*Ekam sat vipra bahuda vadanti* (truth is one the sages express it differently). Here are nearly two dozen languages that have official status, and living literatures of their own, with equally highly evolved vocabulary and scripts! Small wonder then that English has been adapted with such skill and dexterity as in the present, so much so that the Indian writer in English is as much international as any other writer in that language. I believe that the Indian writer in English is just another Indian—just like the Indian writer in Bengali or Malayalam, in Gujarathi or Tamil.

And yet there is something exotic and strange in the manner in which such writing is received in the West. Granted, Salman Rushdie and now Vikram Seth and Arundhati Roy and even Chetan Bhagat are household names, but still there are more than a few frills attached to the brown person who wields the English quill. Though slightly on

this side of poetic exaggeration and humour, I would like to draw your attention to this one instance: John Updike has a poem called “I Missed His Book, But I read His Name,” with this epigraph: *The Silver Pilgrimage*, by M.Anantanarayanan...160 pages. Criterion. \$3.95— The Times.”

Though authors are a dreadful clan To be avoided if you can,
I'd like to meet the Indian,
M.Anantanarayanan.

I picture him as short and tan.
We'd meet perhaps, in Hindustan. I'd say
,with admirable elan, “Ah,
Anantanarayanan--
I've heard of you. The Times once ran A
notice on your novel,an
Unusual tale of God and Man.” And
Anantanarayanan

Would seat me on a lush divan
And read his name -- that sumptuous span
of “a's” and “n's” lovelier than “In Xanadu
did Kubla Khan”-- Aloud to me all day. I
plan
Henceforth to be an ardent fan Of
Anantanarayanan--
M. Anantanarayanan.

We have the diametrically opposite reaction in the unceremonious references to Indian English poets in the posthumously published letters of Philip Larkin. Either way—whether he/she is received in the west with a mixture of exaggerated exoticism and awe or dismissed with racial derision and ethnic contempt—the Indian writer in English continues to create an international



readership or, most certainly, a market overseas, as the phenomenal success of *The God of Small Things* would reveal. The only question that often has bothered me is, who the Indian writer is writing for? And because this occasion does not needlessly warrant a critical perspective, I do not propose to struggle with such socio-political issues related to class, economy, production, publicity and marketing. I shall now proceed, albeit in a rudimentary manner, to outline the growth and development of Indian Writing in English.

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