
In Transition Indian English Fiction Evolved A Great Deal.

Mohd Tahir Amin Khan

Research scholar CMJU

Email : mohdtahir9419@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the transition from the nationalist to the post Independence phase, Indian English Fiction evolved a great deal, alongside non-fictional prose. M.K.Naik in his A History of Indian English Literature (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982) has chosen to entitle an entire chapter "The Gandhian Whirlwind-1920-1947". The withdrawal from the political sphere of both Balagangadhar Tilak and Sri Aurobindo, in the first decade of the twentieth century set the arena ready for the entry of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi fresh from his satyagraha triumph in South Africa. Political writing drew immense strength from the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence and soul-force, and Gandhi himself wrote in a deceptively simple English which had begun by then to achieve a national character.

KEY WORDS : comparison, tremendous, Gandhi, Nehru, Non violence, Philosophy.

What I shall do here would be to briefly site a comparison between the writing of Gandhi and Nehru—both unique instances of an Indian English style. It would be worthwhile to remember that both Gandhi and Nehru had their tremendous political images and hence their influence lay far beyond the mere literary. The men themselves were the influence. Their message was embedded in their life styles.

We read in Gandhi's introduction to *My Experiments with Truth* (1940): The seeker

after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him. Only then, and not till then, will we have a glimpse of truth. (xi)

This is a kind of humility that the Mahatma practiced in his own life. Nehru on the other hand was a pragmatist and towards the end of his *The Discovery of India*, we read: Every culture has certain values attached to it, limited and conditioned by that culture. The people governed by that culture takes these values for granted and attribute a permanent validity to them. So the values of our present day culture may not be permanent and final; nevertheless they have an essential importance for us for they represent the thought and spirit of the age we live in. A few seers and geniuses, looking into the future, may have a completer vision of humanity and the universe; they are of the vital stuff out of which all real advance comes. The vast majority of people do not even catch up to the present-day values, though they may talk about them in the jargon of the day, and they live imprisoned in the past.(4th ed. London: Meridian, 1956.p. 573)

Suffice it to say that it is the combined vision of both these men that engineered the emergent postcolonial India. They were not *literary* in their writings and neither attempted the creative variety of writing, but their influence in the imagination of a people was

so overpowering and far-reaching. More specially the influence of Gandhi reached deep down into the psyche, so much so that the greatest period of Indian fiction in English falls under his shadow. The much acclaimed Indian trio—Mulk Raj Anand (b.1905), R.K.Narayan(b.1907) and Raja Rao(b.1908)—were and continue to be , hard-core Gandhians, while they trace, each in his own individualistic manner, the graph of Indian fiction in English. Anand’s fiction has been shaped by what he himself calls, “the double burden on my shoulders, the Alps of the European tradition and the Himalayas of the Indian past.” (Quoted by Naik, p. 155) His is a fiction drawn from the dregs of life, of Dostoevskian scale, of the insulted and the humiliated. Among the three, Anand’s style is direct and less embellished, and his influence on regional literatures has been deep. For R.K. Narayan his fictional *Malgudi* affords a locale to explore and create variations on an indigenous scale; his characters are life-like, and many, like Swami, most refreshingly endearing. Narayan’s narratives are like “the boy’s will,” fresh and free. Of the trio, Raja Rao is more philosophically and theoretically sophisticated. His concerns are also deeper and more intense than the other two. In his forward to *Kanthapura* (1938), Raja Rao writes:

We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

Raja Rao gives utterance to the self-reflexivity of the Indian writer of English when he says

that: “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.” This self-consciousness distinguishes his style and narrative. His passionate attachment to the Indian soil has been sharpened by his long self-chosen exile. Perhaps it is the distance that has emboldened his vision. Very much like the sensibility that shaped these writers, the form and style of their work, although couched in “a language that is not their own,” thoroughly impinges on the Indian.

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The writers who followed in the trail of the trio succeeded in keeping up the momentum of the Gandhian whirlwind. Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgoker, Kamala Markhandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee...the list of successful writers is endless. Perceptibly enough the woman’s voice in Indian writing is most striking. The work of Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala especially ushers in a fresh sensibility to the sphere of Indians writing in English. The thematic and stylistic contours of this field are broadening day by day. During the last three decades there has been a wild spate of publishing fiction in this country and so much of it has been marketed successfully overseas. After the phenomenal success of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, many Indian critics and columnists have taken upon themselves the role of investigators keying up to seek out the reason why Indian writers in English draw raving reviews and are quite successful in UK and the US while at home they hardly get noticed and often enough are severely discredited and derided. The reason, many Indian critics maintain, is precisely because much of the recent Indian English fiction fits

in well with the west's preconceived notions of India, that so much praise is lavished on it by western critics. Either way, whether it is seemingly because of the big money involved in book business or whether there is a tremendous lack of knowledge about India in the West, the successful Indian writers in English often get the cold shoulder from their regional counterparts. Added to that is the sort of scalding remark regarding regional writing that a successful writer of the stature of Salman Rushdie makes in his now famous (or infamous?) Introduction to the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997* (edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, London: Vintage, 1997), that "the prose writing - both fiction and non-fiction—created in this period by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 official languages of India, the so called *vernacular languages*, during the same time,; and indeed, this new and still burgeoning , Indo-Anglian literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books." Such a claim, at the outset, certainly would go to the extent of proving only

Rushdie's own ignorance of the rest of India, however, the fact that such a claim could be made for a literature that has such a short history is something worthy of consideration. The Indian writer in English is not a creature from Mars or Jupiter, but just another writer using a different Indian language ! Because of the vagaries of India's colonial history,

English has developed to such an immeasurable magnitude in our country that we have to realize that we have given rise to a whole generation of men and women who speak in English, dream in English and write in English. How could we call them anything other than Indians like the rest of us?

As a unique instance of the postcolonial self-reflexive use of the language I shall but site the dedication that Arundhati Roy has given at the beginning of her book: "*To my mother who grew me up*"! Suffice it to say that this English is something that has been abrogated and appropriated to suit to the Indian say! We have indeed come a long way from *Matthew Arnold in a Sari*. Look, we have come through!

ABOUT AUTHOR

Mohd Tahir Amin Khan is a research scholar CMJU. He has done graduation from Govt. Degree College Rajouri affiliated to Jammu university. He has done LLB 3 year Professional from Dora Law College Jammu affiliated to Jammu university. He has done post graduation from CMJU. He has written number of books .

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