



THE IMPACT OF INDIGENOUS LITERATURES ON INDIAN ENGLISH WRITING

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Abstract:

Indigenous literatures influenced, shaped and moulded English literature in the evolution of Indian English literature. India's rich literary heritage, with its profound multilingual diversity, has influenced and deeply shaped English literature, which later developed into distinctive Indian English Literature. Classical texts such as Epics, Puranas, Itihasas, Bhakti poetry, local folk narratives, and diverse regional traditions are deeply entwined with Indian English literature, shaping its themes, narrative structures, and cultural identities. English became a medium for the reassertion of indigenous texts and wisdom, creating a hybrid literary tradition nurtured by both national and Indian diaspora writers.

Sri Aurobindo's translations of the Vedas, Upanishads and Gita with commentaries into English introduced the ancient Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and the Indian literatures, the Eastern wisdom to the Western world. Regional Literary texts like Tamil Sangam poetry, Renaissance writings in Bengali, the mystic traditions of Sufism, and the ghazals of Urdu literature contributed diverse aesthetics. Toru Dutt's translations of Bengali and Sanskrit works into English combine indigenous traditions with colonial literary forms. This article explores the role of indigenous literatures in India and their influence on Indian English literature, tracing the journey from colonial literature to postcolonial expressions.

Keywords: Indigenous Literatures, Hybrid Literary Spaces, Bhakti Traditions, Sufi Poetry, Postcolonial Literature

Introduction

The influence of indigenous literatures in India plays a major role in understanding the evolution of Indian English literature. Despite English being a colonial imposition, the Indian English writers enriched it with indigenous themes, moral frameworks, and cultural identities. The folk and oral narratives, Indian classical texts such as Upanishads, Epics, Puranas and Itihasas, along with regional and vernacular literatures, shaped Indian English writing that continues to thrive globally. Indian English literature has become a separate branch of study. Introduction of native wisdom and Indian knowledge systems undermined colonial dominance by creating a hybrid literary space and redefining modern Indian identity.

Indigenous Literary Traditions in India

Sanskrit Epics and Classical Texts

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are not just epics but treasure troves of moral and philosophical wisdom. They provide narrative archetypes, moral dilemmas, and mythological frameworks that Indian English writers often redefined in their works. The epics laid the foundation for oral storytelling traditions in India, emphasising the concepts of dharma (duty), karma (action), the birth-and-death cycle (rebirth), lila (maya), and cosmic order. Writers like R.K. Narayan in *The Malgudi Days* and *The Guide*, Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (from Draupadi's perspective), and Girish Karnad's *Maa Nishada* (a modern interpretation of Ramayana) heavily relied upon these epics to weave narratives that reverberate with modern readers while retaining the local and regional indigenous spirit.



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As the *Mahabharata* states: “What is found here may be found elsewhere, but what is not here cannot be found anywhere.” This sense of universality influenced Indian English writers like R.K. Narayan’s retelling of *The Ramayana*, based on the 11th century Tamil version written by Kamban (focused on duty & morality), in English was an attempt to preserve indigenous wisdom while making it accessible to global readers. His *Malgudi Days* begins with: “The talkative man began his story in a leisurely fashion, with frequent digressions.” (Narayan 3). It imitates the cadence of oral storytelling in English prose, where digressions and repetitions are an integral part of the narrative structure. Narayan’s indigenous writing style captured the essence of South Indian regional cultural heritage and traditions that shaped Indian English prose, and his fictional town, Malgudi, becomes a microcosm of Indian life. He embedded village folklore and local idioms into English novels.

Bhakti Tradition & Sufi Poetry

Medieval Bhakti poets such as Kabir, Nanak, Chandidas, Mirabai, and Tulsidas emphasised devotion and egalitarianism in vernaculars. The mystical and lyrical traditions of medieval Indian knowledge systems, and the local Baul folk tradition of Bengal, influenced Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry, particularly *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*), which carried the essence of Bhakti spirituality into English literature. Tagore asserts in *Gitanjali*:

“Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?” (Tagore 7). “The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.” (Tagore 12)

This imagery explores the Bhakti tradition’s emphasis on the union between the divine, the cosmic whole and human beings. Tagore, himself, translated *Gitanjali* into English, embedding indigenous devotional and spiritual rhythms.

In his 1912 introduction to *Gitanjali*, W. B Yeats appreciated *Gitanjali* as a “supreme culture” that appeared as natural as the “common soil”, and its spiritual depth made him “forget all the troubles of the world.” Through the mystical expressions of Tagore, Y.B. Yeats understood the greatness of indigenous spirituality, challenging colonial notions of rationality and secularism. His work demonstrates how the devotional traditions could reshape English into a vehicle for mystical expression. Kabir’s devotional verses, such as “The river that flows in you also flows in me,” emphasise cosmic unity and egalitarianism.

Similarly, Sufi poetry also enriched Indian English literature with themes of divine love and transcendence. Sufi saints in India used vernacular languages rather than the original Persian and Arabic languages so as to make their poetry more accessible to native Indians. They even embedded the Bhakti movement in their poetry. The Sufi poetry of Rumi became popular all over the world with its modern translations in English. Themes of universal and eternal love can be seen in indigenous and Sufi poetry. Mehfil-i-sama (mystical gatherings) entered English literature.

Folk Narratives and Oral Traditions

India has a rich oral storytelling tradition in vernacular languages. Narrative styles and ethical models have been influenced by the stories of *Panchatantra*, *Jataka tales*, *Kathasaritsagara* and village folklore. A story within a story, such as *Kathasaritsagara* (11th-century tales) and *Panchatantra*, is a native folk narrative tradition that created the basis of non-linear narratives. The infusion with local idioms has created a unique Indian identity of Indian English writing (Jetir.Org). *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie is an imitation of oral narration to convey the postcolonial identity. In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy makes use of the oral traditions of Kerala.



Colonial Encounter and the Rise of Indian English Literature

Macaulay's Minute of 1835 introduced English as a tool of administration and education. Early Indian English writers like **Henry Derozio** and **Toru Dutt** incorporated Western literary forms with Indian themes, and thus achieved a hybrid literary space that slowly led to the inclusion of rich and diverse indigenous literary traditions. Raja Rao emphasised that English must be "Indianized" to embrace the rhythms of Indian speech and thought, emphasising the need for cultural authenticity.

Raja Rao's preface to *Kanthapura* is an example of Indianizing English: "We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can only write as Indians." (Rao vii). It is a bold statement of both literary and political importance. This statement firmly establishes the influence of indigenous literary cultures on the texture and the layered meanings of Indian English literature, thereby distinguishing it from colonial imitations. By strongly advocating for Indianized English, Rao foregrounds the role of indigenous traditions in shaping the national identity. Indian languages withstood colonial erasure by means of embedding cultural memory into English texts.

In *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie states that "*I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country.*" (Rushdie 9). This metaphor reflects that individual destinies are inseparable from communal narratives and national ethos. Rushdie's postcolonial storytelling with the help of magical realism, folklore and myth is a blend of indigenous texts with global literary forms. *The Shadow Lines* of Amitav Ghosh explores how indigenous narratives shaped modern English novels. Texts in Indian languages challenged colonial authority, paving the way for nationalist and postcolonial discourse. Writers used English to articulate indigenous concerns, transforming it into a tool of resistance.

Hybridity and Identity Formation

Indian English literature is embedded with tradition and modernity. Indigenous literatures provided authenticity, preventing English writing from becoming mere imitation. Authors such as Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao incorporated social issues in their novels, including caste, community, and spiritual concerns rooted in indigenous traditions. This hybridity enabled Indian English literature to challenge colonial dominance while asserting cultural identity.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* states: "*They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved, and how.*" (Roy 31). Caste and social hierarchies found their way into indigenous moral storytelling in her works. Roy's use of Malayalam idioms and oral rhythms are examples of how regional traditions enrich English literature with cultural identities. A unique hybrid literary identity was created by embedding indigenous traditions into English literature. Postcolonial Indian writers have shaped English-language writing, reinforcing its cultural ethos.

Contemporary Relevance

- Indigenous languages are a constant source of cultural continuity that influenced postcolonial and modern Indian writing.
- Booker Prize winners like Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga have enriched English literature and demonstrated the global recognition for Indian English literature.
- The tension between tradition and modernity remains a defining feature.



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Risks and Challenges

- Constant dependence on Western literary models may subdue the authenticity of Indian languages.
- Most of the times the original essence of regional works may be lost in translations.
- Global publishing houses often prefer “exotic” portrayals of Indian culture.

Conclusion

Not only did the indigenous literatures in India preserve the cultural identity, but they have also made English literature a unique Indian expression. By weaving oral traditions, classical texts, and regional narratives into English, Indian writers created a hybrid literary model that challenges colonial legacies and enriches global literature. The dialogue between indigenous and English literatures continues to shape India’s literary identity, ensuring that English in India remains deeply rooted in indigenous soil.

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