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# **M.A. English**

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## **Part II**

### **Course V**

#### **INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH**

#### **BLOCK**

#### **I**

#### **Introduction to Indian Writing in English**



**School of Distance Education  
The English and Foreign Languages University  
Hyderabad – 500 007, India**

**Written by**  
Malati Mathur

**Course and content editor**  
Mahasweta Sengupta

**Format and language editors**  
T. Sriraman  
Mahasweta Sengupta  
Lakshmi Chandra

**Cover design by**  
G. Prem Raj

**Page set by**  
A. Tasneem

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# **INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH**

## **BLOCK I**

### **Introduction to Indian Writing in English**

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## INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE

Welcome to this course on Indian Writing in English. In many ways, this course is most probably about texts that are close to you as a citizen of India as they deal with contexts and issues that are known to you.

This course comprises four blocks. The first block is introductory, giving you a broad survey of Indian Writing in English. The second block is on Indian Poetry in English and you will learn about some major poets in it. The third block is on Fiction in Indian Writing in English and it discusses some major novels. The fourth block is on Non-Fiction and Drama by Indians. We expect that you will read on your own much more than what you have in these blocks and familiarize yourself with the area.

We hope you will enjoy these texts and read them with the critical attention required to comprehend the complex world that we live in. Indian Writing in English is one of the most important and exciting branches of postcolonial writing, comprising voices that represent the very complicated intermeshing of the European modernist and the other older civilizations. History and geography both play a very important role in postcolonial writing and you will see how writers are circumscribed by the time and place of their production.

Enjoy the course.



## **INTRODUCTION TO THE BLOCK**

This is the first block in the course on Indian Writing in English. Therefore it presents the theoretical concepts and issues that underlie the designing of the course. The two Units in this block introduce you to Indian Writing in English, a major stream of postcolonial literatures.

Unit 1 introduces Indian Writing in English as a distinct stream of postcolonial literatures. It starts by tracing its beginnings and then discusses the major themes and issues that the literature has dealt with over the last century and a half.

Unit 2 makes a genre-wise survey of Indian Writing in English and briefly lists and describes the work of the major writers in each genre and the themes they have creatively presented.

Taken together the Units in the block will prepare you adequately for the study of the writers and works that you will undertake in the remaining blocks of this course on Indian Writing in English.





## **Unit 1**

### **Introduction to Indian Writing in English-I**

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## **Unit 1**

### **INTRODUCTION TO INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH-I**

#### **1.0 Objectives**

In this unit we will talk about the background and beginnings of Indian Writing in English and the factors that promoted the spread of the English language in India. Indian Writing in English has evolved over the years to become a recognized body of writing that explores diverse themes and issues. We will discuss the major issues that Indian writers in English have been preoccupied with and see the changes regarding issues, approaches and the modes of writing down to the present day avatar. By the end of this unit you should be able to identify major writers and the themes that characterize their writing.

#### **1.1 Introduction**

In June 1997, a special fiction issue of *The New Yorker* featured essays by Amitav Ghosh and Abraham Verghese, short fiction by Vikram Chandra and poems by Jayanta Mahapatra and A. K. Ramanujan. John Updike profiled R.K. Narayan and commented on Arundhati Roy's *A God of Small Things*.

Much of the best and most innovative writing in English today comes from outside the Western world, from writers who have adopted English as their preferred medium of creative communication. Indian Writing in English (IWE) refers to that body of work by writers who write in the English language and whose mother tongue is one of the many Indian regional languages. It also refers to the writing of the Indian diaspora – writers of Indian origin who have settled outside the country and write in English.

The Indian-British encounter gave rise to Indian writing in English and what started as a necessity – the learning of English by Indians for purposes of trade and commerce – gradually saw it being used for creative writing as well. English education was introduced in India in the early nineteenth century and it was to be expected that Indian pens would soon start pouring out essays, articles, fiction and poetry. We could also safely speculate that Indians had probably started writing in English even before the beginning of a formalized English education system as the English presence in India dated back to many years earlier. Much of the initial writing

was about social reform and in the form of journalistic articles or treatises especially since English journals and newspapers had also started rolling off the presses. This contributed in no small part to the development of Indian prose writing in English.

## 1.2 Background

The East India Company was set up in 1599 at a meeting attended by leading London merchants and around a century and half after it was founded, the Company was in a position to dominate the commercial, political and social set up of Bengal and, as its power expanded, India as a whole. By 1813, the British had taken up not merely police functions but also the mission of educating and ‘civilizing’ Indians. In the beginning, the idea was to promote Oriental education, to which end an amount of one lakh rupees was set aside as a grant. There had been printing presses and books coming out in Indian languages as well as in English (grammars, dictionaries, translations) from around the early years of the eighteenth century.

The first English newspaper in India - *Hicky's Bengal Gazette* – started in 1780 and was soon followed by others. Private schools that promoted education in English such as those established in 1717 at Cuddalore near Chennai, in 1718 at Mumbai and 1720 at Kolkata, culminated in the establishment, in 1817, of the Hindu College (as it was initially called and later known as the Presidency College in 1855) by Raja Rammohan Roy, David Hare and Sir Edward Hyde East. It was obvious that the institutes which offered Oriental education were fast being overtaken in popularity and demand by those that offered Western education and although there was still some debate between the Orientalists and the Anglicists, it appeared to be settled by Macaulay's famous *Minute* which asserted that it was both necessary and possible to “make the natives of this country good English scholars and that to this end our efforts ought to be directed.” On 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1835, Lord William Bentinck resolved that “the great object of the British Government ought to be the promotion of European Literature and science among the natives of India, and all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone.”

Between the years 1835 to 1855, the number of Indians educated in English increased significantly. In fact, it was estimated that even before that, the number of English books sold was higher than those in Indian languages and the bulk of the demand came from educated Indians and not from Englishmen based in India. As

distances started to get bridged through the introduction of the railways and the telegraph, a common medium of communication – English – started increasing in usage. In addition, European techniques in science and medicine started making their presence felt and it was through the English language that they spread among the educated classes.

Once Indians became familiar with the English language as they increasingly used it for utilitarian communication, they started making use of it for creative purposes as well. Essays, speeches, travelogues, letters, biographies, autobiographies, verse, drama, story – all the genres were soon being explored with the result that we now have a large corpus of writing in English that comprises the work of men and women from the subcontinent. Interestingly enough, the Indian involvement with English literature stimulated creativity in other Indian languages as well and one can see the connections between Indian English writing and modern Indian writing.

Starting from a blossoming of native genius, Indian writing in English has gradually and increasingly grown to become a new form of every Indian culture and the voice that articulates the thoughts, passions and dreams of countless Indians while Indian English has become the language in which India converses regularly. I remember asking a few students some months ago – we were conversing in English – whether they read newspapers in a foreign language. Although all of them regularly perused English dailies, they replied with a concerted and vehement ‘NO!’ When reminded of the newspaper they gulped down with their morning tea, they looked astonished and refused to entertain the idea that English was a ‘foreign’ language in India now.

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**Activity A**

Jot down the major factors that stimulated the spread of English education in India.

**Discussion**

The assumption of political power by the British soon led to other developments like the introduction of the railway and telegraph. The establishment of English medium schools and English journals and papers were other factors that influenced the spread of the English language throughout the country. In addition, there was a deliberate effort to teach Indians the language so that they may serve the interests of the British Empire in offices etc.

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### 1.3 Beginnings

The signposts of the landscape of early writings in English in India were sketches, memoirs and short fiction. The beginnings were not well documented and for a long time, Cavelly Venkata Boriah (1776-1803) whose *Account of the Jains* was published in 1809, was usually acknowledged as being the first published writer in Indian English. K R Srinivasa Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* (1962) and M K Naik's *History of Indian Literature* (1982) mention Boriah as the first writer. However, in as late as 1996, Michael H Fisher - a historian - narrated the life of an unknown Indian, Dean Mahomet, in his *The First Indian Author in English: Dean Mahomed (1795-1851) in India, Ireland and England*. Dean Mahomet (1795-1851) may be said to have the greatest claim to having been the first Indian writer in English as his travelogue *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* was the first published Indian English piece of writing in 1794. Written in an epistolary form, the travelogue is the first ever account written by an Indian about life with the East India Company. Although he is chronologically the first, it is still doubtful how many Indians of that time - or those who started writing later - were aware of his work.

### 1.4 Postcolonial writing

Indian Writing in English is also referred to as 'postcolonial' writing. So what exactly do we mean by the term? It does, obviously refer to writing from those countries which have experienced colonial rule and are now free of it, hence 'post' colonial. It stands to reason that such writing would be explicitly or otherwise, opposed to colonialism or imperialism in any form but it also discussed the effects of decolonisation on the political/cultural mind-set of people once oppressed by colonisation. Postcolonialism theory is also a tool with which to analyse texts.

In the context of Indian Writing in English, postcolonialism can be seen as the critiquing of Western canons, thought and perspectives to bring about a new articulation rooted in the Indian consciousness. It can therefore be said that postcolonial English literature in India is a 'writing back', a 're writing' or a 're reading'. Where the colonised had earlier been the subjects of someone else's stories, they now felt the compulsion to tell their own stories and rewrite what had been told in the form of counter-histories. There are however, Indian writers who see the label of 'postcolonial literature' as too limiting.

It can be said that Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) which is considered to be the first major Indian novel in English, achieves a decolonising of language and mentality, borrowing as it does, the style and structure from Indian tales and folk epics and experimenting with the language to follow oral rhythms and the narrative techniques of traditional ways of story-telling. As the celebrated writer U R Ananthamurthy says, "...departing boldly from the European tradition of the novel he has indigenized it in the process of assimilating material from the Indian literary tradition."

The foreword to *Kanthapura* has in fact, been called the manifesto for the practice of Indian Writing in English as it points out the struggle of bridging the cultural gap between the English language and the Indian story – the difficulty, as Raja Rao puts it, of describing 'in a language that is not one's own, the spirit that is one's own'. He goes on to suggest that this can only be accomplished by a systematic indigenization of English and by imbuing it with the breathless and unpunctuated tempo of Indian life. Similarly, given the Western origin of the novel, the Indian writer would have to locate his narrative in the epic legacy of India – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

While postcolonial literature refers to that body of writing by Indian writers whose mother tongue is one of the many Indian languages, it also takes into account the writing of the Indian Diaspora – people who were born in the sub-continent but were raised, live and work outside it. Salman Rushdie is the most celebrated example of this group who, in his acclaimed *Midnight's Children*, speaks of the staggeringly difficult task of forging a national identity in the midst of such vastly heterogeneous elements that Indian society is made up of.

Earlier writers like Kamala Markandeya, Manohar Malgaonkar, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal have delineated the spirit of independent India and the struggle to break away from copying British models as well as to make a transition into the modern age by questioning Indian traditional models in order to establish a distinctive identity. The writers of the seventies like Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh and Shashi Tharoor carried this forward with Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga winning the Man Booker. In addition, there have been writers like Manju Kapur and Vikram Chandra whose first books were given prestigious awards. Poets like Nissim Ezekiel, K K Daruwala and A K Ramanujam also strove to express Indian

thought and ideas in English, thus giving their work a truly postcolonial flavour.

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### **Activity B**

In what way can Indian Writing in English be considered to be postcolonial writing?

#### **Discussion**

Since India had been under the yoke of colonial rule, the writing that came out of the subcontinent as a reaction and aftermath to colonialism is known as postcolonial writing. It seeks to move away from a blind imitation of Western concepts even though it may draw inspiration from them and to speak in terms of the Indian experience whether within the country or abroad.

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### **1.5 Themes and Issues**

Before we begin to talk about the issues that Indian writers have explored and the conflicts that they have grappled with in their writing, it would be a good idea for you to write down what you think may be key issues that crop up in their writing. Do you think that Indian writing in English would be substantially different from writing from other countries also in English? Do you think that Indian writers consciously or otherwise use quintessentially Indian motifs? Is it necessary for them to do so?

The 'Indianness' of Indian Writing in English continues to be an issue that engages writers and critics alike. Does one expect Indian writers to dwell specifically on matters that are unique to the Indian context or are they to articulate the feelings, hopes and dreams that are universal? Why would one come to Indian Writing in English only to find some more English Literature? On the other hand, should their writing read like a guidebook, as it were, to Indian places, habits and customs? The answer, as for most things in life, cannot be either black or white and lies somewhere in between. While it is true that there may be certain issues that are unique to the Indian experience and context, there are others that are universal. It may therefore be useful to rephrase Alex King, an Australian critic's words that we are all humans by necessity and Indians by accident. And any literature can only stand the test of time when it is able to transcend all narrow barriers of geography and specificity and is able to speak to all of humanity. So it might be right to say that, with all the 'Indian' baggage which accompanies a good piece of writing that flows out



from the pen of an Indian writer writing in English, there would still be certain concerns that would strike a chord in a reader regardless of nationality.

The quest for identity has been a recurrent motif in modern literature but one that specially resonates in the Indian context. With its multiplicity of languages, religions, customs and cultures, the added conflict of a postcolonial schism in the national consciousness has always raised issues of identity that writers have sought to address and resolve.

Indian writing in English can be said to belong as much to imperialist history as to the postcolonialist era. The themes that can broadly be said to have occupied the early writers in English were: the British imperial possession of India, nationalism and the freedom struggle, Independence and partition. There was also an involvement with the East-West conflict, Gandhian ideology and various socio-cultural issues such as caste, poverty and industrialization. While the early writers advocated modernity, they were staunchly opposed to imperialism. Postcolonial India saw writing that dealt with the issues of cross fertilization and hybridity of cultures and ideas, the colonial period and a re-examination of imperialism, multiculturalism, psychoanalysis of national identity and the emergence of India as an independent nation in its own right. Sociopolitical realities and the idea of the colonial person and colonial writing have also figured largely in the works of many writers like Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand. Other writers like Bhabhani Bhattacharya and Manohar Malgaonkar have focused on the history of pre-independence India and social reality.

We could perhaps categorize Indian Writing in English according to some broad themes. While many of the works may not completely fit under one category, there might also be an overlap in some but it would nevertheless be helpful to identify the major issues that writers have been concerned with.

### **1.5.1 The Freedom Struggle and Nationalism**

It is inevitable for any literature to reflect the times it was written in and the literary output during the nationalist period in India is no exception. If a certain period is specially marked by powerful activism or sustained political thought and action, the literature of that time would most certainly bear unmistakable signs of that ferment. And so we find that writers of that time - across all

languages and genres - describe the freedom struggle and can be said to be the representatives of the nationalist consciousness.

For instance, Raja Rao indigenized the English language to serve the nationalist cause by loading it up with Indian mythological and cultural terms as well as an oral style of narration thus making emotional, what he termed as “the language of the intellectual make-up”. Dadabhai Naoroji wrote *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901), a powerful indictment of the British exploitation of India. Similarly, Sri Aurobindo demanded ‘purna swaraj’ in his fiery articles, enthusing and infusing the nation with his impassioned rhetoric. The Tamil nationalist-poet Subramaniam Bharati also wrote letters and articles in English that were published in *The Hindu* between 1904 and 1916. Shoshee Chunder Dutt wrote *Shunkur: A Tale of Indian Mutiny 1857* and *The Young Zamindar* (1883). Both the novels spoke about India’s cultural heritage and sought to make readers conscious of the need to fight for political freedom.

The influence of Gandhi on Indian languages and literatures was significant both directly through his writing in English and Gujarati as well as indirectly through the movements that were generated because of his speeches and writings. In addition, many political leaders of that time like Nehru, Rajagopalachari, Vinoba Bhave, Pattabi Sitaramayya, Rajendra Prasad, Abul Kalam Azad, and others were also social reformers, thinkers and writers who expressed themselves eloquently in English.

In addition, the intellectual elite of the country – all steeped in the study of the English language and its literature – and who also spearheaded the freedom movement, attempted to put together a unified national discourse that would speak to people in all parts of the country regardless of what their mother tongue was. This could only be done through English. By effectively using the language of the colonial masters to write against them, the Indians were displaying both assimilation and resistance at one and the same time!

The appropriation of the English language by Indian writers can be seen as a subversive strategy as, by adapting it to local culture and customs, it makes a subtle political statement, denies and rejects the political power that a colonizing language wields. As Salman Rushdie says, the conquering of the English language was one means of setting ourselves free from our colonial masters.

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**Activity C**

Why do you think the earliest Indian Writing in English was so imbued with nationalistic fervour?

**Discussion**

Indians started using more English at a time when the struggle for independence was just getting under way. English became the medium through which speeches, articles, letters etc. could reach a wide audience all over the country. Since the language was primarily being used to stir up patriotic sentiments, the tone of the writing was nationalistic.

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**1.5.2 Social and Political Concerns**

Indian society is a complex, multicultural and multilayered one and all its richness and complexity have been effectively articulated by writers from the earliest beginnings to the present day. Problems of hierarchies of class and caste, poverty, and the social evils of child marriage and dowry have found a place in Indian Writing in English. The modern day alienation and isolation of the individual under the onslaught of industrialization and the breakup of the old family structures and values have also found expression in a number of literary pieces of all genres as in for instance, Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971). Along with class and caste issues, modernity vis-à-vis religion as well as the latter's role in both individual lives and in society as a whole, the effects of colonialism, the questioning and problematizing of gender roles and rural life have all been delineated over the years.

Writers from the earliest period of IWE have focused on the political scenario in the country and shown how politics can impinge on the social and personal lives of individuals. Writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, David Davidar and Adiga make strong statements regarding the nature of politics in the country while weaving it through the strands of social and personal narratives.

Issues related to women have also been dealt with extensively. The deification/demonization of women, the social and domestic factors that hinder their development and seek to rein in their aspirations, their innermost desires and anxieties and the torment of not being able to express or realize what they actually want can be found in writers as varied as Rammohun Roy, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (*Rajmohan's Wife* serialized in 1864), Krupabai

Sattthianandhan (*Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life*, 1894), Shevantibai Nikambe (*Ratnabai: A Sketch of a Bombay High Caste Hindu Wife*, 1895), R K Narayan (*The Dark Room*, 1938), Kamala Markandeya, Kamala Das, Anita Dessai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Lakshmi Kannan, Raji Narasimhan, Suniti Namjoshi, Attia Hossain, Rama Mehta and others.

Concerns specific to the Indian milieu like untouchability for instance, have been focused on by early writers like Mulk Raj Anand (*The Untouchable*, 1935) and more recently by Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*, 1997). The subaltern perspective is brought out in such writing and the reader is forced to look at the stark, unsavoury aspects of Indian life. Anand's *Coolie* (1936) and *Leaves and a Bud* (1937) are about labourers. Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* (1947), is about the famine in Bengal. Poverty, deprivation, humiliation, desperation, exploitation – all the attendant miseries of the downtrodden in society – find due attention in Indian Writing in English in all the genres.

While the focal point in the poetry of the early 1960's poets like Nissim Ezekiel and Kamala Das was on the personal or family life, poets like Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Arun Kolatkar, Pritish Nandy, Dilip Chitre, AK Ramanujan and Jayant Mahapatra, who came later with their experimental poetry, exhibited a satirical yet compassionate strain while setting their sights on society and the individual and the combined heritage of both. A study of modern Indian poetry in English reveals a heightened sense of awareness and the consciousness of the immediacy of Indian experience practically with every passing decade.

The partition of India was a huge cataclysm, devastating in terms of human suffering, displacement and separation and is a saga of tenacious survival. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Manohar Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) are some examples of novels that deal with the tragic consequences of dividing people in the name of nationalism, religion etc.

Other themes include humour and satire, travel, social and literary criticism, historical and culture studies, the East-West encounter, biographies and autobiographies.

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**Activity D**

In what ways does Indian Writing in English reflect social concerns?

**Discussion**

Writers articulated their concerns regarding caste and class, the status of the family and individual in a changing society and women's issues and the earliest writing spoke directly about social reforms. Writers as late as in the 1990's still spoke about the tragic consequences of discrimination on the basis of caste as Arundhati Roy did in *The God of Small Things*. There was also an engagement with political trends and the reflection of a concern for India's rural land/mindscape.

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**1.5.3 Reinterpreting and Retelling Myths/Epics**

The use of myth is common and long accepted as a valid and sophisticated way of defining and judging contemporary life. In the hands of a gifted writer, myths not only offer a re-evaluation of history but in the process, themselves are refashioned into something new. There is a plurality of perspective and consequently, the barriers of ancient myth and modern reality blur into a comprehensive world view.

Even in the increasingly westernized pace of life in India, the mythic past is very much present. Many short stories of late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were a kind of re-telling of traditional Indian legends and parables. The old myths and legends are retold and reinterpreted in the context of contemporary life, resonating in the Indian's consciousness in a new but still recognizable way.

Dedicating his poem *Love and Death* (1921) to his brother, Manmohan Ghose, Aurobindo wrote:

To take with a reverent hand the old myths and cleanse them of soiling accretions, till they shine with some of the antique strength, simplicity and solemn depth of beautiful meaning, is an ambition which Hindu poets of today may and do worthily cherish. To accomplish a similar duty in a foreign tongue is a more perilous endeavor.

Aurobindo took up Vyasa's short narrative of the Satyavan-Savitri episode and transformed it into a long poem of 24,000 lines

(*Savitri*, 1950, '51), attempting to go beyond the surface of the tale that is a part of the *Mahabharata*.

Other Indian writers in English have reinterpreted or retold the stories from the great epics as did Toru Dutt who went to the ancient ballads for material for her poetry. Vasudeva's *Nala Damayanti* (1920), T P Kailasam's *Karna: The Brahmin's Curse* (1940), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1993), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and Gurcharan Das's *The Difficulty of Being Good* (2009) are examples which go to show how Indian writers in English have, over the years, continued to engage with the ancient texts.

The 1980s onwards has seen a surge of epic narratives in English. Maha Nand Sharma for instance, used the myths of Shiva for his *Rudraksha Rosary* (1987). S.M. Angadi's *Basava Darsana* (1986) talks of the phenomenon of Basaveswara, the founder of Virasaivism and Amreeta Shyam has transcreated the myths in her *Kurukshetra* (1991) and *Kaikeyi* (1992). And the grand old man of Indian literary criticism, K R Srinivasa Iyengar wrote *Sitayana* (1987), *Sati Saphakam* (1991) and *Krishna-Geetam: Delight of Existence* (1994).

While Gurcharan Das's book discusses contemporary ethical problems and issues of dharma by referring to characters in the Mahabharata, Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale's *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology* (2009) is a collection of essays which interrogates patriarchal readings of one of the most idealized women of India. Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010) takes into account all the various folk renderings of the epic across India such as the Pandavani of Chattisgarh, Gondhal of Maharashtra, Terukkuttu of Tamil Nadu, and Yakshagana of Karnataka. Nanditha Krishna's *Sacred Animals of India* (2010) explores the traditional Indian religious conception of animals from Ganesha to others in the epics and in Buddhist and Jain narratives. Amish Tripathi recently published his trilogy on Shiva: *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011) and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). Ashok Banker has published, along with others based on Indian myths, *The Slayer of Kamsa* (2010) which is on the life of Krishna while Ashwin Sanghi's *Chanakya's Chant* (2011) draws upon the legendary Chanakya to write a modern-day political thriller. Suniti Namjoshi uses myths and fables from Indian texts to illustrate the condition of women. Similarly, Githa Hariharan revises, retells and rewrites myths from a woman's point of view.

Although their literature is set in the present and they use modern literary resources, their writing is imbued with the texture of the epics and one gets a sense of tradition that has survived and surfaces in unexpected ways and places as their narratives reshape memories into a present-day contemporaneity.

Besides the myths and legends of ancient India, the nation's rich legacy of religion and philosophy has also been explored by writers like Vivekananda, Tagore, Aurobindo, S Radhakrishnan and Khushwant Singh.

#### **1.5.4 Diasporic Writing**

The term 'diaspora' originally meant dispersal from the homeland (usually under compulsion or extreme circumstances) but has now come to denote all those who have settled in other countries both voluntarily or otherwise. The term also embraces the children of the migrant community who may never have set foot on the soil of their forefathers but who have imbibed their 'Indianness' from their parents or grandparents and the stories they have heard and read about India. For them, even if India is not a concrete reality in terms of felt experience, they still engage with the 'idea' of India which may be just as real.

'Diaspora' therefore, refers to those who live in exile, refugees, immigrants, expatriates and their descendants whose lives have been shaped by their double – some might even say 'fractured' – consciousness of various factors in their native and adopted lands. These would include language and perceptions of culture as also the disorientation as well as reorientation of geographical displacement. In a sense, one could perhaps say that all the literatures of the world are diasporic in character as they are the result of migrations of various people and communities from one part of the world to another over countless periods of time.

Although writers of the diaspora are attached to and yearn for their homeland, there is also the necessity and desire to adapt and belong to the country in which they have settled. As such, they may perhaps be said to belong to two worlds or, paradoxically, to neither as they are forever caught between their roots and their place of transplantation, and thus, doubly marginalized.

While this situation of being 'unhomed' (to use a phrase by Homi Bhabha) is associated with that of alienation, the wish to look back at the past is yoked to the desire to stay in the present and look

forward to a future where one is assimilated into the culture and ethos of the adopted country in order to 'fit in'. As Bhabha so insightfully puts it,

...to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself... taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'.

The old diaspora, made up largely of the subaltern and unprivileged class, and mostly illiterate, hardly produced any literature at all. Theirs was still generally, an oral culture which consisted of stories, narratives, songs and texts that, by and large, did not enter into the print medium. This rich archive of oral culture and the narrations of self and community are yet to be explored and in many cases, it is the descendants of this older diaspora who are now writing and giving us an idea of what the fractured consciousness is all about.

Diasporic writing is creative and imaginative and shows all the positive signs of a cross-fertilization of cultures in terms of subject matter, linguistic experimentation and heteroglossia (conflicting discourses within a literary activity). They show an involvement with issues relating to race and ethnicity; identity and belonging; isolation and alienation; gender; homelessness and nostalgia; loneliness and rootlessness; questioning and protest, assertion and quest; subaltern and minority issues. Many of the texts show a healthy mix of more than one world-order, a refreshing change from the monolithic uncentric literatures of earlier times.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni for instance, while re-telling and re-interpreting the myths and epics of ancient India, refashions them in order to blend in with the stories of immigrant Indian women who are struggling to survive between cultures – the new way of life in an alien world on the one hand and the desire to keep the memories and values of the homeland alive on the other.

Raja Rao, A K Ramanujam, Nirad Chaudhari, Salman Rushdie and Kamala Markandeya are among the celebrated writers of the Indian Diaspora while other notable writers are Bharati Mukherjee, V S Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, KS Maniam, Edwin Thumboo, Kirpal Singh, Satendra Nandan, Yasmine Gooneratne, Uma Parmeswaran, Anjana Appachana, Mena Abdullah, Kiran Desai, Vassanji, Dom Moraes and Vijay Misra among others who



are writing from the UK, the Caribbean, Canada, the U.S., Australia, Singapore, Malaysia and Fiji.

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**Activity E**

How does Diasporic Writing offer a different perspective?

**Discussion**

Writing by people (and their descendants) of Indian origin who have migrated to other countries for various reasons reveals a confluence as well as a conflict of cultures and values. It articulates the sentiments of those who feel the pull of both their motherland (often accessed second hand through grandparents) and the adopted land.

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**1.6 Summing up**

Moving away from the first phase of imitation or a narration of history, Indian writers in English discovered – or rather, re-discovered - who they were and constructed a platform of writing which, while avoiding simple imitation, would justify the use of a foreign language and resources to articulate native concerns. In this process, there was a much telling and retelling of narratives, sometimes from a completely new and fresh perspective.

Indian literature in English does show the stylistic influence of the regional languages as evidenced by the use of local idioms and certain sentence constructions. However, this can also be viewed as the ‘nativisation’ of English and a successful adaptation of the language to suit the Indian context.

Writers today are no longer fettered by the canonical restraint of earlier writing. They are creating their own paradigms and feel free to set down their markers and definitions. Conscious of the fact that Indian Writing in English tells multiple stories from varied viewpoints, these writers revel in the hybridity of the form and refuse to accept the limitations of being viewed from a single perspective. They have also shifted from the platform of fixed social contexts to an inner reflexiveness that is more representative of the modern day context. The shift in aesthetic emphasis has also meant that the pressure of articulating an ideological position is no longer as overbearing as it used to be.

There is some opposition by Indian English writers to being classified rather simplistically as ‘postcolonial writers’ and recent

writing shows a marked movement away from the ways in which Indians earlier used English for creative writing. Writers have dealt positively with concepts of difference and dispersion, focusing with great empathy and insight on the modern world with all its curses and blessings. Indian Writing in English over the years has seen a lot of experimentation and innovation where theme and form are concerned. By exploring history, religion, myths and folklore and relating them to contemporary socio-political contexts, this form has come to be regarded not merely as an off-shoot of another but a tradition in its own right.

### 1.7 References and Suggested Reading

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