

FRATERNITY OF INDIAN ENGLISH NOVELISTS SINCE 1980s

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hAbstract

In the period of globalization, English has developed augmented importance as a common language for the global community. Speaking of literature, Indian writing in English is nearly hot off the fire. The Indian writing in English boosted off only in the last couple of decades and since then, a number of writers bagged global fame, some achieved national and others had to find contentment through contracted loop. These Indian writers have fashioned a niche of their own in English with their awe-inspiring works of literary fineness. Indian writing has navigated an elongated haggard path of uplifting evolution. The renaissance in Indian writing was kicked off in the 1980's and the predecessor of this group, the hallmark of Indian writing of this era was Salman Rushdie.

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Indian literature witnessed renaissance in 1980s and 1990s. Salman Rushdie, an Indian-British novelist and essayist, spearheaded this renaissance with his path breaking novel, *Midnight Children* in 1980. He exploded to recognition with the book and from the time when he kissed success, there has been plenitude of Indian authors scripting in English. *New York Review of Books* writes: “*Midnight’s children*’ is one of the most important books to come out of the English-speaking world in this generation.”¹ His work always revolves around the Indian Subcontinent as a vital theme. His *Midnight Children*, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and *Shalimar Clown* were critically acclaimed for their themes and the use of delightful practicality. But the book that dotted deadly controversy was *The Satanic Verses*. He was indicted of profanity by countless Muslims because of certain supposedly disrespectful references to Islam's Prophet Mohammad. Arousing the wrath among Muslims globally, a fatwa was issued by Iran's Ayotollah Khomeini calling for the execution of the novelist. The book was banned in many countries including India. Rushdie veiled himself in U.K. and till date his name is there in the wanted list with a price on his head.

This research work deals with two prominent Booker Prize Winning novelists: Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. Historically, The Man Booker Prize is a prize for fiction in English. It is founded in 1969 and is financed by Booker McConnell, a multinational conglomerate. It is awarded annually by a panel of judges for what, in their opinion, is the best full-length novel published in the last twelve months. The award is accompanied by considerable publicity and media razzmatazz. The winner of the Booker Prize is generally assured of international renowned and success for this reason; the prize is of great significance of the book trade. The prize worth 50,000 GBP to the winner and each short-listed author receives 2500 GBP in addition to a leather-bound copy of his own book.

In a long span of time from 1969 to 2012 we have five famous Booker Prize winners related to India or Indian Diaspora. They have evaluated the greatness as well as the weakness of Indian culture, civilization, and life boldly. These highly renowned novelists are- V.S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Arvind Adiga.

Vidiadhar Suraj Prasad Naipaul, born in Chaguanas in 1932, was educated at the Queen's Royal College, Trinidad, and University College, Oxford. He lived in Britain since 1950 but travelled extensively. V.S. Naipaul won Booker Prize for his *In a Free State* in 1971. Naipaul is a novelist of merit, whose choosy, sardonic tone controls a profound concern with 20th century suspicions and such harmful effects of imperialism upon the people of the Third World as cultural alienation and deracination.

His major books are: *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959), *A House For Mr. Biswas* (1961), *In A Free State* (1971), *A Bend in the River* (1979).

Salman Rushdie, born in Bombay in 1947, he migrated to Britain in 1965, he was educated at Cathedral and John Connon School in Mumbai, Rugby School, and King's College, University of Cambridge, where he studied history. "Fostered by James Joyce and Gunter Grass among others, Rushdie's interests are in reshaping the history of his time to make it congruent with identities fractured by imperialism, and in questioning how fiction dare undertake so colossal a task. His novels are important examples of magic realism.

His major books are: *Grimus* (1975), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Shame* (1983), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990).

Arundhati Roy was born in Shillong, Meghalaya, India in 1961. She spent her childhood in Aymanam in Kerala, and went to school at Corpus Christi, Kottayam,

followed by the Lawrence School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi, where she met her first husband, Gerard de Cunha.

Dr N.D.R. Chandra writes: “Arundhati Roy’s works are not autonomous creation of an autonomous artist. Her works are cultural artefacts to be read and understood by applying method of ‘thick descriptions’ as suggested throughout her novels and essays, myriad events are described which give us a glimpse of social, cultural, and political life in contemporary India.”²

Her major works are: *The God of Small Things* (1997), *The Cost of Living* (1999), *Power Politics* (2002), *Public Power in the Age of Empire* (2004), *War Talk* (2004), *An Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire* (2004).

Kiran Desai, born in New Delhi in 1971, is an Indian author. She is a citizen of India and a permanent resident of the United States.

Krishna Singh writes: “Kiran Desai... explores colonial neurosis, multiculturalism, modernity, immigrants’ bitter experiences, insurgency and the game of possession, gender-bias racial discrimination, impact of globalization and historical relationships between people from different cultures and backgrounds.”³

Her major works are: *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (2009).

Arvind Adiga, born in Madras in 1974, grew up in Mangalore and studied at Canara High School, then at St. Aloysius High School, where he completed SSLC in 1990. After immigrating to Sydney with his family, he studied at James Ruse Agricultural High School. He studied English Literature at Columbia College, Columbia University in New York. Adiga began his career as a financial journalist interning at the Financial Times.

His major works are: *The White Tiger* (2008), *Between the Assassinations* (2008), *Last Man in Tower* (2011).

We shall now move from southern to northern India and examine the first chapter of *In Custody*, Anita Desai’s Booker-shortlisted novel of 1984. This narrative, though written in English, is about what Desai’s text explicitly calls the politics of language, focusing on the rivalry between a dominant Hindi and an embattled Urdu, and, poised somewhere between elegy and farce, charts the decline of the once-vibrant Urdu culture of Delhi. This is expressed through the bittersweet encounter between Deven, a Hindu and hard-up teacher of Hindi and part-time critic and poet, and a fading

Muslim cultural icon, the vain, ageing but brilliant Urdu poet Nur Deven lives in Mirpore, a small city - like Malgudi, fictional - located near Delhi, where he teaches at a low-prestige college: his subject is Hindi literature, but he was brought up bilingually in Hindi and Urdu. The book opens with Deven receiving a surprise visit at his workplace from an old college friend, Murad, who edits an Urdu-language literary journal: Murad asks him to go to Delhi and interview Nur for the journal, and Deven's acceptance of this task sets the story in motion.

In *The Nowhere Man*, Kamala Markandaya deals with the theme of the East-West encounter from a new perspective by portraying the miserable plight of the Indian immigrants in England from pre to post-Independence. In the words of B. Krupakar: "Kamala Markandaya's novel *The Nowhere Man* is a compassionate and distressing tale of aged Indian immigrants who becomes a martyr to racial hatred."⁴ The novel illustrates the authors "continued concern with cultural values in the context of racist attitudes in England following the decline and defeat of British imperialism."⁵ (Rao & Menon 1987:105) Markandaya artistically presents the dichotomy of the East-West confrontation which is shown through the undeserved plight of an old and friendly Indian immigrant in England; the portrait of his misery is probably the result of a deep study of the helplessness of Indian expatriates in Britain. The Indo-British interaction is depicted mainly through the experiences of Srinivas, an Indian immigrant in Britain. Srinivas becomes disoriented person and is considered to be a trespasser. He, even after living for half a century in England, tends to feel like a "nowhere man, looking for a nowhere city."⁶ Being cut off from his well-founded traditional and cultural roots, he tries to get sustenance from his adopted country.

Unlike other writers who are of the view that the gap between the East and the West can never be properly bridged, Kamala Markandaya seems to suggest in her novels that a cultural synthesis and a compromise between the two modes of living are always possible. In the words of Rochelle Almeida: "Markadaya believes that an East-West encounter can be as fulfilling and successful as one would want to make it. When there exists a mutual desire to foster friendship and respect without consideration of individual gain, the encounter can be a very successful one."⁷

A series of novels, including *The Dark Holds no Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadow* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), and *Small Remedies* (2000) have established Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938) as perhaps the leading writer who deals in a direct way with the situation of women in urban, middle-class life. Educated in Bombay and Bangalore, where she lives, Deshpande turned to writing relatively late after bringing up her children and training as a journalist in the early 1970s. Her novel *The Binding Vine* (1992) is filtered through the fears, hopes and uncertainties of an urban middle-

class consciousness. The narrator, Urmi, who lives in Bombay, has recently lost her daughter, but she is drawn out of her grief by two experiences, both of which challenge the boundaries of her world. The first is the discovery of a trunk belonging to her dead mother-in-law, packed with poems and diaries, which, to Urmi's surprise, reveals her to have been a woman of great imaginative powers, trapped, violated and eventually killed by a man she did not love. J. P. Tripathi in an article is commenting on Urmila's relationship with her husband:

Urmila, the sailors wife and college teacher, is more self-reliant and has an identity different from that of her husband; she is self-respecting and does not want to live on Kishore's money. She is, however, a sensitive vine and need Kishore as an Oak to entwine herself around.”⁸

In the process the domestic sphere is revealed to have histories of its own which have gone previously unrecorded. The second experience challenges the limits of Urmi's domesticity, not through confronting it with an image of the history of its repressions but by revealing the contemporary realities of life for women of less privileged classes. Visiting a friend in hospital, Urmi meets the distraught Shakuntala, whose daughter has been brutally beaten and raped. Their developing relationship, haunted by the figure of the daughter who remains unconscious in hospital, is a difficult and uneven one. Although Urmi assumes direction of Shakuntala's life, her modern, reforming gaze has to accept its own limits. Urmi's English-speaking background is a different world from the Marathi culture inhabited by Shakuntala, just as her mother-in-law's poetry, written in Kannada, and which Urmi struggles to translate into English, comes from an unimagined past. Translation becomes a governing metaphor in the novel for the gaps which separate the different cultures that make up the nation, especially as they affect the question of the place of women in the national community.

Shobha De (b.1948) within the framework of a novel depicts the breaking up the institution of marriage. The new concept of marriage envisages complete sexual freedom with no notion of fidelity. In such a situation man and woman do not become one in marriage; they merely become partners in love. Economic freedom, promiscuity and uncontrolled passion resulting from 'the lust of the blood' make most men and women vulnerable and the resultant frustration in life engulfs them. That is what happens to Mikki and Alisha. However, Shobha De tries to redeem her protagonist, Mikki by making her deeply human. Her concern for her half-sister, determination to make amends for her father's vices and misdeeds by rehabilitating Alisha in her own house, speaks volumes of her kind nature. Even her love for Binny who ditched her shows the magnanimity of her character. Shobha De does not make her only a sex

symbol. Her hopeless passion for love making and desire for getting on in the world finally yield place to concern the well-being of her half-sister, Alisha, and she seems to be more sinned against than sinning. In this tragic world of cut throat competition, where good intentions fatally miscarry, Mikki suffers and it is through her suffering she learns the art of living. Her final triumph comes when she wins the love and affection of her half-sister, Alisha who pined for legitimacy in life, but failed, because her father has no guts to own her in public. Shobha De brings these two women together, who blundered their way for a while and turned their mutual distrust to love and affection passing the bounds of social restriction. The novel is appropriately titled Sisters.

In imposing contrast to the ways in which so many of the recent novels draw attention to history as itself a story stands the classic realism of Vikram Seth's mammoth *A Suitable Boy* (1993). This is set in the early 1950s, formative years of the Nehru period, with the passing of the zamindari abolition legislation and the first election of the post-independence era looming. For all its copious realism, it is difficult not to see this novel too as an allegory of nationhood. Where it differs from Rushdie's other literary children is in the confident way that it subscribes to an idea of Indian history as a progress towards the goal of a secular, commercial society in the image of conventional Western models of national development. The novel is based on a romance plot, the choice of a suitable boy for the heroine, Lata Mehra; but although she shows signs of independence, the novel is ultimately one of conformity and what it represents as the inevitability of bourgeois life. The man Lata chooses is neither the son of the Calcutta's high society, nor the Muslim boy whose friendship scandalises Lata's mother, but Haresh Khanna of Prahapore, a man who is foreign-returned but from a British technical college rather than the kind of elite institution which Seth himself attended. Moreover, it is the shoe trade for which he is being trained, a business profession which brings with it the spectre of the loss of caste. Haresh would seem to represent Seth's idea of properly bourgeois man emerging from religious superstition and social snobbery. Along with its sense of the inevitability of a particular kind of national development-for Haresh's success is surely intended as a parable for the times-comes nostalgia for a feudal world of Urdu literature and courtly entertainments. *A Suitable Boy* would seem to affirm the idea that the destiny of middle-class India lies in casting aside an obstructive concern with traditional identities in pursuit of secularism in its liberal economic mode. With such confidence about the future of the nation, what is to be left behind can be romanticise in nostalgia for a world that it views as inevitably lost.

The Mumbai-born Rohinton Mistry, shifted to Canada and there penned his first novel *One Sunday* which bagged the annual contributor's award from the Canadian fiction magazine. He also received the commonwealth writer prize for *Such a Long Journey* whereas *A Fine Balance* was shortlisted for Bookers Prize. His novels throw

light on concerns distressing the Parsi community in India. The beauty of his books lies in their lyrical prose though his novels are long and depressing at times. Mistry's works are a pool of human emotions that mount above situation or provision. His characters are philosophical porch of unsophisticated love and he dwells in the ordinary only to transform into the extra-ordinary.

Rohinton Mistry's works seeks to evolve a vision that involves both the community-centred existence of the Parsis and their involvement with the wider national framework. His novels are concerned with the experience of the Parsi in India. Mistry, re-narrates the history of his community and country as it has been in the post-Independence era. This re-narration of history in a way depicts consciousness of anxieties and aspirations, perils and problems of existence of individual, communal and national issues. Mistry has, in this sense, successfully exploited some historical points of post-Independence era and endeavoured to re-think them and re-narrate about his community and country through the various narratives woven in the novel.

Politics form an important subtext to the main action of all three novels of Rohinton Mistry. This preoccupation moves increasingly closer to contemporary times as Mistry tackles first, in *Such a Long Journey*, the Bangladeshi war with Pakistan, second, Indira Gandhi's declaration of a State of Emergency which affects the livelihood of the tailors of *A Fine Balance* and finally, in *Family Matters*, the impact Hindu fundamentalist agitation and the post-Babri Masjid riots had on the life of the ordinary Indian.

Although aspects of national history, especially as it relates to the fate of the Parsi in pre-and post-Independence India, are of implicit relevance to an understanding of the characters of —*One Sunday in Tales from FirozshaBaag*, it is only with his first novel, *Such a Long Journey* that Mistry foregrounds aspects of national politics and integrates them into the main plot of his narrative.

With *A Fine Balance*, he reproduces his concerns about the imbrications of national politics and the fate of the individual. However, in *Family Matters*, because of the more intimate nature of his fictional terrain, state politics, though present, affect the main narrative only towards the end. *Such a Long Journey* is set against the backdrop of the Bangladesh—Pakistan wars of the 1970s. In this novel, public events have direct repercussions on the life of the ordinary citizen. Since the wars are a narrative excuse for the exploration of both political ethics and the problems of individual ethical-moral responsibility, an explanatory note on the historical events is in order.

Gita Hariharan (b.1954) has not adopted Deshpande's realist mode, though there are thematic similarities in their fiction. Hariharan came to writing after a career as an

editor and journalist and shows an interest in literary experimentation in a less epic mode than many of her male counterparts. Whereas nearly all of those novelists who have toyed with the epic tradition have laid some kind of claim to the cultural authority of the Mahabharata, Hariharan's *A Thousand Faces of Nights* (1992) and *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994) are concerned with rewriting folk tales and children's stories. In the latter, a retired schoolteacher, Vasu Master, succeeds in winning over the problem child Mani by storytelling. The stories are reworking of the Panchatantra. A.W. Ryder's translation of the famous collection of tales, cited in Hariharan's notes, describes the Panchatantra as a 'niti-shastra', a textbook of 'niti' or the wise conduct of life. While it is more concerned with the domestic space than the epic canvas of history, the novel explores what it means to be a good citizen and places the problem squarely in relation to the question of what constitutes Indian modernity.

Vasu comes to recognise 'the necessity of reconstruction' from the 'dismantled parts of various ideas, beliefs, models' that are his inheritance. His willingness to use whatever lies at hand as material for the stories that eventually seem to heal the boy suggest an attitude to traditional culture which treats it as an open resource for the future, not a closed, epic authority, but something that can be rewritten for present needs. In the mode of Raja Rao's adaptation of the folk form to the story of the nationalist struggle, Hariharan's novels stand as a repudiation of the orientalist view of India as defined by the glorious high culture of antiquity. *A Thousand Faces of Night* focussed more specifically on the positioning of Indian women in relation to this orientalist idea of tradition.

Hariharan herself returned to India after attending graduate school in the United States and this novel is an account of the foreign-returned Devi's attempt to find a way of living in contemporary India, cunningly interleaved with the tales of heroes and heroines told to her as a child by her grandmother: her use of these tales as part of a fluid tradition of storytelling questions the closed idea of 'tradition'. She anticipates something of Vikram Chandra's sense of Indian culture as an infinite set of perpetually circulating narratives, but her novel has a keener sense of the way these narratives can become ossified into constricting forms, particularly in relation to the way that they are used as containing narratives for women. The achievement of *A Thousand Faces of Night* lies in its sense of the way stories can both liberate and enslave, an insight it shares with Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*.

Amitabh Ghosh is obviously a novelist given to generic inventiveness and he has been taken by some critics to be a champion of post-modern cultural weightlessness, but his writing is as interested in the ties that bind as in the transitory nature of global culture. The most impressive of Ghosh's novels remains his second book, *The Shadow*

Lines (1988), which deals with relations between the different arms of a prospering bhadralok family, the Datta-Chaudhuris, displaced from Dhaka to Calcutta by the Partition. At the centre of the novel is the figure of Tridib who teaches the nameless narrator that all communities, indeed all identities, are imagined or narrated: "Everyone lives in a story ... they all lived in stories, because stories are all there are to live in, it was just a question of which story."⁹ Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that Ghosh's novel is uninterested in the particularities of specific cultural locations.

If the nation is a fiction, whose boundaries are capable of being re-imagined and redrawn, it nevertheless remains a powerful determining presence, as too are the histories of colonialism and racism which haunt the relationships between the Datta-Chaudhuris and the Prices, English friends-of-the-family across two generations. The *Shadow Lines* is a novel filled with the specificities of names, dates, and places, a novel in love with some kinds of cultural difference even while it seeks to imagine a way beyond others. Moreover, it shows that different narratives of the self and the nation can collide with devastating effects.

Part of its brilliant sense of the complications of cultural identity is its perception that even where cultural difference is radically asserted, when Tridib is killed in a communal riot while visiting his family's old home in Dhaka, it can be shadowed by lines of connection. The riot has been started by the theft of the prophet's hair in Kashmir, in a city thousands of miles away, in a country from which Dhaka is now partitioned, with the two countries, India and East Pakistan (as it was at the time of the riot) 'locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free-our looking-glass border'. This last metaphor, the figure of the mirror, runs throughout the novel as the sign of those relations which paradoxically connect nations and individuals even as they divide them.

In some respects, *The Shadow Lines* can be thought of as a historical novel. Like *Midnight Children*, it is interested in recuperating histories squeezed out of the state's homogenising myth of the nation. The riot which kills Tridib in Ghosh's novel has fallen from the pages of history, unrecorded in Calcutta newspapers, Ghosh suggests, because the state and public institutions regard war alone as a 'properly' historical conflict. A series of young novelists has followed Ghosh in trying their hands, with varying degrees of success, at writing historical narratives that display a revisionary scepticism about narrow definitions of the nation. Ketaki Dutta, an eminent critic and writer, writes about Ghosh's novels:

Thus, in the major novels of Amitav Ghosh, "high art" runs parallel to "popular culture". Wanderlust breeds 'multi-cultural tensions' finally leading on to 'post-

coloniality', inquisitiveness gives birth to quest-discovery motif and demands of "popular culture" rope in "magic realism". So, the 'post-modern' novels of Amitav Ghosh stand "a unique class by themselves..."¹⁰

A similar idea of using traditional Indian literary forms for the purposes of historical narration underpins Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Tharoor (b.1956) is another international Indian who went on from St. Stephen's to a career with the United Nations. Perhaps rather too relentlessly, his novel adapts the story of the Mahabharata to an allegory of modern Indian history. As the tongue-in-check title suggests, *The Great Indian Novel* takes an irreverent view of the development of modern India which is in tune with the scepticism of many recent historical novels. Similarly, he shows few qualms about taking on one of the great epics for such purposes.

Rather than simply placing contemporary material in traditional forms, which would be in danger of reproducing the kind of orientalism that has always defined India in terms of the glories of an unchanging past, novelists of this period have been much more willing to rewrite the genres of Indian literary tradition. Nor has Indian tradition simply been understood to be a repertoire of classical literary forms. Hindi film, for instance, has had an important influence on recent fiction, providing a set of symbols, new kinds of narrative technique (as in Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*, 2001), and, in novels such as Sealy's *Hero* and Tharoor's *Show Business* (1994), a new subject matter. For these and other novels soaked in the world of popular cinema, definitions of Indian tradition in terms of eternal high-cultural forms are being broken down.

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