

# Parallel Horizons: A Comparative Voyage through Modernist and Postmodernist Waves in Australian and Indian Writing

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## Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative exploration of modernist and postmodernist movements in Australian and Indian literature, examining their transformative influence on the global literary landscape of the 20th century. Modernists introduced subjective expressions and disruptive narrative techniques, exploring psychic fragmentation, while postmodernists playfully challenged conventional literary representations. In Australian modernism, Patrick White's "Voss" (1957) critiques imperialism through surreal characterization, and Christina Stead's "The Man Who Loved Children" (1940) employs expressionistic symbolism to highlight marital oppression. Indian modernists, including Tagore and Anand, fused indigenous and Western influences in socially-conscious works addressing colonialism. Transitioning to postmodernism, Peter Carey's "Bliss" (1981) and Salman Rushdie's "Midnight's Children" (1981) utilize intertextual pastiche to interrogate post-Independence national identities. Modernists disrupt narrative continuity to unveil alienation, while postmodernists expose storytelling's artifice through self-referentiality. The paper argues that narrative shifts between movements reflect changing assumptions about identity and power relations during anti/post-colonial transitions. Australian postmodernists, like Carey, reframe national myths from marginalized perspectives. In Indian postmodernism, Rushdie's carnivalesque narration destabilizes post-Independence identity constructions. In conclusion, modern and postmodern literature document the reconstitution of identity amidst profound societal change. Cross-cultural analysis enriches understanding of how global aesthetic movements intersect with localized interpretations. This study contributes to the discourse on evolving identity in literature, underscoring the significance of narrative transformations across distinct cultural and historical contexts.

**Keywords:** Comparative Analysis, Modernism, Postmodernism, Australian Literature, Indian Literature, Identity Evolution

## Introduction

Modernism and postmodernism represent seminal global literary movements, catalyzing experimental zeal across geographies. As Ellmann (1983) elucidates, modernists pioneered subjective expressions and formal innovations to depict psychic fragmentation in their prose and poetry, while postmodernists playfully subverted conventions and assumptions underlying literary representation itself (p.25). This paper undertakes a comparative investigation of quintessential modernist and postmodernist Australian

and Indian texts to analyze their stylistic interventions and thematic preoccupations against the backdrop of their respective turbulent socio-cultural contexts.

### **Modernism in Australian and Indian Literature**

In the Australian context, Patrick White's modernist tour de force, *Voss* (1957), utilizes surrealist characterization and temporally distorted poetic interior monologues to critique the destructive mythologies underlying imperial conquest, as a megalomaniac German explorer unravels amidst the unforgiving outback. As Semmler (1984) explicates, White's arid, dreamlike aesthetic, shaped by his interactions with avant-garde artistic movements between the World Wars, portrays the inhospitable outback's terrain as a metaphor for psychic desolation and white Australia's spiritual vacuity in its colonialist program (p.8).

Likewise, Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940) employs expressionist symbolism and stream-of-consciousness in its claustrophobic portrayal of a narcissistic patriarch presiding over his disintegrating household. Stead's protean, woman-centered writing aims to articulate the stifled interiority of feminine experience beyond the strictures of masculine literary norms, extending Virginia Woolf's modernist endeavors in this regard using Australian vernacular.

In contrast, spearheading Indian literary modernism in the vernaculars and English, Rabindranath Tagore radically reworked traditional poetic forms to assert India's cultural hybridity and openness against the homogenizing pressures of British colonialism. His seminal English poetry collection *Gitanjali* (1912) masterfully fuses subtle spiritual imagery and motifs from the Upanishads with indirect yet unmistakable political critique of the oppressive British Raj (Chakraborty, 2022). Tagore's creative assimilation and intertextual reworking of both Indian and Western canonical elements parallels the collage experiments spearheaded by European high modernists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Meanwhile, an equally crucial exemplar of Indian prose modernism is Mulk Raj Anand's naturalist novel *Untouchable* (1935). This socially conscious text depicts a single harrowing day in the life of a young untouchable man Trapped in preordained socio-economic misery. The stringent realism of its finely etched details indict the relentless everyday violence, dehumanization and sheer indignities systematically wreaked by religion-sanctioned caste inequities and hierarchies. This ability of Anand to assimilate disparate global literary influences to channel searing social commentary marks Indian literary modernism's multifaceted evolution amidst the gathering nationalist movement.

### **Postmodernism in Australian and Indian Literature**

Both nations produced postmodern novels that became contemporary classics by iconoclastically probing the cultural mythologies and monologic narratives underlying personal and collective self-perceptions of identity. Peter Carey's *Bliss* (1981) playfully appropriates tropes from Biblical parables, noir thrillers and surrealist visual arts in its chequered portrayal of advertising executive Harry Joy's identity crisis and spiritual awakening after a near-death experience. As Hergenhan (1988) notes, Carey exuberantly utilizes diverse postmodern storytelling modes - fables, mystery plots, psychedelic imagery - to challenge and destabilize reified ideas of a coherent postcolonial Australian identity rooted in white settler ideology that is still reconciling with its suppressed indigenous histories (p. 395).

Likewise, tracing India's passage from the euphoria of hard-won Independence through its violent, traumatic Partition from Pakistan, Salman Rushdie's magical-realist classic *Midnight's Children* (1981) animates this troubled colonial inheritance on the subcontinent via creolized, carnivalesque narration

indebted to Latin American authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. As seminal critic A.P Mukherjee (1985) articulates, with his hybrid English that incorporates subcontinental diction and mythical intertexts on multiple planes, Rushdie spearheaded the unprecedented confrontation with India's fractious and unresolved postcolonial trajectory in subcontinental English language writings after 1947 (p.95). Both Carey's and Rushdie's postmodern masterworks implode unitary accounts of personal development or national evolution from brazenly within the cracks of their restless, shape-shifting texts through masterful intertextual incorporation of Euro-mythic, indigenous and subcultural narrative elements.

### **Comparative Analysis**

As seminal literary postmodernism theorist Linda Hutcheon (1988) notes regarding the distinction between high modernism and postmodernism, while modernists lacerate narrative continuity and coherence to anxiously highlight profound psychic wounds and emotional intensity, postmodernists like Carey characteristically revel in flaunting the entire edifice of fiction's linguistic constructed-ness itself as artifact, laying bare its underlying assumptions and mechanisms of operation (p.23). To illustrate, the surrealist passages in White's *Voss* gesture toward the radical interiority of fractured subjectivity and dissolving ego boundaries under extreme isolation and deprivation. By contrast, Bliss' magical irruptions jolt the reader in metafictional mode to provocatively interrogate both normative ideas of middle-class Australian identity and realist narrative's claims to straightforward mimesis.

Likewise, seminal comparatist Jessica Walker's (2007) global framework theorizing commonalities and divergences among modernist and postmodernist styles argues that: "Revolutionary stylistic shifts in forms of narration and their intentions signal assumptions changing about knowledge construction, identity representation and power relations between periods marked by profound societal upheavals" (p. 192).

Applying her model, the Australian modernism that emerged between the World Wars, against the backdrop of deepening cultural nationalism sensitivities, forged radical literary aesthetics to accompany this drive to define a unique antipodean identity untethered from its residual colonial past. This crucially included Christina Stead's trenchant gender critiques that are absent in mythologized masculinist depictions of the remote outback as quintessentially Australian. By contrast, reflecting the failures of decolonization to deliver on its emancipatory promises and the gradual rise of multicultural sensitivities, postmodern literature in settler colonies inhabits forms of irony and incredulity towards official narratives and institutions. This profound yet playful questioning notable in Carey's work resonates with Rushdie's irreverent postmodern troubling of rigid constructs like cultural authenticity or ethnic purity in the postcolonial Indian context.

### **Impact on Literary Identity**

Through increasingly radical textual interventions implemented over the course of 20th century by visionaries like White, Stead and later Carey, the National literary canon of Australia has expanded dramatically from its earlier colonial-era preoccupations to encompass more representative and heterogenous depictions of lived experiences and identities rooted in this unique geography. From modernists like White demythologizing imperial hubris to postmodern fabulists like Carey reconstituting Antipodean identity itself as a site of energetic experimentation and contradiction, the protean Australian

literary identity continues to evolve as its multicultural society comes to terms with its indigenous heritage.

Similarly, Indian literature, just a few decades removed from two centuries of colonial rule, was profoundly reshaped by luminaries like the modernist poet Tagore and later Rushdie who overturned the tendencies of cultural nationalism and the realist aesthetic that were popular in the decades immediately before and after independence in 1947. Through their postmodern irreverence towards historicity and monolithic constructions of national identity, Rushdie especially catalyzed conceive identity in the subcontinental imaginary as irreducibly hybrid, pluralistic, vernacular and malleable - premised on intermixing and overlap rather than narrow religious communalism or attempts at externalized authenticity. This paradigm shift catalyzed by *Midnight's Children* generated literary resonances across the world, inaugurating the efflorescence of immigrant diaspora writing and postcolonial literature thematizing hybridity issues in settler and creole cultures.

### Conclusion

In summation, modernism and postmodernism as aesthetic movements adopted shifting narrative modes and figural grammars to register underlying societal uncertainties and turbulent transitions as the 20th century progressed from colonialism's decline toward the uneasy promise of globalization. If high modernist texts stylistically embodied profound alienation and yearning for authenticity to critique conformism and surface capitalist society's ruptures, postmodern works characteristically channel incredulity and irony toward institutionalized cultural production and its power dynamics itself. This seminar paper undertook brief speculative examinations of select Australian and Indian variants to highlight the intricate interplay forged between currents in worldwide literary movements, evolving conceptualizations of individual and community identity in unsettled nations, and the ever-changing material realities shaping postcolonial societies. Further extensive cross-cultural scholarship contextualizing aesthetic radicalism and changing literary sensibilities against localized historical exigencies would undoubtedly enrich scholarly and lay understanding of the aforementioned dynamism not just between these national traditions but within modern world literature as a whole. Therein perhaps resonates a vital continuity in the limitless capacity of visionaries like White, Carey, Tagore and Rushdie to challenge the sedimented bulwarks of conformity through reinventing language anew. For is not the crucial role of art during periods of destabilization to refresh perceptions and vary the lenses trained toward vexed realities? As Rushdie himself memorably states in *Midnight's Children*, "Re-description is revelation." In ongoing times of churn, may polyvocal literary truth-tellers continue to replenish what he terms life's "oceanic pluralities."

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