

Emergence of Indian English Novel Before Independence: A Study

Dr. Vishal A. Patel

Assistant Professor, Shri B. P. Brahmhatt Arts and M. H. Guru Commerce College, Unjha

Abstract:

This paper explores the evolution and significance of Indian English novels written before India's independence in 1947. It begins by defining the genre as a fusion of Indian themes and English literary form, developed under British colonial influence. The study analyzes how early Indian novelists employed English not as a colonial inheritance but as a medium to express indigenous experiences, socio-political concerns, and cultural conflicts. The article is divided into three key areas: the hybrid nature of language and identity, the role of nationalism and Gandhian philosophy in shaping narrative content, and the depiction of Indian society under colonial rule, including issues of caste, gender, and economic disparity. Through close readings of seminal works by Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan, supported by scholarly commentary, the paper highlights how these novels became powerful instruments of resistance, reform, and representation. These foundational texts laid the groundwork for postcolonial literature, asserting Indian consciousness within the framework of an imposed language. The article concludes by emphasizing the enduring legacy of pre-independence Indian English novels in articulating both personal and national quests for identity, dignity, and freedom.

Keywords: Indian English Novels, Colonialism, Nationalism, Cultural Identity, Pre-Independence Literature

Introduction:

Indian English novels refer to fictional works written by Indian authors in the English language, blending Indian themes with Western literary techniques. This unique genre emerged during the British colonial era when English education spread across India, enabling a new class of educated Indians to express their cultural, political, and social concerns through fiction. The journey began with *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, often considered the first Indian novel in English.

Before independence, Indian English novels were shaped by the nationalist movement, social reform, and cultural identity. Writers explored themes like colonial oppression, caste discrimination, women's rights, and the clash between tradition and modernity. These novels became tools of resistance and introspection. Notable early writers include Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao.

Language and Cultural Hybridity in Indian English Novels Before Independence

The Indian English novel before independence was marked by a profound engagement with language as a site of cultural negotiation. As Indian writers adopted the English language, which had once been the language of the colonial master, they reshaped it to reflect Indian realities, sensibilities, and idioms. This phenomenon is referred to by scholars as linguistic hybridity or the Indianization of English.

Raja Rao, in the preface to his seminal novel *Kanthapura* (1938), directly addresses this issue:

“The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.”

This statement encapsulates the linguistic dilemma faced by Indian English writers. Rao doesn’t just use English; he infuses it with Indian rhythms, proverbs, and idioms to narrate the spiritual and political awakening of a South Indian village.

Cultural hybridity also manifests in narrative structures. For instance, *Kanthapura* follows a puranic mode of storytelling, echoing oral traditions. The narrator, an old village woman named Achakka, recounts the tale in a way reminiscent of the *kathavachaks* (storytellers) in Indian temples, thereby merging Western novelistic form with Indian oral and religious traditions.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, in her seminal work *The Twice Born Fiction*, notes:

“Indian English novels began as a bilingual enterprise... the linguistic structure was English, but the cultural referents remained wholly Indian.”

Similarly, Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of “third space” in postcolonial theory can be applied here. Indian English fiction, for Bhabha, creates a hybrid space where colonizer and colonized cultures interact, resist, and transform each other. This is vividly seen in *Kanthapura*, where Gandhian philosophy, Indian mythology, and colonial politics coexist.

Other Novelistic Examples:

In Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), although the language is English, the use of terms like “latrine-cleaner,” “sweeper,” “outcaste,” and indigenous words like “tiffin,” “langar,” and “jalebis” preserve the Indian cultural context. Anand writes:

“He had read the name on the notice: TOILETS... but he called them latrines, like all the people in the colony.”

The translational approach—writing Indian thought in English without erasing its cultural origin—was a deliberate narrative strategy.

In R.K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* (1935), the language is deceptively simple, but the culture is deeply rooted in South Indian middle-class Brahmin life. Narayan does not explain or translate many terms (e.g., “dhobi,” “vaniyar,” “pyol”), trusting the reader to grasp their meaning contextually. This reflects Girish Karnad’s observation that Narayan’s English creates a world “as deeply Indian as any written in an Indian language.”

This linguistic-cultural hybridity helped shape a distinct Indian English literary voice. It wasn’t just about mastering English—it was about owning and transforming it. As Amitav Ghosh later observed, the English language in India became a “palimpsest,” layered with cultural and historical meanings.

Pre-independence Indian English novels, therefore, were not mere imitations of British fiction; they were sites of resistance, negotiation, and cultural assertion. By localizing English and blending it with indigenous narrative forms, writers like Anand, Rao, and Narayan laid the foundation for a powerful postcolonial literary tradition.

Role of Nationalism in Indian English Novels Before Independence

The pre-independence Indian English novel was not just a literary enterprise; it was deeply enmeshed in the nationalist struggle against British colonialism. Writers used fiction as a vehicle to reflect, question, and promote ideas central to India’s socio-political awakening. Through characters, conflicts, and

allegories, these novels captured the emotional, psychological, and ideological dimensions of India's journey toward self-rule.

Gandhi as a Literary Presence

A central influence in nationalist-themed novels was Mahatma Gandhi, whose philosophy and methods—nonviolence, Swadeshi, and Satyagraha—reshaped India's identity. His presence, either direct or symbolic, pervaded many early novels.

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is perhaps the most important nationalist novel in Indian English literature. Though Gandhi never appears in person, his ideology is the invisible driving force of the novel. The protagonist Moorthy becomes a Gandhian reformer who renounces caste and British goods. The narrative itself mirrors a political awakening, as Achakka, the narrator, describes how:

“Gandhi is the new avatar of Vishnu... who has come to cleanse the land of the white man's sins.”

This metaphor reflects the blending of nationalism with traditional Hindu imagery—transforming political struggle into spiritual duty.

Fiction as Political Weapon

Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), while focused on caste oppression, is equally rooted in nationalist urgency. The novel ends with Bakha, the sweeper-boy, hearing about Gandhi's call to reform:

“Gandhi has said that untouchability is a sin... he calls you Harijans, children of God!”

Anand's political commitment is clear. He aligns with both Gandhian compassion and Ambedkarite rationalism, making the novel a political manifesto in narrative form. Scholar E.M. Forster, who wrote the introduction to *Untouchable*, called it a “book of protest,” linking its mission to the larger liberation movement.

Depicting Colonial Oppression

Pre-independence novels often highlighted the cruelty and moral hypocrisy of British rule. Characters are humiliated, traditions disrupted, and communities fractured under colonial authority.

In Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers!* (1947), the Bengal famine and the economic exploitation by the colonial system become metaphors for the dehumanizing effects of imperialism. Devata, a Gandhi-like figure, inspires villagers to resist British policies by reviving rural self-reliance:

“The charkha hums freedom... It is not just a wheel; it is a weapon.”

Bhattacharya uses Gandhian ideals as an artistic template, blending realism with nationalist optimism.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in *Indian Writing in English*, asserts:

“The Indian novel in English grew not merely as an art form, but as an expression of the Indian mind in its response to alien rule.”

This “response” was not always propagandistic. Often, it was critical introspection, as seen in R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room* (1938), which critiques not British rule but the limitations of Indian patriarchy and social norms, even during the nationalist era.

The Indian English novel before independence served as a literary mirror to the nationalistic ethos of the time. Writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and Bhattacharya didn't just describe the freedom struggle—they gave it artistic life, blending Gandhian ideals with narrative innovation. These works were not isolated from politics; they were politics, told through a story.

Depiction of Indian Society and Colonial Impact in Indian English Novels Before Independence

Indian English novels written before independence served not only as reflections of the national movement but also as realistic portrayals of Indian society under the complex pressures of colonial rule. These narratives became vehicles to represent social injustices, traditional hierarchies, changing value systems, and the psychological impact of imperialism on the Indian mind. In doing so, they created a powerful intersection of literature and social history.

Complex Portraits of Society

Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao presented Indian society in all its plurality—depicting caste divisions, gender inequality, religious orthodoxy, and economic exploitation. These portrayals were not romanticized; rather, they reflected the conflicted, layered, and evolving identity of a nation-in-the-making.

In Anand's *Coolie* (1936), the protagonist Munoo is a symbol of the exploited peasantry and working class. As he journeys through rural villages, towns, mills, and hospitals, the reader witnesses the crushing realities of class struggle:

“He was a coolie, a beast of burden, made to carry the weight of others’ wealth.”

This novel critiques both traditional Indian caste/class oppression and the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism, often perpetuated under colonial economic policies.

Colonial Modernity and Social Change

British rule brought with it ideas of modernity, education, and reform—yet these were often delivered unevenly, creating tension between tradition and modernity. Writers engaged with this dynamic critically. R.K. Narayan's *The English Teacher* (1945), though not overtly political, explores the subtle dislocations of the educated Indian elite. The protagonist, Krishna, is an English lecturer at a provincial college in Malgudi, deeply influenced by Western education but internally torn between rationality and spiritual yearning. Narayan doesn't reject English education outright but subtly shows how it alienates Indians from their roots, until a spiritual reawakening occurs:

“He felt he had walked too long on foreign soil and wanted to reclaim his inner voice.”

M.K. Naik, in *A History of Indian English Literature*, notes:

“Narayan's world is not about grand ideologies but about quiet revolutions in the soul, shaped by the colonial presence.”

Caste and Patriarchy as Structural Realities

In *Untouchable*, Anand uses the character of Bakha to expose the deep-rooted caste-based exclusion within Indian society, further exacerbated by British indifference or hypocrisy. Even though colonial officials may claim a civilizing mission, they often ignore—or uphold—existing hierarchies for administrative ease.

The tension between reform and tradition is also seen in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, where Moorthy's attempt to break caste taboos leads to his alienation. His mother's reaction reflects societal rigidity:

“You have brought dishonour to our home, consorting with pariahs.”

The intersection of colonial politics with social orthodoxy is evident. Colonialism was not a single oppressive force—it often reinforced existing Indian social structures that writers sought to question.

Gender and the “New Woman”

The early Indian English novel also made tentative but significant inroads into women's issues. While not always feminist in the modern sense, these works questioned patriarchal roles.

In *The Dark Room* (1938), Narayan presents a rare interior portrait of a woman, Savitri, who momentarily rebels against her controlling husband. Although she returns to her domestic space, the narrative exposes the emotional violence of patriarchy and the absence of real agency for women, even within the emerging nationalist and modernist frameworks.

Critic Usha Bande notes:

“Narayan, without preaching, shows the heavy cost women pay in a society that pretends to be progressive while remaining deeply patriarchal.”

Gauri Viswanathan, in *Masks of Conquest*, argues that colonial education created a literary class whose fiction was shaped by both imperial values and a desire to assert native identity. Hence, novels became a site for negotiating this duality—English in form, Indian in content.

Aijaz Ahmad further explains that these early Indian English novels served as “social documentaries”, mapping not just individual stories but broader collective conditions. He critiques some of them for a reformist, middle-class tone, but acknowledges their role in catalyzing social consciousness.

The depiction of Indian society and colonial impact in Indian English novels before independence was nuanced, critical, and deeply rooted in lived experience. These novels served as lenses through which readers could witness India's socio-political transformation—from caste oppression and patriarchy to cultural alienation and economic suffering. In capturing the spirit of a colonized nation wrestling with itself and its rulers, early Indian English novelists created literature that was both reflective and reformative, laying the groundwork for the postcolonial literary movement.

Conclusion:

Indian English novels before independence played a crucial role in shaping India's literary and cultural identity. Rooted in colonial realities, these works reflected the tensions of language, the urgency of nationalism, and the complex fabric of Indian society. Writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R.K. Narayan crafted narratives that blended Indian ethos with English expression, turning fiction into a tool of resistance and reform. Their works not only documented a nation's struggle but also redefined the English novel in an Indian context. These foundational texts continue to influence postcolonial literature and our understanding of India's journey to freedom.

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