

Literature and Music: A Comparative Study of English and Indian Literary Traditions

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Abstract

Literature and music are among the oldest forms of human expression, deeply intertwined across cultures and historical periods. English literature has consistently drawn upon musical elements such as rhythm, melody, and harmony, while music has often relied on literary texts for lyrical and thematic depth. Indian literature, particularly Indian Writing in English, shares a similarly intimate relationship with music, rooted in ancient oral traditions, devotional poetry, and performance practices. This paper explores the interrelationship between English literature and music and extends the discussion to include Indian literature in comparison and dialogue with English literary traditions. Through an examination of shared origins, structural similarities, thematic concerns, and cross-cultural influences, the study demonstrates that English and Indian literatures, though culturally distinct, converge in their use of musicality as a powerful aesthetic and emotional tool.

Keywords: Literary and Musical Expression, Cross-Cultural Influences, Aesthetic Expression, Cultural Convergence, Interdisciplinary Studies.

Introduction

The relationship between literature and music is both ancient and universal. Across civilizations, poetry was first sung before it was written, and stories were preserved through rhythm and melody. English literature, from its earliest oral forms to modern experimental writing, bears the imprint of music in its structure, language, and emotional resonance. Similarly, Indian literature—especially in its classical and modern forms—emerged from a culture where music, poetry, and spirituality were inseparable.

Indian Writing in English, shaped by colonial contact and cultural exchange, stands at a crossroads between Indian aesthetic traditions and English literary forms. Writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu, A. K. Ramanujan, and Salman Rushdie engage deeply with musicality in language while drawing upon both Indian and Western literary influences.

This paper examines how English literature and music are interrelated and places Indian literature in conversation with English literary traditions. By analysing their shared origins, poetic techniques, thematic overlaps, and mutual influences, the study argues that music functions as a unifying aesthetic principle that transcends cultural boundaries.

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Oral Traditions: Shared Beginnings in England and India

Both English and Indian literatures originate in oral traditions where music and poetry were inseparable. In early English culture, poetry was recited or sung by scops, and works such as *Beowulf* relied on alliteration, stress, and rhythm for memorability. As M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham observe, poetry is “closer to music than to ordinary speech” (236).

Similarly, ancient Indian literature emerged from oral transmission. The Vedas were composed as hymns meant to be chanted rather than read silently. Sound (*śabda*) was considered sacred, and precise pronunciation was essential. This belief in the spiritual power of sound parallels the reverence for rhythm and meter in Old English poetry. Both traditions demonstrate that literature and music developed together as performative arts, meant to be heard as much as understood.

Music and Poetic Structure

One of the most visible connections between literature and music lies in poetic form. English poetry uses meter, rhyme, and stanza patterns that resemble musical composition. The iambic pentameter of Shakespeare’s plays creates a rhythmic flow that mirrors natural speech while maintaining musical regularity.

Shakespeare’s awareness of music is explicit. In *Twelfth Night*, he famously writes, “If music be the food of love, play on” (1.1.1). This line reflects the Renaissance belief that music and poetry nourish emotion and imagination.

Indian poetry also emphasizes rhythm and sound. Classical Sanskrit prosody (*chandas*) is highly musical, and this influence continues in Indian English poetry. Sarojini Naidu’s poems, for example, are known for their lyrical quality. Edmund Gosse described her as

“a singer whose songs are strung with verbal melody” (Gosse).

In her poem “Palanquin Bearers,” Naidu writes:

Lightly, O lightly we bear her along, She sways like a flower in the wind of our song. (1–2)

The rhythm and repetition closely resemble a folk song, demonstrating how Indian poetry in English adapts musical traditions into English literary forms.

Romanticism and Indian Poetic Sensibility

The English Romantic movement emphasized emotion, imagination, and the musical quality of poetry. William Wordsworth believed poetry should reflect “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (60). Romantic poets often associated music with emotional purity and transcendence.

A similar sensibility appears in Indian poetry, particularly in the works of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore was both a poet and a composer, and his songs, known as *Rabindra Sangeet*, blur the boundary between literature and music. Like the Romantics, Tagore viewed music as a spiritual force.

In *Gitanjali*, Tagore writes:

My song has put off her adornments. She has no pride of dress and decoration. (1–2)

The simplicity and musical humility echo Wordsworth’s call for plain language infused with deep feeling. Tagore’s influence on Indian Writing in English reflects a fusion of Indian musical tradition with English literary expression.

Music in Drama: Shakespeare and Indian Performance Traditions

Music plays a vital role in English drama, especially in Shakespeare’s plays, where songs enhance atmos-

phere and deepen emotional impact. In *The Tempest*, music becomes a tool of magic and transformation, guiding characters toward reconciliation.

Indian dramatic traditions similarly integrate music and literature. Classical performance forms such as Kathakali and Yakshagana combine storytelling, music, and performance. Modern Indian playwrights writing in English, such as Girish Karnad, draw upon these traditions.

Karnad's *Hayavadana* incorporates folk music and myth, using song as a narrative device. This approach parallels Shakespeare's use of music to comment on action and theme, illustrating a shared dramatic strategy across cultures.

Modernism: Fragmentation and Musical Experimentation

Modernist writers in English literature turned to music as a model for experimentation. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* uses fragmented voices and rhythmic variation similar to a modern musical composition. Eliot incorporates song lyrics and references to opera, blending high and popular culture.

Eliot writes:

These fragments I have shored against my ruins. (*The Waste Land* 431)

The line suggests a deliberate arrangement of fragments, much like musical motifs in a symphony.

Indian English writers also adopted modernist techniques. A. K. Ramanujan's poetry reflects a precise, rhythmic economy influenced by both classical Tamil poetry and English modernism. His poems rely on sound, pause, and understatement, showing how Indian and English literary traditions intersect through musical form.

Music, Myth, and Narrative in Indian English Fiction

Indian English fiction often draws upon musical and oral storytelling traditions. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* employs a narrative rhythm reminiscent of oral performance. The novel's episodic structure and playful language echo the improvisational quality of music.

Rushdie describes storytelling as an act of rhythm and repetition, noting that stories "shape themselves around rhythms" (9). This idea aligns with the musical foundations of narrative found in both Indian and English traditions. Similarly, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* uses a chant-like prose style influenced by Puranic storytelling. The novel's repetitive, musical language reflects the oral roots of Indian narrative while employing the English language.

Themes Shared by English and Indian Literature and Music

English and Indian literatures share thematic concerns that are often expressed through musical imagery. Love, devotion, loss, nature, and social injustice appear in both traditions.

Devotional poetry in India, particularly Bhakti literature, closely resembles English metaphysical poetry in its intensity and imagery. Like John Donne, Bhakti poets use emotional directness and metaphor to express spiritual longing.

In modern contexts, protest literature and music serve similar purposes in both cultures. English Romantic poetry responded to industrialization, while Indian literature often addresses colonialism and postcolonial identity. Music amplifies these concerns, turning literature into a collective emotional experience.

Contemporary Perspectives: Lyrics as Literature

In contemporary times, the boundary between literature and music has become increasingly fluid. Song

lyrics are studied as poetry, and spoken-word performances revive oral traditions. Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize recognition reinforces the idea that musical lyrics can be considered a form of literary expression. Indian musicians and poets similarly blend literary depth with musical performance, continuing a tradition that predates written texts.

Indian English poets today frequently perform their work with music, reaffirming the ancient bond between word and sound.

Conclusion

The relationship between English literature and music is profound and enduring, rooted in shared origins, structural similarities, and thematic concerns. Indian literature, particularly Indian Writing in English, participates fully in this relationship, drawing upon ancient musical traditions while engaging with English literary forms.

From oral epics and devotional songs to modern poetry and experimental fiction, literature and music function as complementary modes of expression. Their interconnection transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries, revealing a universal human impulse to transform emotion and experience into rhythm and sound. By examining English and Indian literatures together, it becomes evident that music is not merely an influence but an essential element of literary expression. The harmony between words and sound continues to shape literary creativity, ensuring that literature remains a living, resonant art form.

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