
Indian Literature in English: An Introduction

Lecture 6: The Emergence of the Novel

- 1) Co-ordinates
- 2) The First Indian Novel in English
- 3) Towards Independence

1) Co-ordinates

Phases:

- a) 1800-1857 Beginnings/'Reaching Out'
- b) 1857-1901 Retrenchment and Imperial Reassurance
- c) 1901-1947 Ways to Independence

1835	Macaulay's 'Minute on Education' anglicizes the colonial curriculum
1857/58	Great Indian Rebellion ("Mutiny") brutally suppressed; India turned into a crown colony, with Viceroy as Queen's representative; 1858 India Act officially ends rule by East India Company
1871	British PM Disraeli declares Queen Victoria 'Empress of India'
1885	Formation of Indian National Congress
1906	All India Muslim League established
1916	Lucknow Pact of Muslim League and Indian National Congress
1919	Gandhi leads first all-India <i>satyagraha</i> (peaceful resistance); Amritsar massacre
1929	Congress calls for 'complete independence'
1940	Muslim league demands separate states
1942	'Quit India' resolution issued by Congress; leaders jailed
1947	Independence/Partition

(Döring 2008, 124)

The History of the Novel

c.1680-1750	The Rise of the Novel Behn, Defoe, Richardson; Fielding > the emergence of realism
c.1750-1800	Crisis? What Crisis? Sterne; Gothic novels/sensibility > radical experiments
c.1800-1900 and beyond	The Conventions of Realism Austen, Scott > the Victorian synthesis (Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot)
c.1900-1945/1968/1989	The 'Turn of the Novel' Conrad, Ford, James, Woolf, Joyce > modernism: formal experiment, stream of consciousness-techniques
c. 1945/1968/1989	The Novel Today > postmodernism: formal pluralism, reflexivity

The Emergence of the Novel in India

The factors that shaped the growth of this genre since the mid-nineteenth century arose as much from the political and social situation of a colonized country as from several indigenous though attenuated narrative traditions of an ancient culture that survived through constant mutation. English education and through English an exposure to western literature were by far the strongest influences at work. It is not an accident that the first crop of novels in India, in Bengali and Marathi, appeared exactly a generation after Macaulay's Educational Minutes making English a necessary part of an educated Indian's mental make-up were passed. Yet to regard the novel in India, as is sometimes done, as purely a legacy of British rule – such as the railways or cricket – would be to overlook the complex cultural determinants of a literary genre.

(Mukherjee 1999, 3)

Major Novels in Indian Languages, 1801-1900:

Hindi	15
Bengali	30
Urdu	7
Marathi	13
Gujarati	7
Telugu	3
Tamil	2
Malayalam	3
Oriya	1
Assamese	1

(Mukherjee 1999, 189-192)

[>> 82 titles as compared to c. 45 titles in English between 1830 and 1930 as listed in Mukherjee 2002, 27-29]

By the end of the century the novel became the most popular form of print-medium entertainment in at least eight major languages of the country.

(Mukherjee 2002, 8)

Writing in English:

- published from the metropolitan centres of book production (London, Calcutta, Bombay, Madras) and small presses in smaller towns
- titles often promise the unveiling of the mystery of 'The East', 'the Orient' or of a seemingly homogenous space called 'India' (*A Peep into, Glimpses, Revelations* etc.)
- uncertainty about presumed readership
- 'vernaculars' as the repository for interiority and imagination
- vs.
- English as a rational and functional tool for polemics and persuasion, **but:**
- English seeped into the intimate and personal domains of men of the elite classes from which writers in all the languages emerged (cf. Mukherjee 2002, 9)
- earliest narrative texts:
 - Klyas Chunder Dutt, "A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945" (1835)
 - Shoshee Chunder Dutt, "The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the 20th Century" (1845)
 - tracts of imaginary history projected into the future, describing battles of liberation against the British
- early novels in English are eager to distribute sympathy evenly between the British and the Indians, most strikingly so in Shoshee Chunder Dutt's *The Young Zemindar* (1883) about resistance movements in different parts of India and *Shunkur* (1885) about the 1857 rebellion

By the turn of the century, novel after novel in English seems to be paying direct of veiled tribute to British rule [...] Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, when nationalism had become a conspicuous strand of thought in most creative writers in the Indian languages, novelists in English continued to display obsequiousness towards the ruler at regular intervals [...] This flaunting of subjection occasionally coexists with fierce cultural pride and an assertion of the antiquity and superiority of Indian civilisation in relation to Europe.

(Mukherjee 2003, 95f.)

- at the same time, the writers' familiarity with western classics is frequently paraded by means of quotations, references and epigraphs (esp. Shakespeare, Byron, Scott, Cowper, Coleridge) while the widely read middle- or low-brow writers (G.W.M. Reynolds, Wilkie Collins, Marie Corelli, Benjamin Disraeli) are not explicitly acknowledged

[T]he Indian novel in English fail[ed] to generate [...] momentum in the early years of the emergence of the novel on the subcontinent. [...] [W]e [are] witnessing a total reversal suddenly at the end of the twentieth century when an unmistakable and ebullient proliferation of fiction in English written by both resident and non-resident Indians has become globally recognized and (consequently?) a nationally highlighted phenomenon[.] If in 1864 a Bankimchandra Chatterjee felt it necessary to discard his aspirations for a literary career in English, in 1995 we find a Kiran Nagarkar – trendsetting writer in Marathi – turning to writing in English. In neither case are the reasons arbitrary or strictly literary.
(Mukherjee 2002, 13)

2) The First Indian Novel in English

Bankimchandry Chatterjee/Chattopadhyaya (1838-94)

- writes *Rajmohan's Wife* while working as a 26-year-old Deputy Magistrate posted in Khulna (Bengal Presidency) after graduating from newly founded Calcutta university; in 1864 the novel is published in serialized form in a short-lived weekly from Calcutta; it will not appear in book form in the author's lifetime
- the novel is followed by fourteen novels in Bangla, among them *Durgeshnandini* (1865), *Anandamath* (1882) and *Rajsingha* (1893)
- a very nearly realistic representation of East Bengal middle-class life, though there was no precedent of mimetic rendering of domestic life in fiction in India as yet; subsequent novels in Bangla return to romance mode
- further influences: Sanskrit kaviya (e.g. descriptions of female beauty), Gothic fiction (terror, dungeons)

Ch. 1: The Drawers of Water

There is a small village on the river of Madhumati. On account of its being the residence of wealthy zemindars it is regarded as a village of importance. One Chaitra afternoon the summer heat was gradually abating with the weakening of the once keen rays of the sun; a gentle breeze was blowing; it began to dry the perspiring brow of the peasant in the field and play with the moist locks of village women just risen from their siesta.

It was after such a siesta that a woman of about thirty was engaged in her toilet in a humble thatched cottage. She took very little time to finish the process usually so elaborate with womankind; a dish of water, a tin-framed looking-glass three inches wide, and a comb matching it sufficed for the task. Then, a little vermillion adorned her forehead. Last of all some betel leaves dyed her lips. Thus armed, a formidable champion of the world-conquering sex set out with a pitcher in her arm and pushing open the wattled gate of a neighbouring house entered within it.

There were four huts in the house which she entered. They had mud floors and bamboo walls. There was no sigh of poverty anywhere, everything was neat and tidy [...]

It is superfluous to add that she went straight towards the zenana. I know not where the other inmates of the house had gone after their siesta, but at that time there were only two persons there – one, a young woman of eighteen bent over her embroidery and a child of four immersed in play [...] The newcomer sat down on the floor by the side of her who was working and asked, 'What are you doing?'

The other laughed and said, 'Oh, it's Didi. What kindness! Whose face was it I first saw on getting up this morning?'

The guest laughed back and retorted, 'Who else but the person you see every morning?'

At this, the face of the younger woman clouded over for a moment, while the smile half-lingered on the lips of the other. Let us describe them both at this place. [...]

Constellation of Characters:

Matangini	Rajmohan	Madhav	Hemangini
Kanak		Mathur	Tara/Champak

various scoundrels and criminals (the sadar, Bhiku)

the white administrator: 'a shrewd and restlessly active Irishman'

Conclusion:

And now, good reader, I have brought my story to a close. Lest, however, you fall to censuring me for leaving your curiosity unsatisfied, I will tell you what happened to the other persons who have figured in this tale.

The sadar successfully escaped – not so Rajmohan. He had been implicated deeply in Bikhu's confession, – was apprehended, and under the hope of a pardon confessed likewise. They were however wise by half and made only partial confessions. The pardon was revoked, and both he and Bhiku transported.

Matangini could not live under her Madhav's roof. This, of course, they both understood. So intimation was sent to her father and he came and took her home. Madhav increased the pension he allowed the old man, on her account. History does not say how her life terminated, but it is known that she died an early death.

Tara mourned in solitude the terrible end of a husband who had proved himself so little worthy of her love. She lived a long widowhood in repose, and, when she died, died mourned by many.

As to Madhav, Champak and the rest, some are dead, and others will die. Throwing this flood of light on their past and future history, I bid you, good reader, FAREWELL.

3) Towards Independence

Novelists of the 1930s and 1940s:

Mulk Raj Anand

- *1905 Peshawar (now Pakistan) to a Hindu coppersmith family
- 1921ff. involvement with non-co-operation movement
 - > brief imprisonment
 - > undergraduate education at Punjab University
 - > University of London (philosophy), drawn into the fringes of the Bloomsbury circle
- 1935 *Untouchable*
(one day in the life of Bakha, an outcaste sweeper)
- 1936 *Coolie*
(a Dickensian saga about the misfortunes of orphan Munoo on his way from Kangra Hills to Bombay)
- 1937 *Two Leaves and a Butt*
(the story of the dashed hopes of a peasant lured into working on a tea estate in Assam)

[+ 11 novels, died 2004]

Untouchable:

The outcastes' colony was a group of mud-walled houses that clustered together in two rows, under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washermen, the barbers, the water-carriers, the grass-cutters and other outcastes from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane, once with crystal clear water, now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up to be made into fuel cakes. The absence of a drainage system had, though the rains of various seasons, made of the quarter a marsh which gave out the most offensive smell. And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in.

At least, so thought Bakha, a young man of eighteen, strong and able-bodied, the son of Lakha, the Jemadar of all the sweepers in the town and the cantonment, and officially in charge of the three rows of public latrines which lined the extreme end of the colony, by the brook-side.

[...]

‘Keep to the side of the road, ohe low-caste vermin!’ he suddenly heard someone shouting at him. ‘Why don’t you call, you swine, and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow-legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself. And it was a new dhoti and shirt I put on this morning’

Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility. He was used to being spoken so roughly. But he had seldom been taken so unawares. The curious smile of humility, which always hovered on his lips in the presence of high-caste men, now became pronounced. He lifted his face to the man opposite him, though his eyes were bent down. Then he stole a hurried glance at the man. The fellow’s eyes were flaming. [...]

[cf. more recently Narendra Jadhav, *Untouchables: My Family’s Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*. New York: Scribner 2005]

Raja Rao

- *1908 Mysore to a Brahmin family, educated in Muslim schools, graduated from Madras University
- 1927ff. life of a cosmopolitan intellectual (France, USA) combined with strong Indian commitments (politics, philosophy)
- 1938 *Kanthapura*
(an account of the impact of Gandhi’s teaching of non-violent resistance against the British; style and structure adapted from Indian vernacular tales and folk-epic; told by an old woman)

[+ 4 novels, died 2006]

Preface: “One has to describe in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.”

R.K. Narayan

*1907	Mysore; studied English literature, working as a schoolteacher
1935	<i>Swami and Friends</i>
1937	<i>The Bachelor of Arts</i>
1938	<i>The Dark Room</i>
1945	<i>The English Teacher</i>

[34 novels in all (died 2001)]

from *The English Teacher*:

[...]

I sat in my room, at the table. It was Thursday and it was a light day for me at college – only two hours of work in the afternoon, and not much preparation for that either. *Pride and Prejudice* for a senior class, non-detailed study, which meant just reading it to the boys. And a composition class. I sat at my table as usual after morning coffee looking over the books ranged on the table and casually turning over the pages in some exercise books. 'Nothing to do. Why not write poetry? Ages since I wrote anything?' My conscience had a habit of asserting itself once in six months and reminding me that I ought to write poetry. At such moments I opened the bottom-most drawer of my table and pulled out a notebook of about five hundred pages, handsomely bound [...] Today I was going to make up for all lost time; I took out my pen, dipped it in ink, and sat hesitating. Everything was ready except a subject. What should I write about? [...]

[My wife] drew herself up and asked 'Let me see if you can write about me.'

[...]

'I never knew you could write so well.'

'It is a pity that you should have underrated me so long; but now you know better. Keep it up,' I said, 'And if possible don't look at the pages, say roughly between 150 and 200 in the *Golden Treasury*. Because someone called Wordsworth has written similar poems.'

[...]

'Aren't you ashamed to copy?'

'No,' I replied. 'Mine is entirely different. He had written about someone entirely different from my subject.'

'I wouldn't do such a thing as copying.'

'I should be ashamed to have your memory,' I said. 'You have had the copy of the *Golden Treasury* for years now, and yet you listened to my reading with gaping wonder!'

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