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Contemporary Indian English Novels: A Critical Study

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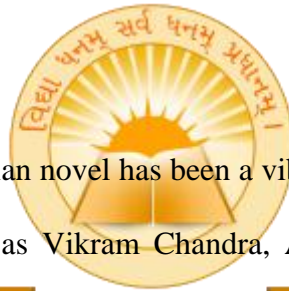
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ABSTRACT

This paper will provide a sketch of the development of the Indian English novel, which is essentially a story about a changing India. The Indian English novel began its journey with the trio Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan. The early novels were patriotic portrayals of Indians, but as India gained independence, she grew out of her own streak of imperialism during the emergency, and the Indian idiom began to shift. With the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the entire Indian English novel scene was changed. It paved the way for a slew of new writers. This paper will investigate and explain the major changes in Indian English novels, bringing to light recent trends in the field.

Key Words: Imperialism, Globalization, New Trends in Indian English Novel

Introduction



VIDHYAYANA

In the twenty-first century, the Indian novel has been a vibrant and energetic expressive space. While new novels by established authors such as Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, and Salman Rushdie have reflected the grand postcolonial gestures of the late-20th-century Indian novel, a slate of new authors has emerged during this time, charting a range of novelistic modes. Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Githa Hariharan, Samina Ali, Karan Mahajan, and Amitav Kumar are among these authors. In general, there has been a shift away from ambitious literary fiction in the form of the "huge, baggy monster," which resulted in the publication of several monumental postcolonial novels in the 1980s and 1990s; increasingly, the most dynamic and influential Indian writing uses new novelistic forms and literary styles tied to India's current contemporary social and political prowess. The newer generation of authors has also shifted from attempting to portray all aspects of modern Indian life, opting instead to focus on much more limited regional and cultural narrative frameworks.



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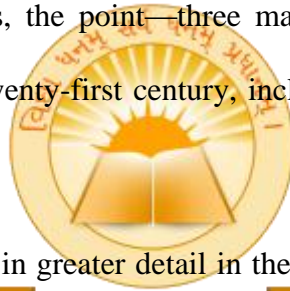
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Novelistic Forms and Style

Indian English writers in the twenty-first century are experimenting with new novelistic forms and literary styles. The "large, postmodernist Indian English novel," according to Amit Chaudhari, is pursuing a "mimesis of form, where the book's size allegorizes the size of the country it represents" (48). Fredric Jameson's much-debated "national allegory" concept could be another version of this idea. Even in the 1980s and 1990s, not all Indian novelists writing in English aspired to the baggy nationalist allegory; Chaudhuri is a prime example. Nonetheless, the most exciting new Indian fiction published since 2000 has eschewed the aspiration to represent the entirety of life in modern India in favour of exploring much more limited regional and cultural narrative frameworks. Although there is no central agenda or defining idiom for this emerging literary culture—which is, in some ways, the point—three major groupings take up some of the major themes of Indian literature in the early twenty-first century, including globalization, urban realism, gender awareness, and searching for one's self.



VIDHYAYANA

For reasons that will be discussed in greater detail in the note on language below, the focus will be primarily on novels written in English. It's also worth noting that the focus here is on Indian fiction rather than Indian diaspora fiction. Thus, diaspora-oriented fiction by writers like Jhumpa Lahiri or Chitra Divakaruni is not the focus of this essay; instead, the focus is on contemporary novels set in India that can be seen as contributing to the ongoing conversation about Indian literature in India in some way. However, it is worth noting that no analytical distinction is made here between writers who are primarily based in India and those who are based elsewhere. Thus, even if their authors live in the United States, books like Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon* (2008) or Chandra's *Sacred Games* should be considered "Indian" novels because they are set entirely in India.

First, a brief discussion of language and the growth of domestic Indian fiction markets, which has



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resulted in a reorganization of the Indian publishing industry. There are approximately twenty different literary languages in India. Most literary studies of Indian literature, which cannot be understood as a singular national literary tradition in the manner of European traditions, are likely to be hampered by critics' linguistic limitations, which include the author of this essay. Instead, Indian literature must be viewed as internally comparative, and any analysis that claims to represent it in its entirety (which, to be clear, this essay does not) must be comparative. Despite this, English continues to be the dominant language in Indian literature, at least in terms of public prestige. Writers of Indian languages frequently lament the fact that their works are largely unknown outside of India, unreviewed, and unread by the country's most educated citizens. Hindi writer Uday Prakash expressed his dissatisfaction with Hindi literature's secondary status in a recent collection of short stories, saying, "When the English were here, it was English who made us into slaves." Now that the English are gone, Hindi is the one who has enslaved us.



VIDHYAYANA

Popular Fiction

While a previous generation of postcolonial Indian authors frequently complained that they needed the status of a western publication to truly break through and gain a wide readership and interest among Indian readers, the presumption of western publishing dominance is beginning to shift. The Indian publishing industry is growing, with an increasing number of new authors being published each year, regardless of their status or ties to the West. While it used to be customary for an Indian author to seek first publication in London or New York, the most commercially successful new Indian authors such as Chetan Bhagat, Devdutta Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi are increasingly attracting interest from western publishers after establishing themselves as popular brands in India. Chetan Bhagat, who is likely to be completely unknown in the west, is by far the author most associated with the growth of the domestic Indian publishing market. Bhagat published seven popular novels and two nonfiction books in the 2000s. Several of the novels have



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been adapted into commercial Hindi films, with Bhagat contributing to the screenplay in some cases.

One Night @ the Call Centre (2005) uses a prominent feature of globalizing India—Internet-based call centres set up by multinational corporations in urban centres primarily to serve the needs of western consumers—as a framing device to explore the problems of a group of young Indians. Most of the popular writers do not have formal training in writing and hence, their novel structure is simple and lucid. M.K. Naik, while observing the opinions of the critics, writes that:

The simplest argument is that English is only an acquired language for most Indians. Kailashpathy and Anantha Murthy have argued that ‘English with most Indians is still a language of official public affairs, of intellectual and academic debate. They do not use English for their most intimate purposes, “to think and feel, bless and curse, quarrel and kiss”’. (298)

Emergence of Graphic Novels

Graphic novels have grown in popularity in tandem with the growth of genre fiction in the 2000s. Some of these follow the trend toward superhero stories (and several authors in the genre fiction market have also published comics), with a nod to Indian mythology, as mentioned in the previous section about genre fiction. A number of graphic novels with a more literary sensibility have emerged alongside more popular entertainments (comics), such as Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008) and Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010). Vishwajyoti Ghosh also edited *This Side, That Side: Re-storying Partition*, a collection of graphic Partition narratives (2013). There's no denying that the market for Indian fiction in English has changed in recent years, and there's reason to believe it will continue to do so. There are reasons to be optimistic, given the steady increase in the number of English-language readers in India, the emergence of mass-market Indian authors like Bhagat, and the proliferation of genres in recent years. However, with the rise of digital



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marketplaces, widespread piracy, and an increasingly pervasive middle-class culture addicted to social media and digital devices, the future prospects for authors, publishers, and booksellers in India remain uncertain.

The New Urban Realism

In Indian fiction, the new urban realism is characterized by a highly realistic style that prioritizes local details and frequently focuses on regional cities such as Patna or Hyderabad rather than national metropolises (i.e., Delhi and Mumbai). The style also frequently incorporates themes of criminality, violence, and corruption, as well as an open-eyed acceptance of liberal Indian hypocrisy (especially in an era of simultaneous wealth accumulation and urban slum growth) and double standards regarding caste and religious biases. Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, a nonfiction book, may have been the starting point for the burst of writing that emphasized this style (2004). That book, which was a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2005, created a stir among both western and Indian readers. The New Urban Realism can be seen as a way for a new generation of authors to set themselves apart from those who came before them; the subgenre generally avoids fanciful elements like Rushdie's old magic realism or Roy's precocity in *God of Small Things* (1997). While the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* was most directly based on Vikas Swarup's novel *Q&A* (2005), the film's producers and screenwriters freely admitted that they were also inspired by *Maximum City* in their portrayal of Mumbai street crime. Surprisingly, while Roy's first novel's over-the-top reception established it as a text against which more recent novelists might position themselves, Roy's most recent novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), could be seen as engaging in a form of urban realism.

While male novelists tend to dominate the New Urban Realism genre, some female novelists, particularly Samina Ali, may be considered to be writing in this space. But Arundhati Roy, whose 2017



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novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has a definite emphasis on urban life and adult perspectives that were less evident in her earlier novel *The God of Small Things*, which had a decided atmosphere of tragic pastorality and a focus on the experiences of young children, is the most important figure to enter this space. Much of Roy's new novel is set in Delhi, and it sensitively explores the Hijra (transgender) community's life and culture. Another major plot thread immerses the reader in the politics of Kashmiri secessionism and the state's repressive response to it. Despite the fact that much of Roy's novel takes place outside of Delhi, the major characters all have a strong connection to the city. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is an example of the urban realist aesthetic because of its emphasis on political violence, urbanized aesthetics, and the sense that moral judgment in contemporary India is hopelessly vexed—Roy suggests, in an echo of Chandra, that we are all complicit in unspeakable violence.

Exploring the Impact of Globalization

Some writers have chosen an aesthetic of acceleration and cultural simultaneity to explore the impact of globalization: everything is changing, and all establishments and traditions are being overturned at the root. After *Midnight's Children*, some of Salman Rushdie's work, particularly *The Satanic Verses*, with its embrace of hybridity and displacement, seems relevant to mention here. Indeed, in an essay from *Imaginary Homelands* published shortly after, Rushdie described his novel with a credo that could be applied to the globalization aesthetic as a whole: "The *Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes from new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, and songs." Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2005) and Rana Dasgupta's *Tokyo Cancelled* are two recent novels in this vein (2005). These novels, especially Dasgupta's, are so invested in establishing a kind of global chic that they appear to be homeless.

Over the last decade, a number of Indian writers have used an aesthetic that views focus on place and



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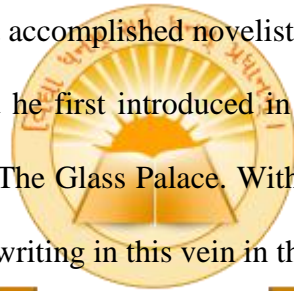
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the continuous influence of history to get to the present. Reaction is occurring, but at the same time nationalistic assertion and cultural retrenchment are too. Instead of vainly claiming to celebrate globalization, these books seek to unearth the disjunctions and impasses that continue to separate us.

Kiran Desai's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Inheritance of Loss* is one highly successful example of a novel that perfectly exemplifies the global in the local (2006). The main character, Sai, was educated in Europe for several years before returning to India to live with her grandfather, Judge Jemubhai Patel. As a young man in England, the Judge had his own history, and he is now trapped in a kind of nostalgic Anglophilia that reminds the reader of how the legacy of British colonialism continues to impact life in India today.

Amitav Ghosh, one of India's most accomplished novelists, is known for his inscription of the past in stories with a global scope. It's a method he first introduced in *In an Antique Land*, a seminal nonfiction work, and then expanded on in his novel *The Glass Palace*. With *The Hungry Tide* and the *Ibis Trilogy*, he produced some of his most accomplished writing in this vein in the 2000s.



VIDHYAYANA

Conclusion

Thus, it is the voice of India's ever-changing but vast cultural ocean. What began as a by product of imperialism's encounter with a restless young nation has now taken on its own identity in the world of literature. Indian English fiction is now distinct and well-known, and it is discussed with great reverence and respect. The world anticipates masterpieces by Indian authors, as well as their distinct experience and narrative styles. The notable authors advanced Indian literature over a period of time, helping to create literary trends in the 21st century. It is, as far as Indian writers have been able, to present Indian culture in its essential aspects without losing its meaning in translation. With regard to both authorship and art, more remains to be done in the 21st century.



VIDHYAYANA

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VIDHYAYANA