

We Are Great Because They Said So...

A Curious Case of Modern Indian English Writers

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Who does not like to hear about Indians who have made it big in life due to sheer grit, determination and hard work on their part? There are many big names in Indian English in modern times who have provided India name and fame in the literary field all over the world. In recent times, India has won many prestigious literary awards. Suddenly everyone is fascinated and charmed by Indian Writings globally.

It was 1981 when the unprecedented, never ending story of Indian English Literature started with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The book not only went on to win the Booker Prize and the 'Booker of Bookers' Prize in 1993 but also made it to the Time Magazine's list of 100 best novels of all times. Pankaj Mishra, author of the best-selling travel-book *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* and chief editor of HarperCollins (India) writes, *Midnight's Children* not only inspired many Indians to start writing fiction in English, but also to write in a brave new way."

Rushdie's success was followed first by Amitav Ghosh, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) and then by Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, a path-breaking verse-novel that a fellow writer says, "can only appear once in a century". *Trotternama* by Irving Allan Sealy, *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh, and *English August: An Indian Story* by Upamanyu Chatterjee were all published and charmed the literary world in 1988. In 1990 came Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, which was short-listed for the Booker and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* arrived in 1992.

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* clinched the Commonwealth's Best First Book Award in 1993. The year 1995 saw Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth And Pouring Rain*, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Shards Of Memory*, Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass*, Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* and Ashok Banker's *Byculla Boy*.

1996 produced two major novels, both receiving excellent reviews in India and abroad: Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Khushwant Singh and Anita Desai were already making their presence strongly felt in the global literary arena.

1997 was unmistakably the year of Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* and the big Booker. Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999 received numerous awards such as the O. Henry Award for the short story, The New Yorker's Best Debut of the Year and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000. Raj Kamal Jha's debut novel, *The Blue Bedspread* won the 2000 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia region) and was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year. His second novel *If You Are Afraid of Heights* was a finalist for the Hutch-Crossword Book Award in 2003. Recently in 2008 Arvind Adiga has been given the Booker Prize, the UK's most popular literary award, for his book *The White Tiger*.

One of the key issues raised in this context is the superiority v/s inferiority of Indian Writing in English as opposed to the literary production in the various languages of India. Key polar concepts involved in this context are superficial v/s authentic, imitative v/s creative, shallow v/s deep, critical v/s uncritical, elitist v/s parochial and so on. There is one more side also of this success story and recent hype. As commented by Fiona Lellagher, Pulitzer Prize winner who was recently in India for The Jaipur Literature Festival, "India's literature is 'glamorous, layered and complex'." Another writer Richard Ford comments that the country is enjoying a literature boom with a number of young Indian writers coming to the fore."With the country becoming more prosperous, people will begin to start moving from place to place and that is going to produce more literature," he said. Ford explained that he found several aspects of India striking, including the huge crowds, extreme poverty, large-scale construction projects and rapidly developing cities."

So the greatness of India is not always in its development but its tendency to retain its past shame of poverty, dirt and illiteracy and when any Indian offers the same to the Western world, they can identify with their own, self-created stereo type and are much comfortable to appreciate it.

“In Kolkata as well as in Jaipur, it was heartening to see a whole sea of people all so passionate about books and authors. While you can see eye-popping poverty you also get to see a widening middle class which you hope will have more sympathy for the poor when they climb the social ladder.” Ford, who is also famous for his book *The Lay of the Land* and short story collection *Rock Springs*, added that while he did not have a stereotypical view of India in his head before visiting, he did have a view of the country based on a “melange of discreet impressions” from various books and films.

Dainik Jagran newspaper recently published an article titled, “The Booker ‘Pee on Pagans Award’”. As it puts it, Some Indians have caught on to the trick of making money from the rich Westerners by criticizing their own land and culture. The glamour and prestige that has become associated with the English language in India often manages to obscure the ugly reality of its English writers. Our English writers carefully craft the content to serve the taste of foreigners. The English writers of India get acceptance and approval from the Westerners only if they affirm through their work a strange and twisted kind of image about India that the foreigners love to promote.

Adiga received the prize money of about one hundred thousand US dollars because the Booker panel seems to have been mightily impressed by his story about a killer servant. According to the head of the panel Michael Portilo, after reading the novel, his beliefs about India have changed and he got to know about the “real India.” *Time* magazine has carried a two-page report about Arvind Adiga bagging the Booker prize. Nothing has been said in it about the literary quality of Adiga’s book except that it reveals the real face of Indian poverty, shows how meaningless all talks about economic development and advancement of India actually are and proves how competent Adiga’s agent is that he got him this award. The *Times* report calls the book a commercial success, not a literary one. The only comment it makes about the plot and writing style of *The White Tiger* is that these are about the success of a killer servant. Is this the alleged “reality of India” that has been revealed?

Many of our English writers in their greed for awards, prize money and Western approval portray a distorted and perverted picture of India. There is a major

role of lobbying by agents in securing these. But the main thing is that many English writers do a kind of “formula writing” that is tailor-made to attract the Westerners and pamper their self-conceit. It is a known fact that Westerners have always known India for our poverty, dirt, population, illiteracy and other such factors. These factors prevail today also in our writings to lure foreign personalities who hold the key to Western awards and prize money. This tendency of our English writers has been scrutinized in detail by M. Prabha in her book *The Waffle of the Toffs: A Socio Cultural Critique of Indian Writing in English*. According to her, English writing in India is a purely commercial business that is run by a small but incestuous group of Indian con-artists. Their output has absolutely no originality or creativity. Instead, it is deliberately stuffed with “saleable” material.

Even today in India, English is the language of the elite who account for a mere one or two percent of the population. There is a negligible number of Indians who use English as a medium of thinking and self-expression. It is not without reason that most of Indian English writers such as Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie, Amitabh Ghosh, Farukh Dondhi, Jhumpa Lahiri and so on live in either England or America. Even those who live in India are also completely focused toward the West. In other words, these people never consider other Indians as their readers and neither do they write for Indian society or readers. This is why English writers lack quality as well as diversity.

Salman Rushdie, one of the most famous Indian origin authors, is best known for the violent backlash his book *The Satanic Verses* (1988) provoked in the Muslim community. Iranian spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie. Vikram Seth, author of *A Suitable Boy* (1994) is a writer who uses a purer English and more realistic themes. Being a self-confessed fan of Jane Austen, his attention is on the story, its details and its twists and turns. Shashi Tharoor, in his *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), follows a story-telling (though in a satirical) mode as in the *Mahabharata* drawing his ideas by going back and forth in time. Khushwant Singh is a senior prominent Indian novelist cum journalist. A significant post-colonial writer in the English

language, he is known for his clear-cut secularism, humor and a deep pas for poetry. Recent writers in India such as Arundhati Roy and David Dav show a direction towards contextuality and rootedness in their works. Arunc Roy calls herself a “home grown” writer. Her award winning book is set in immensely physical landscape of Kerala Davidar sets his *The House of Mangoes* in Southern Tamil Nadu. In both the books, geography and poli are integral to the narrative.

Pulitzer prize-winning author Joseph Lelyveld, writer of a new book Mahatma Gandhi has generated a controversy in India. Lelyveld’s book, “*Gr Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and his Struggle with India*“, is not yet available India, which means much of the controversy has been generated based on review of the book published mainly in Britain’s tabloid *Daily Mail*. The review published on 28 March, said the book claimed that Gandhi was ‘bisexual’ and was ‘deeply in love with Hermann Kallenbach’, an architect and bodybuilder who became Gandhi’s disciple in South Africa.

Indians have revolutionized global popular culture. Through their films, the first made inroads into international consciousness. In literature, they enjoy the same currency now. In India itself, the engagement of many mainstream Indian based publishers with their literature is becoming phenomenal. Augmented by the collaboration between Indian publishers like Ravi Dayal and Rupa and their Western counterparts such as Penguin, Harper Collins, they have taken their works to the next level. Writers like Siddhant Sanghavi, David Davidar, Chetan Bhagat, Arundhati Roy are very popular on the domestic front. There are other factors that excited the literary quest of young Indian writers. The country’s great economic boom, the arrival of the internet and outsourcing contributed in bridging the divide between provincial India and the world, making it possible for Indian-born novelists like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh to displace the likes of Wodehouse and Robert Frost from the bookshelves of the Indian libraries. Contemporary Indian writing creates a link between the East and the West and we have an important factor called Diaspora Writing to their credit.

Aravind, who won the Booker Prize, had a different view on India. The major voice in his novel, *Balram Halwai*, reflects a typical middle-class India. The author said in an interview: “*Balram Halwai* is a composite of various men I have met when traveling through India. I spend a lot of my time loitering about train stations, or bus stands, or servants’ quarters and slums, and I listen and talk to the people around me. There is a kind of continuous murmur or growl beneath middle-class life in India, and this noise never gets recorded. Balram is what you’d hear if one day the drains and faucets in your house started talking.”

The novel is suffused with detail, from the corrupt workings of the police force to the political system; and from the servant classes of Delhi to the businessmen of Bangalore. Aravind also writes about the binary nature of Indian culture: the Light and the Darkness and how the caste system has been reduced to the rich and poor. The last fifty-something years have seen great changes in India’s society, and these changes have overturned the traditional hierarchies, and the old securities of life. “A lot of poorer Indians are left confused and perplexed by the new India that is being formed around them,” said Aravind.

Aman Mangat, a critic writes about the Popularity of Indian fiction in his article, “Indian Fiction and its Popularity and Significance at Home and Abroad”.

There is no denying the fact that Indian English fiction has finally gained the recognition it deserves, but market researches and experts do not present a very heartening picture. The very trend of getting published abroad is a deliberate attempt to ensure attention if not success within the domestic sphere at least. Pankaj Mishra, author of *The Romantics*, winner of the Los Angeles Times’ Art Seidenbaum Award for first Fiction, throws light on the luke-warm sales figures abroad saying, “The concerns of people in the west are different, their expectations from a novel coming out of India are somewhat fixed. It is not just a matter of quality. Good books dealing with matters we consider vitally important may not seem saleable to publishers there.”

Another critic Jayabroto Chatterjee argues that Indian writing in English is mere novelty in the west. There is no doubt that writers like Seth, Mistry, Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor of *The Great Indian Novel* and *Show Business* fame, and Arun Chaudhuri (*A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Afternoon Raag*) get gushing reviews, but these, with the exception of *A Suitable Boy*, rarely translate into large sales. "The literary supplements have recognized us... but I'm not sure about the average reader."

But after all these controversies the good news is that Indian writers are being recognized. The national and international awards heaped upon our authors, the outstanding number of books sold, the extensive marketing done by the media, and the flurry of optimism kindled by the past successes, big and small suggest that Indian English fiction has come of age, that it has secured a definitive place in world literature. It is important that we re-examine our attitudes with regard to our own writers and their place in the context of an ever evolving multi-cultural world that is becoming increasingly globalised.

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