UNIT 4 SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of the unit is to show that the newly emerging literatures in English in South Asia (and the Indian novel, specifically) are the products of complex determinants. The colonial encounter is the foremost determinant for emerging literatures in English in India and the subcontinent. Additionally, the process through which the new nation comes into being, the trauma of partition, the formation of national identities in a situation of political instability all contribute to the vast body of literature, not just in English, but in the regional languages as well.

My attempt in this introduction to a representative body of South Asian literature would be to show how literature refracts realities outside its domain and cannot, therefore, be studied in isolation from them. In this course, you will study Bapsi Sidhwa’s partition novel *Ice Candy Man*, which pulls together some of the issues mentioned above.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan), Sri Lanka and Nepal are the countries covered under the rubric of South Asia. Most of these are newly emerging nations, having gained freedom from British colonial power around the late 1940s or so.

The term ‘New Literatures in English’ has been deemed appropriate to describe the recent literary developments in South Asian countries emerging from the experience of colonialism. The term ‘new’ in this context would also seek to distinguish between the ‘old’ British literature produced by representatives of the imperial power and the recent ‘new’ literature produced by indigenous inhabitants in the English language. ‘New Literatures in English is now found preferable to the earlier categorization of ‘Commonwealth’ or ‘Third World Literature’, as you might have read. Further,
though 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' are used as well, the idea of 'new' literatures also seems to de-emphasise the colonial past and might therefore be preferable to other descriptions.

What each of these literatures from the South Asian region has in common beyond their 'special' or distinctive characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and 'asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial center.' (Ashcroft et al., 1989, p.1)

The new literatures in English can be seen to develop through various stages which can be broadly classified as imitation, in the first phase, followed by a phase of protest or resistance and finally to a phase where the 'new' literature develops a distinct identity of its own. In the first phase writers tend to imitate the great works of the imperial power, which become the models for emulation. Shakespeare and the Romantic poets were some of the models for the Indo-English writers in the nineteenth century, which led them to 'daffodilize' the tropics or to see their own landscapes through English eyes. This kind of literature can be seen to be produced under 'imperial license' and often resulted in a sense of alienation from the lived and experiential reality around them. The careers of the Bengali poet, Michael Madhusudan Dutt and the Sri Lankan James Alwis can be shown as illustrations of this pattern.

In the second stage, there is a denial of the privilege of 'English' and a 'refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage' (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p.38). In this first phase of nationalist self-assertion, there is a realization of the power and mastery inscribed in language which leads to a rejection of the colonial culture. The final phase is the development of an indigenous idiom, when the colonized writer is able to appropriate the language – English, in this case - to communicate his/her own cultural experience. This process would lead to a sense of 'disalienation', the ability to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p.39)

The importance of language in colonialism and subsequent processes of decolonisation was realized by one of the most well-known critics of colonialism, Frantz Fanon (1927-1963), a psychiatrist from Martinique. While recognizing the potency and power of racial characteristics of 'Blackness' at the heart of the oppression of colonialism, he felt that the power exercised by white over black, colonized over colonizer could be dismantled by a realization of the mystificatory potential of language. In this influential book *Black Skin, White Masks*, he attempts to analyse colonialism and to "help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment" (Fanon, 2001, 160). The black/colonized man, according to Fanon, should be freed from the disabling position of colonialism to the construction of new liberating narratives of decolonisation.

The process of imitation, resistance or protest and then appropriation or forging one's own literary idiom are often foregrounded in the literary works of South Asian writers like Raja Rao (in his preface to *Kanthapura*) and earlier nineteenth century writers like M.M. Dutt and James Alwis of Sri Lanka as well. The fiction, poetry and drama of many writers bear the imprint of the tensions of the colonial relationship while expressing an incipient nationalism and proclaiming development of a distinct identity. However, inherent in this implicit agenda is a danger that Balachandra Rajan cautions against in his address at a Leeds Conference:

In newer literatures, the pressures of literary nationality can be compulsive and the writer writes according to specifications which can be subtly tempting when the writer himself is committed to them as a citizen ... [There is] the patriotic [view] in which the writer...
becomes the voice of nationhood and the achievement of an Indian writer for example, is judged by the intensity of his Indianness (Quoted in Considerations ed Mukherjee, 1964; 1)

Different writers respond to these pulls and pressures in different ways, according to diverse cultural locations and ideological positions, but certain common themes emerge in most of South Asian literature in English: the colonial and East-West encounter, the development of a sense of pride in one’s own culture, a preoccupation and experimentation with language and a continuing concern with issues of identity and nationhood. Some of the best South Asian fiction in English by Rushdie (See Midnight’s Children, 1981), Amitava Ghosh (The Shadow Lines, 1988) and Michael Ondaatje (The English Patient, 1992) reflect and refract these urgencies and preoccupations.

4.2 SURVEY OF SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURES IN ENGLISH

In this section, I will briefly survey Pakistani and Sri Lankan literature in English before going on to deal with Indian-English writing. The South Asian region is where English has been more prominent than elsewhere, moreover, the use of English has not been confined to the practical spheres alone, but has been the literary vehicle for some of the best writings from this region.

4.2.1 Pakistani Literature in English

In his address to the International Conference on English in South Asia (January, 1989), Alamgir Hashmi pointed out that English in Pakistan had come to South Asia as the colonizer’s language, and had subsequently acquired local “traits, a local habitation and a name” (Hashmi, 1996, 107). In fact, the first published book in English by a South Asian was Travels (1794) by an Indian Muslim Sake Deen Mohammed. During the early twentieth century, there were notable writers like Shahid Suhrawady, Mohammad Iqbal and Ahmed Ali.

In the field of poetry, there was an attempt to weld South Asian epic traditions with those of Romanticism. In the 1930s, Shahid Suhrawady’s poetic compositions like Essays in Verse (1937), drawing on the precision of Muslim art and often on English neo-classicism, could be seen as evolving a character of its own.

In the field of prose writing around the same time, Ahmed Ali had introduced concepts of European realism into his Urdu stories and revolutionized Urdu literature. He then wrote Twilight in Delhi, the first major Muslim novel to emerge from the subcontinent. Developments in Pakistani writing after 1947 illustrate the fact that Pakistani literature has outstripped its colonial origins and developed a new personal identity of its own. This is amply evident in the poems of Taufiq Rafat, Daud Kamal, Kaleem Omar and Maki Qureshi who laid the groundwork for Pakistani poetry in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the field of novel writing, the writings of Ahmed Ali, Zulfikar Ghose, Salman Rushdie and Bapsi Sidhwa “has swayed postcolonial fictional modes from realism to fantasy and metafictional language myths” (Hashmi, 1996, p.114). Sidhwa’s novels are The Bride (1983), The Crow Eaters (1978) and Ice Candy Man (1988), the last of which won several awards including the German Librature Prize (’91) and the 1993 Lila Wallace Grant. Notable recent novels from Pakistan include The Thirteenth House (1987) by Adam Zameenzad where desire is mixed with horror, astrology and mysticism with history. Also worthy of mention are Tariq Ali’s novel Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree (1992) and Sara Suleri’s Meatless Days (1990), which is part memoir, part fiction and which won the Pushcart Prize, Nadeem
Aslam’s *Season of the Rainbirds* which won the Betty Trask Award and was nominated for several others and Mohsin Hamid’s *Mothsmoke* (2000). Zulfikar Ghose’s novels include *Figures of Enchantment* (1986), a superb postcolonial novels, *Holme’s Investigations into the Bogart Script* (1981) and *The Triple Mirror of the Self* (1992), among others. His works assert “language as the only tangible reality, and fiction as an ironic history of self and society” (Hashmi, 1996, 114) Short fiction and nonfiction have also been prolific genres in the hands of new writers like Aamer Hussein, Muneeza Shamsie and Rukhsana Ahmed.

In Pakistan, English drama has had a limited tradition as an art form. It is significant that the few well-known Pakistani English dramatists have all established themselves in Britain. Notable among them are Hanif Kureshi whose screenplay *My Beautiful Laundrette* deals with unemployment and racism in Britain and was followed soon after by *The Buddha of Suburbia* which was a novel about an Asian boy growing up in Britain. The work of Rukhsana Ahmad and Tariq Ali also thematise the East-West encounter. The former’s writing also carries a strong feminist theme, which was in part a response to the imposition of a new martial law regime in the 1970s.

Otherwise original plays in Pakistan have been few and far between. Among the most noteworthy is Taufiq Rafat’s “The Foothold” which was entirely in verse. Muneeza Shamsie relates that after the 1970s some playwrights like Imran Aslam made a conscious decision to write plays in Urdu partly to reach a wider audience and partly because they were a little embarrassed at the ‘elitist’ connotations of English.

Though the tyrannical nature of some of Pakistan’s governments has not been conducive to freedom of expression in any language, the quality of writing on the whole has definitely “improved in the passage from colonial subservience to an era of national self-definition” (Hashmi, 1996, 111).

### 4.2.2 Sri Lankan Literature in English

Sri Lanka had been under the domination of the Portuguese (1505-1640), the Dutch (1640-1796) and the British from 1796 until 1948, when it gained freedom on 4 February, 1948. Sri Lanka is linked to the South Asian region by strong ties of history, culture, religion, language and literature. Like in other colonized areas, the early literature from Sri Lanka in English show the limitations of emulation and blind imitation. This is mirrored in the poetic career of James Alwis who gained proficiency in Sinhalese when he realized that mastery over English would hardly redeem him from slavery.

In the field of Sri Lankan literature, there seems to be an abiding preoccupation with the language of poetry, especially so when that language has been acquired in a colonial situation. “However”, as Gooneratne points out, it “is also part of a wider concern, a search for identity within the national and cultural environment.” (Gooneratne, 1980, p.168)

The writer in Sri Lanka faces the problem of a limited readership/audience and has thus to write with an eye on an international / overseas reader / audience. The prickly problem of the English-language writer’s relationship with his chosen language informs a lot of Sri Lankan poetry. However, instead of the initial pale imitations of Wordsworth and Moore, Sri Lankan poetry has evolved a vigorous local idiom of its own. Thus, from Louis Nell and Ashley Halpe to Patrick Fernando, we move to Lakdasa Wikramasinh, Anne Ranasinghe, the hallmark of whose poetry is a “perceptible freedom to experiment with language in terms of individual experience”, and to “look with fresh eyes at a local society and environment.” (Gooneratne, 1980, p.165). The experience of relocation and expatriation among many Sri Lankan writers in the 1950s and 1960s served to foreground questions of personal identity and themes of nostalgia and exile. In the poems of recent expatriates, there is a sense in which the act of departure has sealed their identity and made that identity a
heightened reality. Also, the violence and strife that has marked Sinhalese society in the last thirty years has found its way into its poetry as well.

Sri Lankan theatre in English took several years before it was able to develop an English language drama which could successfully exploit the resources of the local idiom. Attempts were made to adopt European plays by the University Dramatic Society under Professor E.F.C. Ludowyk in the 1940s, but these attempts could not establish a successful dramatic tradition subsequently. It was only with Ernest McIntyre’s production of Brecht’s *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and later Shakespeare’s *Othello* that a connection was established between the worlds of Sinhalese and European drama (Gooneratne, 1980, p156). At the same time, there is a tradition of domestic comedy in English which comprises plays like Ludowyk’s ‘He Comes from Jaffna’ (1950), Lanerolle’s ‘Well, Mudaliyar’ and McIntyre’s ‘The Education of Miss Asia’ (1971) and ‘The President of the O.B.A.

Any mapping of the terrain of the Sri Lankan novel starts paradoxically with the work of an Englishman Leonard Woolf, whose work *A Village in the Jungle* (1913) demonstrated its closeness to the local idiom and to the habitual rhythms of Sinhalese expression. It has since been translated into Sinhalese as *Baddeganna*.

In the last two decades or so, the novels of writers like Romesh Gunashekhara (*Reef, Sandglass*) and Michael Ondaatje have enriched Sri Lankan English fiction. Originally from Sri Lanka, Ondaatje’s roots are of mixed Dutch, Tamil and Sinhalese elements. After his education in England, he settled in Canada. A sense of the transcultural informs most of his work, communicated through these of migration, international displacement or the personal search for his family’s past. (*The English Patient* (1992), *Running in the Family* (1983), *Handwriting* and *Anil’s Ghost*.) The theme of the mapping countries and experience across cultural boundaries is a key aspect in Ondaatje’s work, a feature that can be called a characteristic of transcultural writing.

### 4.2.3 Bangladeshi Writing in English

Bangladesh became a separate entity after 1971, when it declared its independent status vis-à-vis Pakistan. Bangladesh has had a rich tradition of Bengali literature, which is its common heritage with West Bengal; in addition there has been a tradition of Bangla Muslim writing best represented by Kazi Nazrul Islam. In recent years the writings of Taslima Nasreen have been accorded international recognition, but her works like *Lajja*, her autobiography and newspaper columns are noteworthy not so much for their artistic merit as for their hardhitting polemic against repressive ideologies.

### 4.2.4 Indian Literature in English

In order to contextualise modern Indian poetry in English, it is illuminating to look at Bruce King’s comment on the same.

Modern Indian English-language poetry is one of the many ‘new literatures’ which began to emerge at the end of the Second World War after the end of colonialism. Unlike the creative writing of Africa and the Caribbean, modern Indian poetry in English has been neglected by most critics, foreign readers and intellectuals for it has no obvious direct relationship to the cultural movements which led to national independence; by 1947 the situation had changed and with it the concern of the new poets became their relationship to end alienation from the realities of their society. (King, 1987, p.1)
By the 1960s, the pioneering efforts of Ezekiel and some others, published first in magazines like ‘Illustrated Weekly’ and ‘Quest’ and then by Writers Workshop had borne fruit. Poets like Ezekiel, Ramanujan, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel and Adil Jussawala had made a mark with their poetry. Most of these poets have continued to write well into the 1980s and 1990s. Ramanujan’s (d. 1993) last work ‘The Black Hen’ published as Book IV of the ‘Collected Poems’ (1995) concerns itself with poetic themes of roots, heredity and ancestry. Ezekiel’s ‘Latter Day Psalms’ (1982) and ‘Poems’ (1983-88) show an increasing use of the dramatic mode in place of his earlier theme of failure, which led to a sense of self-doubt and self-laceration in some of his early poetry. Dom Moraes’s poems span more than the quarter of a century; ‘John Nobody’ was published in 1965, ‘Serendip’ (1990) and ‘Craxton’ in the 1990s. Gieve Patel, similarly published his poems in 1966 and his latest collection ‘Mirrored Mirroring’ in 1991. International recognition came by way of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize to Arun Kolatkar for ‘Jejur’ (1976). The writings of Parthasarathy, Arvind K. Mehrotra, Dilip Chitre and later Keki Daruwalla (‘Winter Poems’, 1980, ‘Landscape’, 1987, ‘A Summer of Tigers’, 1995, ‘Night River’, 200) Shiv K. Kumar (‘Trapfalls in the Sky, 1986, Woolgathering, 1998) and Jayanta Mahapatra (8 volumes of poetry from 1980 to 1997) convey a maturity of vision and deftness of execution that have helped establish India-English poetry as a distinct genre. In the last few decades and especially in the 1990s, some women have also emerged as poets of considerable distinction. Kamala Das, Eunice de Souza, Sujata Bhatt and Meena Alexander are some of the better known names. Indian-English poetry, to the extent one can homogenise the category inspite of the diverse voices that constitute it, has made a distinct place for itself in modern Indian culture, As Bruce King comments in his introduction to Indian English Poetry.

Indian English poetry is part of the process of modernization which includes urbanization, industrialization, mobility, independence, social change, increased communication (in the form of films, television, radio, journals and newspapers), national and international transportation networks, mass education and the resulting paradox that as an independent culture emerges it also participate in the international, modern, usually westernized world. (King, 1987, p3).

If, initially, Modern Indian English verse appeared to be indebted to British and a few European models, it now reveals an awareness of most of world literature, including contemporary American, recent South American and older Indian devotional verse in the regional languages (ibid, p.5).

Further, English has become one of the most significant languages of modern India in which “words and expression” have recognized national rather than imported significances and references, alluding to local realities, traditions and ways of feeling (ibid, p.3).

Thus, in ‘An Introduction’, Kamala as sums up the Indo-English writers’ dilemma: “...... I am Indian, very brown, born / in Malabar, I speak three languages, write in / Two, Dream in one. Don’t write in English, they said, / English is not your mother-tongue......... Why not let me speak in / any language I like? The language I speak / becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses, / All mine, mine alone.........”

The story of the growth of Indo-English drama highlights several significant aspects about culture, language and the nature of dramatic and theatrical activity. Nineteenth century attempts to stage and adapt English plays gradually lost out to regional language drama in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. (See Naik, 1984, p.153). While Shakespearean and western drama have often been successfully welded with local folk traditions (e.g., ‘Jatra’, Nautanki’) and performed in the regional languages, drama in English in India has been restricted to a limited urban audience. The names
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Asif Currimbhoy and now Mahesh Dattani are the few well-known names in the field, in contrast to regional language drama which boasts of a whole lot of names like Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir and Badal Sircar. In order for India-English drama to be effective, it has to derive its impetus and strength from traditional Indian forms. The Indo-English dramatists’ continuing attempt must be to locate and successfully use such indigenous traditions.

4.2.5 Twentieth Century Developments in Indian English Fiction

Questions and problems of address, language and ‘Indianness’ persist and percolate through to the twentieth century novel as well, and are articulated in Raja Rao’s preface to *Kanthapura* (1938), a novel dealing with the impact of Gandhian thought upon a community. Since the narrator is an old unlettered woman, Rao uses English with the cadences and rhythms of Indian speech. In the Preface, which foregrounds the postcolonial problematic, Rao confesses:

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. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language (pp i-ii) (*Kanthapura*, 1938)

Unlike an earlier generation of writers like Bankim and Govardhanram Tripathi, (who wrote his novel *Saraswatichandra* (1887-1900) in Gujarati and his personal notebooks in English) and Ngugi later who took a decision in the light of his political commitment to write in his native Gikuyu, as a way out of the impasse between expressing African realities in the English language, Rao continued to write in English. In his refusal to relinquish English as the medium of his stories, since ‘it is not really an alien language’ he exemplifies a turn of phrase that is distinctive and unique. His dictum that “We cannot write like the English... We should not. We cannot write only as Indians” shows a way out from the problem of alienation of the earlier writers. Arguably, it also carves a space for him, which is relatively independent of the burden of cultural representation.

In the hands of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, Indo-English fiction made significant generic leaps forging an idiom of its own, gaining momentum with the socio-political urgencies of the freedom movement and the impact of Gandhian thought. Mulk Raj Anand’s novels are infused by a progressive humanitarianism. His considerable oeuvre includes *Coolie* (1933), *Untouchable* (1935), *The Village* (1939) and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942) and is informed by an ardour for social reform and a conviction of salvation through socialistic doctrine. While it should not be assumed that a novel or a novelist operates in an ideologically neutral space, Anand’s fervent ideological beliefs, and overt socialism sometimes result in technical and artistic flaws, like in *Untouchable* and *The Sword and the Sickle* (where the protagonist Lallu meets the Mahatma). Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), mentioned earlier, also shows the author’s ideological affinity with Gandhian beliefs. Rao’s later book *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), depicts the classic encounter between East and West in the marriage of Rama, the Indian student and Madeline, a Frenchwoman. The novel – if it can be so called with its massive overlay of philosophy – is infused with a belief in non-dualistic vedantic doctrine and shows the contrast between two contrary world-views.

The third major writer of this period, also well received in the West, is R.K. Narayan. Unlike Rao, the East-West theme is lacking in his work; unlike the earlier two authors, his ‘Gandhian’ novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* is considered his weakest. His manifold talents lie elsewhere in crafting a picture / version of Indian life in English unsurpassed in its authenticity and social realism. From *Swami and friends* (1935) to *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) to *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967) he offers a minutely observed account of the fictional ‘Malgudi’, a glimpse which is representative more than panoramic.
In the fifties and sixties, novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Nayantara Sahgal and later, Arun Joshi and particularly Anita Desai are significant figures; G.V. Desani’s All About H. Hatter (1948) and Attia Hossain’s Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) are significant landmarks in the literary landscape. In reading these authors, we must be sensitive to questions of language and address, identity and nationality.

I am aware that a summing up of this kind excludes more writers and issues than it addresses. However, in order to convey some of the salient issues of the newly-emerging literatures of South Asia, I have chosen the Indian English novel as a representative genre within this larger group.

It is in the eighties and nineties – the last twenty years – that the Indian novel has made a phenomenal impact globally, with the publication of Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1980), considered the model postcolonial novel, a national allegory that has influenced a whole generation of writers and created a horizon of expectations for readers and critics alike. In the novel, Rushdie seems to celebrate the plenitude of India in what can be labeled as the postmodernist mode, challenging several assumptions about language, nation, history and narrative.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee comments on the impact of Midnight’s Children:

In retrospect, we see that Midnight’s Children had a very important role to play in the reversal of the ‘centre-periphery’ paradigm in English literary culture, in dissolving the great tradition of F.R. Leavis into a plurality of traditions coming from many races, many regions, many cultures ... Although in an entirely different way from the earlier novels, Midnight’s Children is also constructing the idea of the nation – an India that is inclusive and tolerant but threatened by the bleak forces of binary opposition. (Mukherjee, 2000 pp 76-77).

This novel expresses deep anxiety about the fragility of the nation and the fluidity of identity. The preoccupation with nation, identity, memory and violence has continued to be a seminal one in South Asian subcontinental writing. The making of the nation ruptured by Partition and communal riots, events which bring home to individuals and collectivities the significance of religious and cultural identity are further thematized in Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines, Mukul Kesavan’s Looking Through Glass and Bapsi Sidhwa’s Ice Candy Man.

In Ghosh’s novel, the unnamed narrator, through the experiences of his mentor, Tridib, realizes the illusory and insecure nature of borders and boundaries as invented corollaries of the idea of nationhood. Thus, instead of securing borders through acts of military violence, there is a desire to transcend nationalism to go beyond to an understanding of internationalism and global humanitarianism.

At the same time, we need to look at the category of globalism closely. To what extent is globalism the prerogative of a few privileged individuals or the privilege of an internationally recognized category of writers and intellectuals? It is here that the Indian writer in English employing pan-Indian themes and addressing an international audience has an advantage over the writings of his/her regional counterparts, whose work may not be globally accessible in English. Such a writer, especially if he / she is a migrant – witness the case of Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje or even a Bharati Mukherjee – belongs to what Timothy Brennan calls the ‘Third world Cosmopolitans’ who are hailed by prominent critics as interpreters and authentic voices of the ‘Third World’. Underlying this phenomenon is obviously the operation of a canon. Literary texts get canonized in different ways – by being discussed and praised by influential critics, by being mentioned in histories of literature, by being taught in classrooms and through an acerbation of commentary around them.
In stark contrast to the proliferation of Indian English fiction in the late twentieth century, Indian English novels of the nineteenth century have not been subjected to any of these canonizing processes and have, as a result, been denied literary history, or even archival value.

The growing visibility and presence of the Indian English novel now is tied up, to a large extent, with the increasing influence of postcolonial theory and 'third world' intellectuals on the American academy. The increasing numbers of the 'Third World' cosmopolitan intellectuals in the U.S. universities has helped in the dissemination and circulation of theories based on newly emerging literatures in English from former colonies. What makes intellectuals like Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak and Homi Bhabha successful is their "mastery over the current idiom of the metropolitan metalanguage of narrative". This ensures their "favourable reception in the global centers of publication and criticism." However, not all writers from other cultures, obviously, receive this attention. While this new receptivity in London or New York may have "made it easier for some writers from outside the Western world to get a hearing, they may do so only within a field of reception already defined by metropolitan parameters and agendas" (Mukherjee, 2000, 179) In other words, the criteria of evaluating the standards of literary production are constructed and determined by the needs and demands of the receiving culture, that is, western universities.

One implicit expectation from Third World 'Commonwealth' (the earlier term) and postcolonial writers is that their work would inevitably highlight the experience of colonialism as theme or metaphor - as Rushdie did in the Methwold section of the *Midnight's Children* or Naipaul in 'The Shorthills Adventure in A House for Mr. Biswas'. For all their undeniable literary value, the terms of their critical reception in the West embody the operation of a certain politics of representation that is heightened by the diasporic location of author and critic In spite of their use of English with a small 'e' and forging of an indigenous literary idiom, the Empire need not always write back. The writer's address might not, necessarily, be to the metropolitan centre and colonialism might no longer be the central issue in the newly emergent literatures, which may be conditioned by other local, diverse and complex pressures like the disintegration of older social orders and challenges posed to patriarchy, particularly by the newly emergent articulate woman. As an example, it is only in the late nineteen-nineties that the rich literature of partition, both written and oral, is being looked at. The right critical and aesthetic distance from the event fifty years later seems to have helped evolve the right perspective, resulting in the production and translation of literary classics on partition.

One of the issues raised by the questions of classics, especially at the level of reception, is the question of the "timeless universals" of the "great tradition" of literature, the canon. Academic discussions about interrogating and replacing the canon result in the establishment of a counter canon where certain known names are repeatedly anthologized and showcased under the titles of South Asian, African or Caribbean literatures, with the editors of these collections doing a token updating every few years.

Not only that, it is these anthologies in circulation, which often introduce virtually monolingual or monocultural (having access to one literature) students in South Asian and non-western universities to their own literature. What we have to do here is to interrogate the pedagogic hegemony of postcolonialism currently in circulation in English departments in the U.S. universities which, then, becomes a model here.
Postcolonial analysis is concerned with the material, cultural and intellectual impact of British rule, introduction of Western forms of knowledge and its immediate and continuing effect on the colonised societies. In addition, the impact of the colonizing process on the coloniser has also been looked at by writers like Frantz Fanon and Ashis Nandy.

Edward Said’s influential book *Orientalism* (1978), in many senses the basic text and reference point for postcolonialism, was a ‘canonical event’ in terms of its revolutionary impact on “intellectual formation, structures and lives both in the west and in the postcolonial non-west.” (Gandhi, 1998, 66) It changed the drift of many disciplines, expanding and re-visioning their scope and intent (Brannon, 1992, 98). *Orientalism* is a systematic painstaking exposition of the reciprocal relationship between colonial knowledge and colonial power. What is new in *Orientalism*’s method of exposition is its unrelenting focus on literature, and it is this aspect that I am stressing on as particularly relevant to our field of study. As Leela Gandhi points out in her introduction to postcolonial theory:

Despite its interdisciplinary concerns, the field of postcolonial studies is marked by a preponderant focus upon ‘postcolonial literature’ - a contentious category which refers somewhat arbitrarily to ‘literatures in English’, namely, to those literatures which have accompanied the projection and decline of British imperialism. (Gandhi, 1998, 141)

The focus on literature in postcolonialism as a mode of cultural production is a corollary to the cultural hegemony of British imperialism/colonialism which can be described as a “textual takeover” (Boehmer, 1995, 94). Macaulay’s *Minute* emphasises the value of English literature as an instrument of cultural domination, which was made “central to the cultural enterprise of Empire”. (Ashcroft et al. 1989, 3)

Gauri Vishwanathan’s *Masks of Conquest* (1989) views the literary text as a “mask for economic exploitation” which “successfully camouflages the material activities of the coloniser” (Vishwanathan, 1989, 20). In memorizing passages from literary and poetical texts, the colonial subject was indoctrinated into complete subordination. However, in different ways, Said, Vishwanathan and Ashcroft et al may be seen as subscribing to the idea of a total conquest. There is a subtle shift of focus to forms of response and resistance in later postcolonial theorizing.

Much of postcolonial theory ignores the “theoretical self-sufficiency of African or Asian knowledge systems”; it also shows a failure to “foreground those cultural and historical conversations which circumvent the Western World”. (Gandhi, 1998, Preface) Some of the problems of postcolonial theory and concomitantly, postcolonial literary analysis are outlined in the following sections.

### 4.3.2 Postcolonial Literary Analysis and Pedagogy

A critique of postcolonialism from our point of view would involve a brief look at the implications for reading and teaching initiated by postcolonialism. Postcolonial literary analysis has effected radically revisionist readings of canonical classics like Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. Instead of naturalizing the eternal beauties of the colonial canon, postcolonial pedagogical practice “addresses questions arising from the apparent discrepancy between the antagonistic worlds of the colonial text and the postcolonial classroom.” (Gandhi, 1998, 146) This takes the form of consciousness - raising whereby the student is encouraged to read against the grain of earlier critical ideas like authorial intention and universal meanings. Further, an attempt is made to historicize the received curriculum, with a view to revealing “imperialism’s shaping hand in the formation of English studies”. (Vishwanathan, 1989, 167)
Much of postcolonial literary theory's oppositional and specifically anticolonial thrust were anticipated by the contentious concerns of Ngugi wa Thiong'o as early as 1968, when he and his colleagues challenged the dubious cultural and pedagogical pre-eminence of English within a decolonised African context. In a paper entitled ‘On the Abolition of the English Department’ (Ngugi, 1972) a move discussed ever since in varying climes and places, he proposed that the ‘unauthentic discourse of Englishness be replaced by a radical centralization of African literature and language (Gandhi, 1998, 151). In the context of colonial India, Mahatma Gandhi’s total rejection of English education and belief in the legitimate cultural primacy of Indian literatures and language, is comparable. He realised that English has created a gulf between the educated classes and the masses, and called for a rejection of “their civilization”, since it is this that “makes their presence in India possible.” (M.K. Gandhi, 1938, 66)

Gandhi’s assertion may be seen as an example of a refusal or rejection of the categories of the imperial culture. This refusal is more than a gesture of nationalist assertion; it constitutes a radical interrogation of the bases and philosophical assumptions of European and British metaphysics. (Ashcroft, 1989, 33) At the same time, at another level, problems with English as the medium of instruction persist. In a recent issue of Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) (July 28-August 3, 2001 - Vol.xxxvi No.30), an article on the ‘Politics of Development in Postcolonial India’ discusses the social fracturing caused by English medium education. As a marker of class privilege, English education becomes a terrain of struggle and results in increasing polarization, fracturing and violence along class, caste, religious and gender lines (David Faust, Richa Nagar, EPW).

More productive from the point of view of postcolonial analysis are the textual strategies of subversion and appropriation. One example of this is exemplified in Raja Rao’s ‘Preface’ to Kanthapura (1938) mentioned earlier. In R.K. Narayan’s The English Teacher (1946), the eponymous hero Krishna rebels against the methods of English teaching calling it a “whole century of false education”, but venerates English literature: “What fool could be insensitive to Shakespeare’s sonnets or ‘The Ode to the West Wind?’” (Narayan, 1946, 220-1)

The task of the postcolonial critic and teacher, in the face of the “veneration” mentioned above, would be to prise open the complicit relations between imperialism, language and literature. The first step in demonstrating the politics of representation implicated in such a project would be to problematise the retention and continuance of the study of British literature in post-Independence India. The Lie of the Land (edited R. Sunder Rajan), and Rethinking English (edited Svati Joshi) are valuable critical interventions in such a process. At the same time, some of the newly emerging literatures/ works in English can be seen as produced, by in some sense, and having a dialogic relationship with the agenda outlined above. The nuanced, gender / class / caste inflected depiction of the Syrian Christian community in Arundhati Ray’s The God of Small Things (1997) is a case in point. Similarly, the complex representation of the colonial Indian army in South Asia (Burma and Malaysia) is interwoven with a history of teak and the closing years of Burma’s last king to form the warp and weft of Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace (2000), one of the most well-researched works to emerge from the Indian subcontinent in recent years.

Ideally speaking, the task of a postcolonial pedagogy would be to retrieve, legitimize and provide a basis for knowledge systems which have been suppressed because they were not in alliance with the dominant political interest. In addition, such a pedagogy should be able to unravel and unmask the nexus of power and knowledge which supported the imperial project. It would be appropriate, in this context, to quote Stuart Hall’s description of what the cultural studies project had set out to do:
....When cultural studies began its work ... it had ... to undertake the task of unmasking what it considered to be the unstated presuppositions of the humanist tradition itself. It had to bring to light the ideological assumptions underpinning the practice, to expose the educational program ... and to try and conduct an ideological critique of the way the humanities and the arts presented themselves as parts of disinterested knowledge. (Hall, 1990, 15)

However, while postcolonial theory highlights the duplicities and inconsistencies between western humanist traditions and our colonial histories, it has its blind spots as well. Some of these concerns are briefly indicated in the next section.

4.3.3 Problems with the Postcolonial Paradigm

The problems or limitations of the postcolonial paradigm are partly due to the empowered context of the postcolonial intellectual, a fact mentioned earlier. The circulation of high theories by diasporic intellectuals often occupying certain institutional privileges results in a gap between postcolonial theory and actual ground realities of the developing countries of South Asia or Africa. Critics like Arif Dirlik and Aizaz Ahmad are unrelenting in their exclusion of all theoretical/ intellectual activity which lacks adequate referents to ‘everyday’ sociality (Gandhi, 1998, 56). Ahmad also targets the postcolonial preoccupation with questions regarding the formation of subjectivities as a solipsistic preoccupation with a “play of identities” which obscure the ‘real’ politics of the collectivity (Ahmad, 1995, 13). Similarly, in an article titled ‘The Postcolonial aura: third world criticism in the age of global capitalism’, Dirlik argues that the predominantly “epistemological and psychic orientations of postcolonial intellectual” are ethically incompatible with and irrelevant to the “problems of social, political and cultural domination” (Dirlik, 1994, 331, quoted in Gandhi, 1998, 57).

What are the implications of postcolonialism’s occasional shortsightedness for newly emerging literatures in English? Depending on the positions from where the oppositional critiques emanate—Marxists and socialist feminists lay more stress on class while psychoanalytic feminists primary focus is on gender and sexuality—the focus of postcolonial theorizing become obvious.

It is with some of these excluded marginal areas that I would be dealing with in the last section.

4.4 LITERATURE AT THE MARGINS - SOME CRITICAL ASPECTS

4.4.1 The Question of the Margin

The notion of the excluded margin involves a certain political relationship between the centre and periphery highlighted by the French critic Foucault’s observation that:

One must not suppose that there exists a certain sphere of ‘marginality’ that would be the legitimate concern of a free and disinterested scientific inquiry were it not the object of mechanisms of exclusion brought to bear by the economic or ideological requirements of power. If ‘marginality’ is being constituted as an area of investigation, this is only because relations on power have established it as a possible object... (quoted in Gandhi, 98, 55)

The postcolonial academic is co-opted into accepting the very process of marginalisation he/she should be resisting. One area where the discourse of
marginality is constantly pushing against its limits is in the terrain of women and literature. In fact, feminist criticism has radically interrogated the notion of marginality, viewing it as a patriarchal ploy to invisibilise and suppress women’s writings and to render them invisible.

### 4.4.2 Women and Literature

The location of women in literature and the relation of women and literature is a complex one in our culture. Women become the site in literature of the colonial period, on which the symbolic dramatization of an incipient nationalism, the questions and anxieties of Indianness and of colonial modernity, are enacted. Bimala in Tagore’s *The Home and the World* (1915, translated, 1919), Savithri in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and even Ila in *The Shadow Lines* (1988) embody collective cultural anxieties. The relationship women bear to newly emerging national literatures is both metaphorical (analogue) and metonymic (representative). In addition, as symbolic repositories of tradition and maternal nature and nurture, women are often identified with a traditional, and backward-looking nationalism (McClintock, 1993, 66). Thus, Bimala in Tagore’s novel becomes the battleground for conflicting notions of liberal humanism or civic nationalism, on the one hand, and ethnic nationalism or fundamentalism, on the other. Even the clash of cultures in Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* is conveyed through the contrasting figures of Madeleine and Savithri; on another plane, the collapse of community and identity is powerfully depicted through the changing fortunes of Ayah in Sidhwa’s *Ice Candy Man*.

Sangari and Vaid in *Recasting Women* (1989) have elaborated the implications of deep-rooted and widespread changes in the cultural (social-economic-domestic-conjugal) formations of colonial India in reformulating patriarchies and effecting structural shifts in social arrangements. It is in this moment of challenge to prevailing socio-cultural arrangements that much of the ‘new’ literatures had their origin, as I have mentioned in the first section.

Since men were in the public domain and subject to colonial control, (see Partha Chatterjee, 1986, 1992) women were often the conduit to express their anxieties over their discrepant dislocations. How women bore the brunt of masculine anxieties and yet managed to clear and create a space of their own through writing is related by Tharu and Lalitha in *Women Writing in India* (2 vols.; 1991).

Although women had no direct access to English education till early twentieth century, they were often encouraged to learn English privately or read English literature in translation. Thus, English literature was not an entirely unknown entity among upper class educated women in late nineteenth and early twentieth century India. Tharu and Lalitha’s archival work also unearthed considerable evidence to prove the existence of indigenous traditions of women’s writing that “emerge at the contested margins of patriarchy, empire and nation”. (Tharu and Lalitha, 1991, Pref xvii) 

There are complexities in the cultural fabric that must be considered, for example, the politics of canon building or the tension between public and private realities, to fully appreciate cultural context in which women write. If we look at the contexts and politics of women’s writing and its reception in India and elsewhere, certain processes of censorship, and suppression become evident. In the context of a national colloquium on censorship, held in Hyderabad in July, 2001, Ammu Joseph distinguishes between censorship by mob or street censorship and official or state censorship, on the one hand, and the more subtle forms of censorship, often rooted in gender, that stifle creativity, on the other. (The Hindu, July 15) Often this censorship is self-imposed, in order to negotiate the patriarchal restraints of everyday life.

Novelists like Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938) and Anita Desai (b. 1937) have thematised the middle class woman’s predicament by foregrounding the tensions between inherited traditions and a newly articulated selfhood. The realities of gender
violence, rigid norms of female behaviour and constant suppression of female desire underpin novels like *That Long Silence, The Darkness Holds no Terrors* (Deshpande) and Roy’s *The God of Small Things*. Roy’s novel, in fact, breaks the silence on race, class and gender in a manner reminiscent of Greek tragedy. Further, these gaps and silences, in a sense, should underwrite our recognition of the fact that it is not only women, but other subaltern groups – like dalits in India or aboriginal natives in Australia – who have been relegated to the margins of national cultures or literatures.

With the emergence of fundamentalism and fascism, almost all over the world in the 1990s, it is crucial to go beyond nationalisms to perceive the constructedness of the categories of literature and genre. Received notions of literature or genre often act as limiting frames or fixes, which are inadequate to represent the varieties of newly emerging literatures all over the world.

One function of the newly emerging literatures is to constantly interrogate, challenge and extend the categories of literature. Women’s writing, however, has contested its marginal position to emerge as central to literature. Some feminist criticisms, have highlighted the constructedness (by patriarchy) of the category of literature and literary meaning and have expanded our understanding of these categories.

### 4.4.3 Conceptual Challenges

“The interaction of ‘English’ (Ashcroft et al., 1989, 181) writing with the older traditions of orature or literature in postcolonial societies, and the emergence of a writing which has as a major aim the assertion of social and cultural difference, have radically questioned easy assumptions about the characteristics of the genres we usually employ as structuring and categorizing literature as novel, lyric, epic, play, etc. Our sense, not only of that which ought to enter the canon, but also of what could be included under the rubric of ‘literature’, has been altered by writers writing in an inherited English language. (Ashcroft, 181). Contemporary Asian and African literatures, as a result of the vitality of their oral and performance traditions, have offered a number of alternative ways of conceiving narrative structure. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980) is again a good example of the use of oral narrative traditions where chronology, linearity and continuity are dispensed with and replaced with a digressive, looping narrative. Similarly, standard English is replaced with a kitschy, chutnified mix of colloquialness. In a three part essay titled ‘Poles of Recovery’; From Dutt to (Nirad) Chaudhary (Hindu, July 29, 2001) the noted writer Amit Chaudhuri makes a subtle point:

English prose style, in the hands of writers like Chaudhury (who learnt English as a second language) and Naipaul, has been an instrument of ambivalence; neither of these two writers, among the greatest post-colonial stylists of English prose, come from the upper reaches of their respective societies. In Chaudhuri’s hands, English prose style, becomes the measure of one who feels he does not quite belong ..... On the other hand, Rushdie’s “khichdi” prose, with its “Bombay mix” of Hindi, English and Indian English, is a hegemonic language ..... of an upper middle class generation in post-independence, post-liberalisation India ... this “khichdi” language is far from an African creole or pidgin, or being a language of the dispossessed.

It is thus from a privileged location that a Rushdie can put the claims of Indian writing in English, as superior to regional language writing. Many years ago in a Writers Workshop symposium, P. Lal, its founder, claimed:
Without trying to be facetious I should like to suggest that only in English can the real Indian poetry be written; any other poetry is likely to be Bengali-slanted or Gujarati-based, and so on...."

Possibly, one way of countering the hegemonic claims of Indian writers writing in English, is not to resist but to join them. It is in this that proliferating translations can be seen as a positive and enabling way to bridge the gap between a regional writer and a (inter) national audience. The choice between confining oneself to a limited audience / readership, and submitting to the publisher, market and readership is a difficult one for the writer, but one which has to be negotiated.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this overview of the Indo-Anglian novel as a representative body of South Asian writing, I have attempted to deal with some of the crucial critical issues of postcoloniality, canonicity and pedagogy, as central to the construction of literature. I have also suggested the significance of gender and class locations in determining the author’s fictional aspirations and literary styles. Taken in conjunction with our knowledge of other literatures, this should furnish us with a clear picture of the issues at stake while approaching new literatures in English in South Asia and the developing world.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. To what extent does the canon determine our idea of what constitutes literature? Discuss with examples.
2. Discuss the central issues in the emergence of South Asian literatures in English, using Indo-Anglian fiction as a point of entry.
3. What is the role of women’s writing in newly emerging literatures?

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS


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