

## *Prologue*

The overarching concern of this study is to expose the processes by which an Indian “National Literature” was consolidated in the decades before and after independence from Britain in 1947 and the central role that the English language played in establishing the same for both domestic and international readerships. Indian national literature, as this book will demonstrate, was not a natural formation; it was, instead, a highly crafted and carefully deliberated entity that reflected an elite Indian understanding of the relationship between nation, identity, and literature. While English was understood to be a discomforting part of the legacy of the erstwhile colonizer, it was also the *lingua franca* of the Indian elite, the fashioners of this newly born nation and of its ambassadors to the world at large. And yet, English was patently not considered an Indian language as even those nationalists who were most dependent on it had readily or reluctantly acknowledged. This study tracks the construction of Indian national literature through several distinct locations, key authors, and significant texts. These include collaborative English language literary anthologies assembled from the 1940s onward, the establishment in 1954 of the Sahitya Akademi (the National Academy of Letters), and the work of the nationally acclaimed novelist R. K. Narayan, and of Mulk Raj Anand, whose work was assigned national status and significance by critical consensus.

Working through this diverse body of literary texts and institutions, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature* traces the many pressures and expectations that were placed on Indian creative and critical writing in the English language in the twentieth century. To speak or write in English, a language which migrated into the region fairly recently, is to address a national, and potentially, an international audience, and by doing so to take on the responsibility of presenting an ancient civilization in its modern phase. At various moments in the past century, literary anthologies

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with a selection of works written in or translated into English were presented as representative of national literature. The only questions asked of such anthologies were about adequate representation of India's linguistic diversity. It would have been counter to the modern sensibilities of the Indian English literary discourse to note the caste and gender specificities of what was being gathered together as national literature and what was being left out. And yet, at the same time, Indian literary production in the English language was also viewed as alienated from the rest of the nation and from its regional literatures. Nevertheless, Indian "national literature" was best presented in English.

Two critical questions have shaped this book. First, what specific practices have determined national literary canon formation in the Indian context and how is the English language central to this national endeavor? Second, how have changing normative practices in literary criticism (national and international) and the differing cultural capital assigned to specific languages, literary themes, and plotlines shaped our reading of the generation of Indian English writers from the mid-twentieth century? One of the primary concerns of this study is to question the very use of the "national" as a framework for the literary. Hence, each chapter in this book points to the limitations imposed by a strictly nation-based view of the literary, which undoubtedly provides a critical comfort zone but only at the cost of ignoring other, more delicate, more widely or deeply embedded affiliations in the literature.

Within the arena of literary studies in the middle decades of the twentieth century, elite Indian intellectuals were, understandably, highly invested in crafting a united culture and literature for the new nation. They were also firmly convinced of the pragmatic necessity of doing so in the English language. From a postcolonial critical worldview, the political highlight of the twentieth century was the burgeoning of independence movements throughout the colonized world. Literary texts produced in these locations were thus eagerly read as mirroring the heady national politics of the moment. Some of them did just that. But, as the chapters in this book will demonstrate, the nation was not the only concern, not even in literature written in the language in which this new nation was primarily imagined at this historical juncture. And yet, in the first flush of establishing and showcasing the newly independent nation and its unified culture and literature, most of these other themes and dynamics were rendered secondary.

By the late 1980s, when west-based postcolonial literary critics began attending to Indian literature (as part of their commentary on non-western literatures written in colonial languages like English), they unwittingly

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reproduced the elite Indian investment in a modern, nation-centric, secular discussion of Indian writing in English. In doing so, postcolonial criticism became and remains woefully unaware of how much it has taken its cue from the upper-class, upper-caste Indian literary discourses that have deliberately and firmly eschewed all literary texts that are not nation-centric in orientation as irresponsible and unworthy of serious consideration. And after all, thinking through the nation was the sign of modernity and was therefore to be applauded and encouraged everywhere. Hence, in focusing primarily on the national arena in its consideration of Indian (and other postcolonial) literature, postcolonial criticism has elevated this one theme over other subtler motivations to write and has also, perhaps unintentionally, adopted the mindset of the most elite of Indian colonial subjects for whom the ideas of national identity and subjecthood measured in terms of national sovereignty were central to their understanding of the function of literature. This is an ideological and thematic overlap that is augmented by the fact that both western postcolonial criticism and the elite postcolonial discourses in India (and elsewhere in the former British colonies) are primarily conducted in English. Hence, while the general view (especially in western academia) is that postcolonial literary criticism champions subversive writings from the margins, challenges conventional western literary canons, and gives voice to the unheard writers around the world, this book demonstrates that this is only a partial view of the trends and contestations that have shaped Indian literary production, even in the English language, before and since independence.

Today, postcolonial literary studies is increasingly at the risk of becoming a shallowly defined comparative field, because of publishing and pedagogical pressures as well as linguistic and research limitations rather than because the distinct literatures in the field are best studied in a comparative frame. The specific conditions and circumstances under which Indian national literature was consolidated from the 1930s onward that I examine in this book, make untenable the hitherto prevalent tendency to discuss the impact of colonialism on literary production in diverse parts of the globe without understanding the local conditions in which literature is produced and without taking into consideration the language(s) in which it is produced. The following chapters will show that even within a generation of authors writing in the same language and linked to the same national location there is considerable circumstantial variation in the literature produced. This is particularly evident in the chapters on Narayan and Anand that follow. Each chapter of this book reveals the different ways in which issues of caste, gender, and orientation to the national arena have had a significant

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impact on the valuation and canonization of literary texts in India. Reading literature in the Indian context should require analysis of caste-related issues which might be irrelevant to other postcolonial locations. This is not to argue that other postcolonial societies are not hierarchical, but to insist that Indian caste hierarchies are distinct in their presentation and impact and crucially relevant to cultural production.

Of course, in the first flush of anti-imperial Indian literary criticism in English, all discussion of caste was considered outdated and unmodern and consequently was expunged from the discourse. This was aided and abetted by the fact that even “Indianized” English is unable to convey all the nuances of caste and gender as blatantly as other Indian languages. In the late twentieth century, this seemingly caste-free stance was also adopted by postcolonial critics (either out of ignorance or in respectful imitation of Indian scholarship) when they discussed Indian literature alongside writing from other decolonizing venues under a generic postcolonial critical frame.

In insisting on the importance of paying due attention to the local dynamics such as caste in Indian literature, I am drawing attention to the limitations of the comparative survey mode that has become routine in postcolonial critical projects that discuss African, South Asian, Caribbean, and other British colonial or settler literatures in the same frame, each shorn of all local details. In many postcolonial literary scholarly projects, all of these heterogeneous literary/linguistic/political situations are arranged in sequence to produce a cross-continental literary analysis that is viable only because of its undue readiness to neglect, even deny, the crucial specificities of the literary terrain in each particular location. Viewed through the lens of nation and national literature, postcolonial criticism valorizes a few select themes, such as the creation of national identity, the disappointment after independence, the dynamics of gender and nation, the impulse toward colonial mimicry and national allegory, which in turn produce a reassuring sameness that apparently runs through all literature produced in all postcolonial locations.

In contrast to earlier stages in postcolonial scholarship that accommodated, if not required, such broad generalizations about literary production in all parts of the once-colonized world, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature* keeps local complexities firmly in sight. The focus on literary production in a particular cultural location, namely Indian writing in English in the mid-twentieth century, allows me to address the work of a generation of writers who have been too easily dismissed in postcolonial considerations of Indian literature. The massive negotiations that both writers and critics made in this era between languages, genres, audiences,

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and a host of related literary issues involved in writing in English have gone mostly unacknowledged. This study turns its attention away from the much-written-about late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers like Rabindranath Tagore and from the post-Rushdie era of the 1980s and beyond, in order to focus on the submerged yet clearly visible politics of Indian English literary discourse in the formative period, from roughly the 1930s to the 1970s.

*Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature* situates the very notion of “Indian national literature” in the context provided by the contradictory and changing status of English in India in the mid-twentieth century. Such a focus draws attention to the fact that most of the academic writing that is considered constitutive of modern “Indian” academic disciplines was and continues to be formulated in the English language and from an elite, upper-caste Indian standpoint. However, the issue of the language in which the authoritative Indian academic discourses are conducted is considered so fundamental, so taken for granted, so unchangeable, that it is rendered unworthy of sustained scholarly attention. The same is true for the class and caste parameters that accompany the use of English in academic discourse. This book, by contrast, is especially attentive to the implications of using English to articulate theories of Indian national literature as well as to the caste implications of linguistic choices. And, as the first chapter will demonstrate, the usual primacy afforded to mother tongues and national languages has to be reconsidered in this context. Through their focus on specific instances within the literary arena, the chapters that follow lead us to consider the unexplored impact of the fact that English is the indispensable (but discredited or underplayed) language of Indian academic discourse that aspires to speak *for* the national and *to* the international.

At its heart, then, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature* examines the literary consequences of placing nationhood and nationalism at the very center of the postcolonial literary critical framework that was collaboratively created from the 1980s onwards by scholars from/in different parts of the globe to serve as an analytical tool for “Third World Literatures” in the twentieth century. The readings of R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand that follow demonstrate that their radically different investment in, and critical placement in relation to, the nation and the realm of the national results in their very different stature in the Indian literary canon. The discussion of these writers will reveal how differently the works of each one might be re-evaluated once the assumptions about the close affinity of “nation and narration” are called into question.

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Each chapter in this book explores in detail just how varied the interests and affiliations of individual writers working in English are: Narayan and Anand can both be considered pioneers who differently reworked the very genres they were writing within. Interestingly, their literary reputations may actually be enhanced when they are sprung out of the trap of literary nationalism fostered both by the patriotic fervor of scholarship in the independence period and by the nation-centric foci of the postcolonial critical apparatus in the late twentieth century. Hence, against the expectation that Indian literature and literary criticism would display a strong commitment to the nation, especially when produced in highly charged periods of the anti-imperialist struggle and its immediate aftermath, I present the varying degrees of affiliation to nation, a range and variety of commitments to forms of national identity and to events deemed national, as exhibited in Indian English writings of this era.

Prior to the postcolonial critical turn in the late twentieth century, in Indian critical circles as much as in the west, the assessment of Indian writers in English amounted to little more than an evaluation of the degree of their Indian “authenticity.” Authenticity, simply put, meant that the writer managed to confirm the reader’s view of what was accepted as representative of India and of Indianness. This book demonstrates why, despite the enormous critical attention paid to how “authentically Indian” the literature in English has been or can be, “authenticity” is ultimately a limited concern that erases the history of English in this region of the world and sidelines the amazing heterogeneity of the writing in this language. At mid-century there were many Indian fiction writers and poets besides Narayan and Anand who were writing in English, each with his or her own idiosyncratic interests, whose work has received scant attention outside the assessment of its degree of authenticity. Despite belonging to a small elite group of Indian writers by virtue of their choice of literary language, there is a vast heterogeneity in the work and worldview of these writers; they are not part of a collective, nor did they enter into any substantive correspondence or engagement with each other. In terms of literary reputation, the work of Raja Rao and that of R. K. Narayan vie for the top position as the representative Indian English author for this period whereas Anand is read as an earthier, less-refined writer. When the two prominent female writers of this era, Kamala Markandaya and Nayantara Sehgal, are added to this picture, they are presented as lesser talents. Nation-centric literary criticism has also cataloged as “minor” a pool of writers whose work merits serious scholarly consideration now long overdue. This list would include G. V. Desani, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Kamala Das, Dom

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Moraes, Sasthi Brata, Nissim Ezekiel, Eunice D'Souza, Pritish Nandy, and Saros Cowasjee, among others. All of these writers have been more or less systematically neglected because they cannot be easily accommodated within the currently dominant yet restrictive paradigm of what postcolonial literature is and what it needs as antecedents from the past century. For the most part, these writers did not put events in the national arena – the transfer from colony to independent nation – at the forefront of their literary projects. Hence their neglect. To be sure, on occasion the nation and nationalism are central to specific literary texts: Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), to pick two critically acclaimed examples, are inspired nationalist novels. My interest is not in claiming major status for minor writers or in bringing down authors considered exemplary. I am, however, quite deliberately questioning the usual assessments of the "importance" of various writers when read within a national framework. In this book the imbrications of the national and the literary are examined through investigation of the production of critical and fictional anthologies of "Indian Literature" at three critical junctures: in the early 1940s as a prelude to national independence; from the mid-1950s under the aegis of the Sahitya Akademi; and in the 1990s as part of the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence. What is worth noting is that in all three moments, anthologies of Indian national literature were assembled with both a national and a global audience in view; for possessing a national identity was and remains an essential prerequisite to claiming a place in the category of world literature. As my brief descriptions of the chapters that follow will show, the national and the literary are not always in lockstep with each other, even when voiced in English. However, in a world where, as Pascale Casanova notes, "our literary unconscious is largely national," those writers whose work is consciously synchronized with national projects or whose work critics can easily place in line with national preoccupations seem to capture and retain the attention of academic and mainstream readerships at home and in the world.<sup>1</sup> In the rest of this book and as briefly described below, I examine several distinct literary sites that produce surprising divergences and compliances between the national and the literary arenas.

The first chapter examines the contradictions posed by the deeply entrenched yet paradoxically precarious position of the English language in India in the decades just before and after independence from British rule in 1947. This chapter provides further amplification of a complicated linguistic scenario by arguing that English has had a special designation in the multilingual discourses around the struggle for independence from



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the British and in the establishment of an independent nation: the very use of this language implied that multiple audiences were being addressed and that identities were being consolidated and re-presented. Thus the public use of English in the context of “Indian Literature” or, by extension, “Indian culture,” served a curatorial task that continues to be the purview of this language in the post-independence years. In a parallel move, literary discourse in English in the early years of the nation took on the editorial task of translating and compiling a national literature that was ancient as well as modern and made ready for the world.

This first chapter, then, establishes the literary landscape which I examine further in the chapters that follow. It examines the details of the official language policy instituted in the newly independent nation. It also articulates the importance and indeed the necessity of focusing on literary production as the cultural arena in which we can best trace the difficult position of Indian English in this era. A quick review of Indian cultural production in film, music, drama, fiction, and poetry would reveal that the English language has established itself as a viable medium for cultural production *only* in fiction and poetry. In every other cultural form, to this day, English is still not the language that will “touch the heart” (to use Gandhi’s famous phrase) of an Indian audience. The linguistic situation is such that in most cultural production outside the literary, English is “rejected” as unusable except in brief citations, and yet it remains the prominent language in the vital transactions of the nation both domestically and internationally. This situation is changing in the twenty-first century as cultural production is born and circulates in a global remix that blurs origins, inspirations, and destinations. The first chapter explores the changing parameters by which Indian English literature has been evaluated both in India and outside. The chapter also attends to the equally relevant consideration of how the literary practitioners themselves interpreted their responsibilities as Indian writers in English or as critics of the same.

In the second chapter, I study the work of the acclaimed writer R. K. Narayan (1906–2001), paying special attention to his creation of Malgudi, the quintessential Indian small town in which all of his novels, from the 1930s to the 1980s, are set. Almost all discussion of Narayan’s work has stressed the seeming lack of a political agenda in his novels; indeed, the resolute “apolitical” stance taken in them has been widely celebrated. In contrast, this chapter establishes the political significance of Narayan’s creation of this fictional small town in the pre-independence days, by arguing that in his work written in the 1930s and 1940s, Narayan was creating a cityscape and community that was *Indian* (as opposed to British



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Indian) and in essence unruffled by colonial rule, *prior* to the establishment of the independent nation. Narayan is not nostalgic for a pre-British India; rather, he insists that his protagonists already have access to a viable, locally understood everyday life as Indians. This confident “Indianness,” born of caste privilege, makes him paradoxically the most “nationalist” of the writers in this study. Narayan’s Malgudi functions as a cultural reproduction of a Utopian present *and future* India sketched from the point of view of an upper-caste Hindu intellectual. Narayan’s Malgudi is the utopia of a benevolent Hinduism – a model city whose order and set patterns cement a conservative nationalist anti-imperialism through its confidence that a caste-based Hindu India survives the assaults of outsiders. That Narayan writes his very first novel, *Swami and Friends*, in English rather than in his mother-tongue, Tamil, allows for a rendition of a nostalgic “Indian childhood” in a “typical Indian small town” that all readers can claim as their very own. Malgudi’s success lies in the fact that it is imagined from the same linguistic, caste, and gender location as the Indian nation itself. The very complex but supremely successful process by which a specific caste and gender experience of childhood is rendered “typically Indian” and apolitical in Narayan’s first novel is the central focus of this chapter.

In contrast, Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel, *Untouchable*, published in 1935, the same year as *Swami and Friends*, has always been read, like all of his work, as fiercely political, socialist in its leanings, and committed to the independence struggle. In Chapter 3, I read this novel with its narration of a day in the life of Bakha, a Dalit youth, as a commentary on the crisis about caste discrimination that came to a head with the Dalit demand for electoral self-representation in the Round Table Conferences held between the British rulers and Indian representatives in the early 1930s that eventually led to the formulation of “The Government of India Act” of 1935. I consider how much of this climate of debate about the situation and destiny of the lowest castes is reflected in this first novel by Anand. As critics have duly noted, Anand’s interactions with the Bloomsbury Group and the influence of European modernists and of international socialist writings is visible in this novel, but equally important is Anand’s insistence that ending caste-based oppression is a struggle that is equal in importance and *yet not identical* to the struggle for Indian independence. Over the years, the brutality of caste discrimination that Anand brilliantly captures in *Untouchable* has been undervalued, his fundamental argument against caste practices such as untouchability has been sidelined, and his book has been cataloged as nationalist, even Gandhian. This chapter examines the literary and political confluences in Anand’s writing and revising of his

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first novel, which make it a site where some of the complex affiliations of the writer in English, even at the height of Indian nationalist agitations, become visible. While attentive to the Dalit critique of this novel, my chapter on Anand exposes the gap between the predominantly nationalist readings of *Untouchable* and the many other inflections at play in this slim novel.

Perhaps no literary location in post-independence India has been more tightly or automatically linked with a nationalist agenda than that of the Sahitya Akademi. And yet, as I demonstrate in Chapter 4, there is many a slip between the literary and the national, even in this site where there are multiple convergences between the national agenda for literature and the literature itself. Established in 1954, the early history of the Sahitya Akademi provides a rich and previously underexplored institutional site from which to examine the mid-twentieth-century Indian literary and literary critical production in English in the shadow of a successful independence movement. The imbrications of literary discourses with governmental policy, as well as the simultaneous comfort and discomfort with the central role of the English language in formulating Indian culture in the early decades of the new nation, are ripe for analysis in the documents linked to this cultural institution. This chapter thus further investigates the literary politics of constituting a national literature and the necessity of English to curate this body of work.

The literary production of the first fifty years of the nation was evaluated and celebrated in the last decade of the twentieth century. While Chapter 4 discusses the Sahitya Akademi's particular shaping of the national literary trajectories of the post-independence period, the fifth and final chapter examines a similar moment at the end of the twentieth century, in which the forces which curate a national literature come not from a state/national institution directly but from the literary/academic marketplace. One of the many manifestations of the year-long celebrations in 1997 of the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of Pakistan and of Indian independence was the release by commercial presses of several English language anthologies of Pakistani and Indian national literatures. Most of these anthologies, which feature fiction translated from regional languages as well as written originally in English, are edited by academics. As with the earlier discussed anthologies edited from the mid-1940s and in the post-independence era under the auspices of the Sahitya Akademi, these end-of-the-century anthologies work hard to construct retroactively and to elaborate on retrospectively a distinct national tradition in English that pulls together the many distinct languages and literatures of the region.