Arundhati Roy and Indian Fiction in English: A Short Introduction

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The development of English as a literary language in India is a transformative and long-term effect of British colonialism, which functioned as the dominant political and cultural force in the country during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay, the Law Member of the Supreme Council of India, proposed in his “Minute on Indian Education” that the British colonial government should discontinue its support of Sanskrit and Persian (the classical and Islamic imperial languages, respectively), and institute English as the medium of instruction in its schools. The prompt implementation of this policy through the English Education Act of 1835 began an irreversible process by which an ever-increasing urban population of middle- and upper-class Indians adopted English as the medium of education, business, professionalization, public discourse, and—on a limited scale—creative expression in poetry and prose. By the end of the nineteenth century, Indian literature in English included poets such as Henry Derozio, Toru Dutt, and Aurobindo Ghose, who wrote primarily or exclusively in English; and authors such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Rabindranath Tagore, who practiced multiple literary genres and had equal facility in English and Bengali.

The significant tradition of fiction in English by Indian authors began in the 1930s with an unexpected surge of novels: Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936), The Village (1939), and Across the Black Waters (1939) by Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004); Swami and Friends (1935), The Bachelor of Arts (1937), and The Dark Room (1938) by R. K. Narayan (1906-2001); and Kanthapura (1938) by Raja Rao (1908-2006). Over the next four decades, all three of these authors maintained a steady output of long and short fiction as well as non-fictional prose, with Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004) emerging as the first prominent woman author of acclaimed novels such as Nectar in a Sieve (1955) and A Handful of Rice (1966). The publication of Anita Desai’s Cry the Peacock in 1963 launched another prolific career in fiction that is still unfolding (the Indo-German author is now 75 years old), while the Polish author Ruth Prawer Jhabvala continued the tradition of European fiction set in India with novels such as Esmond in India (1957) and Heat and Dust (1975; winner of the Booker Prize).

These authors, whose writing attracted international attention and garnered a worldwide audience in the course of the twentieth century, are Arundhati Roy’s precursors in the field of Indian-English fiction. Their novels, moreover, embody the peculiarities of English as a creative medium in India which Roy herself confronts and manipulates brilliantly in The God of Small Things. English is now unquestionably an Indian language, serving along with Hindi as a link language across the diverse regions of the country. Its success as a literary medium has also given it a prominent place in discussions of the internationalization of literature, and the emergence of global “englishes” in contradistinction to the Standard English of the imperial centre. But in India, unlike colonial and postcolonial locations in sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, English has always existed in tension with more than a dozen fully developed indigenous languages, notably Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. The historical continuity and evolution of these languages makes them most nearly comparable to the modern European languages; indeed, the Columbia Indologist Sheldon Pollock calls the “unbroken tradition of literacy” on the subcontinent, involving successive generations, an ever-increasing number of languages, and
every conceivable degree of literary intricacy over some two and a half millennia, “a story of complex creativity and textual devotion with few parallels in history.” Except for the northern and central “Hindi” belt, which covers about half the country and contains more than half a billion people, the other languages have a strong “regional” presence which corresponds to the borders of Indian states, because after independence the country’s political map was redrawn along linguistic lines. Hence the majority language in the state of Bengal is Bengali, in the state of Gujarat is Gujarati, in the state of Punjab is Punjabi, and so on. Most Indians in urban and semi-urban areas are bilingual if not trilingual, and also have at least a working knowledge of English, even if they were educated primarily in another language.

Only a minuscule minority of Indians, however, could be described as monolingual in English, and even today we have to acknowledge that English does not have a “natural” or “primary” connection with landscape, place, or experience in India—some other language was acquired earlier and filled the cognitive space of the “mother tongue.” No matter how intrinsic English is as a creative medium to the Indian novelist, the narrative voice is almost always “translating” a landscape, a place, a community, or a set of experiences that occurred in another language into the medium of English. This is also true of much of the dialogue in Anglophone fiction, which ostensibly shows people in actual conversation with each other. In the Foreword to Kanthapura (1938), Raja Rao poignantly describes the difficulties of narrating the “legendary history” of the eponymous village that was his subject:

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. . . . English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before—but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

The dilemmas outlined by Rao have persisted in Indian-English fiction, creating three characteristic effects. The first is a preoccupation with evoking landscape and place that suggests that certain novels are written primarily to memorialize particular geographies. This is certainly true of Ayemenem, the setting of Roy’s The God of Small Things, which even has the same name as the small village in Kerala where her mother Mary’s family was settled, and owned a pickle factory. The second is the saturation of a narrative in English with the names of places, characters, and things that belong originally to another linguistic and cultural register, so that the narrative performs the function of “naturalizing” the two disparate systems and making them mutually compatible. The third is an interest in inflecting English with the speech rhythms of particular places, so that English novels written by authors from different regions in India sound very different from each other.

All these qualities come readily into view if we consider the beginnings of two classic Indian-English novels—Rao’s Kanthapura and Mulk Raj Anand’s Coolie (1936)—and compare them with the beginning of The God of Small Things. This is how Kanthapura opens:

Our village—I don’t think you’ve ever heard about it—Kanthapura is its name,
and it is in the province of Kara.

High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur and many a centre of cardamom and coffee, rice and sugarcane. Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haired valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambe and Champa and Mena and Kola passes into the great granaries of trade. There, on the blue waters, they say, our carted cardamoms and coffee get into the ships the Red-men bring, and, so they say, they go across the seven oceans into the countries where our rulers live.

This opening mentions a fictional place right at the beginning, but specifies exactly where it is on the West coast of India by naming a lot of other real places. Standard English syntax is altered to catch a particular speech rhythm, and the repetition of “they say” indicates that the narrator is going by hearsay, not first-hand knowledge. Colonialism is figured brilliantly and indirectly in the “Red-men” who bring the ships, and the countries across the seven seas where the rulers live. We also learn soon that the narrative voice belongs to an old woman from the village of Kanthapura in Karnataka in the 1920s, and so the language underlying her English is Kannada.

The beginning of Anand’s *Coolie* sets a different tone altogether.

“Munoo ohe Munooa oh Mundu!” shouted Gujri from the veranda of a squat, sequestered, little mud hut, thatched with straw, which stood upon the edge of a hill about a hundred yards away from the village in the valley. And her eagle-eyes explored the track of gold dust which worked its zigzag course through rough scrub, beyond the flat roofs of the village houses, under the relentless haze of the Kangra sun. She could not see him.

“Munoo ohe Munooa oh Mundu! Where have you died? Where have you drifted, you of the evil star? Come back! Your uncle is leaving soon, and you must go to town!” . . . . And her gaze travelled beyond the mango-grove to the silver line of the river Beas, and roved angrily among the greenery of the ferns and weeds and bushes that spread on either side of the stream against the purple gleam of the low hills.

Here the north Indian reader would know immediately that the speaker is a woman from a village in Punjab near the Beas river, that she’s annoyed with a young man who is absent when he should have been present, and that she has no hesitation in cursing him out soundly. “Where have you died” is a straight translation of a Punjabi and Hindi expostulation. The other conspicuous quality is the contrast between the crudity of the dramatized dialogue and the sophistication of the omniscient narrative voice—a juxtaposition that is very visible in Roy’s novel as well.

Almost exactly sixty years later, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* begins as follows.

May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month. The days are long and humid. The river shrinks and black crows gorge on bright mangoes in still, dustgreen trees.
Red bananas ripen. Jackfruits burst. Dissolute bluebottles hum vacuously in the fruity air. Then they stun themselves against clear windowpanes and die, fatly baffled in the sun.

The nights are clear, but suffused with sloth and sullen expectation.

But by early June the southwest monsoon breaks and there are three months of wind and water with short spells of sharp, glittering sunshine that thrilled children snatch to play with. The countryside turns an immodest green. Boundaries blur as tapioca fences take root and bloom. Brick walls turn mossgreen.

Like her precursors in the 1930s, Roy also specifies a place and a landscape immediately, but we only have to read the first paragraph to sense a fundamental change. Style and invention are now in the foreground. The focus is not only on what you are describing, but how you’re describing it. Phrases such as “dissolute bluebottles,” “fatly baffled,” and “immodest green” stand out, along with coinages like “dustgreen” and “mossgreen.” There are many very short sentences, not just here but throughout the novel. One major literary dimension of The God of Small Things, then, is the deliberate artistry with which English is used to evoke this special landscape.

There are several other language-related qualities particular to Roy’s writing that we should bear in mind when reading The God of Small Things. To begin with, she belongs to the first full generation of middle-and-upper class urban Indians who would have been educated primarily in English, making English their virtual first language or one of two first languages. In fact, the predominance of English in education and professional life now often puts the so-called “mother-tongue” in a subsidiary position, especially if it is not the writer’s creative medium. The adventurousness with language in The God of Small Things points to an author who is just more comfortable with the medium because she has been much closer to it than previous generations of Indian-English authors.

Furthermore, Roy is writing about the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, which would have a closer historical and sociological connection with English because of education and religious practice. The lore in the Ipe family about one of their ancestors being blessed by the Patriarch of Antioch, the figures of Father Mulligan the Irish priest and Kari Saipu the Black Sahib, Chacko’s Rhodes Scholarship at Oxford, his English wife Margaret and his half-English daughter Sophie, his job at Madras Christian College, etc., are signs of an internationalism and cosmopolitanism that are significantly mediated by Christianity and English. In contrast with a novel like Kanthapura or Coolie, therefore, The God of Small Things is populated by many characters whose dialogue is not “translated” because they would speak originally in English to each other, while also being fluent in Malayalam, the majority language of the state of Kerala. All the members of the Ipe family—Pappachi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, Ammu, Chacko, and the twins Estha and Rahel—belong to this group. Margaret and Sophie Mol are monolingual in English. The “untouchable” worker Velutha, his brother Kuttappan and his father Vellya Paapen, the cook Kochu Maria, and the workers at the Paradise Pickles and Preserves factory would be virtually monolingual in Malayalam, mainly because of their class. Comrade K. N. M. Pillai the Communist leader, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man at Abhilash Talkies in Cochin, and Inspector Thomas Matthew at the Kottayam Police Station are all threatening male figures who are bilingual, and use language strategically in their power games. Towns and cities in the novel carry Malayalam names; homes, businesses, and organizations are named mainly in
English. The English of *The God of Small Things* is generously leavened with Malayalam, and also evokes a world in which the two languages have completely penetrated each other.

At the deepest level of linguistic self-reflexivity, the novel mimics the cognitive processes by which language is acquired and understood, focusing on the consciousness of seven-year old fraternal twins who process English through Malayalam as well as their eccentric imaginations. After Sophie Mol’s funeral, for instance, Rahel describes the words on her tombstone: “A SUNBEAM LENT TO US TOO BRIEFLY,” and then adds, “Ammu explained later that Too Briefly meant For Too Short a While” (p. 9). When Chacko describes his father Pappachi as an “Anglophile,” the narrator tells us that “He made Rahel and Estha look up *Anglophile* in the *Reader’s Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary*. It said: Person well disposed to the English. Then Estha and Rahel had to look up *dispose*” (pp. 50-51). One of the twins’ favorite games is to “read words backwards,” a practice that transmutes the most ordinary English words into exotic gibberish, and the novel recreates the effects of such licence graphically by printing words in reverse on several occasions. In still other places, the narrative voice vividly captures the “misreading” that marks a child’s interpretive efforts when fear and anxiety intervene.

“If you ever, Ammu said, “and I mean this, EVER, ever again disobey me in Public, I will see to it that you are sent away to somewhere where you will jolly well learn to behave. Is that clear?”

When Ammu was really angry, she said Jolly Well. Jolly Well was a deeply well with larfing dead people in it. (P. 141).

The orthographic and semantic irregularities of this short passage—the italics, block letters, unexpected capitals, misspellings, and misinterpretations—exactly reproduce the jumble inside the head of a seven-year old who cannot bear to alienate her beautiful, vulnerable mother. The creative liberties Roy takes with all aspects of the English language in order to capture the voices of childhood are among the outstanding features of *The God of Small Things*.

In many respects, then, Roy’s preoccupations with place and language connect her firmly to the tradition of fiction in English inaugurated in the late colonial period by Anand and Rao; but in other important respects, she is part of postcolonial reconfigurations that have transformed the conditions of writing as well as reception for the Indian-English novelist. Well-known author Salman Rushdie is widely regarded as the crucial transitional figure in this respect, because the extraordinary success of his novel *Midnight’s Children* (1980) finally laid to rest a century-long debate about whether it was appropriate for Indians to write in English, or if they could create anything truly extraordinary in the language. For several decades Indian-English poets and novelists had been described as “rootless,” “alienated,” “inauthentic,” “pretentious,” “self-centered,” “over-privileged,” “snobbish,” “mediocre,” and “parasitical,” and had been accused of prostituting themselves for the sake of national and international attention. These objections became more or less moot after the appearance of *Midnight’s Children*, which was also, ironically, the first major novel by an author of Indian origin to concern itself with the *history of modern India as a whole*. In this seminal work, the “Western” language became a means of intense connection rather than alienation from the nation, and this propensity for thinking in “national” rather than “regional” terms has marked many major novels that have followed in the wake of *Midnight’s Children*. 
Rushdie was also paradigmatic of another crucial change in creative contexts—the emergence of a postcolonial Indian diaspora in Britain, Europe, and North America, and the appearance of a host of diasporic novelists who achieved international prominence with unprecedented rapidity. Rushdie had left India at the early age of thirteen to be educated in England; he later took British citizenship, married an upper-class Englishwoman, and published his fiction with major British presses. More recent immigrant authors have typically left India as adults and often retained their Indian citizenship, but their literary careers have followed a similar trajectory because they have had access to the same leading Western publishers and international audiences. There are also a few second-generation fiction writers, such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, who have been born and/or brought up in the West, and both have made impressive entries onto the literary scene (Lahiri with a Pulitzer Prize in 2000, and Desai with a Booker prize in 2006). “Indian-English fiction” has therefore been rebranded now as “postcolonial anglophone fiction by authors of the global Indian diaspora,” and many of these authors have dual or multiple countries of residence even as they keep up an unwavering engagement with India-as-subject. Roy, for her part, has continued to live in Delhi, but in terms of subject, style, and audience, there is no qualitative difference between her fiction and that of a full-fledged diasporic author such as Rushdie.

The remarkable visibility of Indian/Indian diaspora authors on the current international literary scene can be gauged from the following chronological list, which begins with an author born in 1937 and ends with one born in 1974. Each author’s name is followed by the country or countries of extended residence, and the major literary awards he or she has received.

Anita Desai (b. 1937). India, UK, USA. Sahitya Akademi Award given by Indi’s National Academy of Letters), Alberto Moravia Literary Prize.
Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940 ). India, Canada, USA. National Book Critics Circle Award.
Salman Rushdie (b. 1947). India, UK, USA. Booker Prize, Booker of Bookers, Best of the Booker, Mantua Prize, James Joyce Award, Whitbread Award, etc.
Vikram Seth (b. 1952). India, USA. Commonwealth Writers Prize, Smith Literary Award, Crossword Book Award, EMMA Award, etc.
Rohinton Mistry (b. 1952). India, Canada. Governor General’s Award, Commonwealth Writers Prize (twice), Kiriyama Book Prize, Neustadt Prize.
Amitav Ghosh (b. 1956). India, UK, Egypt, USA.
Shashi Tharoor (b. 1956). India, Switzerland, Singapore, USA. Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasian Region).
Chitra Banerji Divakaruni (b. 1956). India, USA. Pushcart Prize, American Book Award.
Pico Iyer (b. 1957). UK, USA.
Mukul Kesavan (b. 1958). India.
Manil Suri (b. 1959). India, USA. Barnes & Noble Discover Award.
Upamanyu Chatterjee (b. 1959). India. Sahitya Akademi Award.
Vikram Chandra (b. 1961). India, USA. Commonwealth Writers Prize.
Amit Chaudhuri (b. 1962). India, USA, UK. Commonwealth Writers Prize, LA Times Book Prize, Sahitya Akademi Award.
Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967). USA. Pulitzer Prize, O. Henry Award, PEN/Hemingway Award, Frank O’Connor Short Story Award, etc.
Hari Kunzru (b. 1969). India, UK.
Pankaj Mishra (b. 1969). India. LA Times Art Seidenbaum Award.
Kiran Desai (b. 1971). India, USA. Booker Prize.
Arvind Adiga (b. 1974). Booker prize.

This community of authors is marked by many notable features. All of its members are currently living, and sixteen of the twenty authors were born between 1952 and 1969. With the exception of the Nobel Prize, they have won every major Western and Indian literary prize between them. Arundhati Roy appears towards the end of the list as one of the younger members of the community, and is among a handful of authors (Hari Kunzru and Arvind Adiga being two others) who have published only one work of fiction to date. This fact, not remarkable in itself, is remarkable in the case of Arundhati Roy because in the fifteen years since *The God of Small Things* received the Booker Prize, she has published eleven book-length works relating to her activist political work. Roy has even remarked that she is essentially a public intellectual whose oeuvre includes one novel, and that the novel should be seen in relation to all her other political work. She may, or may not, then, publish another work of fiction—but she is, now and for the foreseeable future, a passionately engaged citizen of the world whose first and only novel can be counted among the contemporary world’s “great texts.”