

INDIAN FICTION – 19th Century

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Overview

Short pieces of fiction (sketches, short stories and the like) dominated the first half of the century. Longer narratives, with realism and a contemporary setting, appeared from the 1860s, often serialised in journals, and mostly in the metropolitan centres of Calcutta and Madras. By the turn of the century, a shift had occurred: the function of literature was no longer to display skill and incite pleasure, but to inform and to instruct. The social issues taken up by these early novelists were serious, from child-marriage to colonialism.

Urdu

Genres Urdu writers in the first half of the century continued the tradition of writing fiction in the Indo-Persian genres of *qissa/dastan* and *masnavi*. As before, they drew on a considerable repertoire of stories from both Persian and Indian literature. However, it is not always appreciated that novels in Urdu also benefited from other, short genres such as *lata'if* (witticism) and *naqliyat* (fable), as well as anecdotes and comic sketches. From 1800 to the 1830s, numerous collections of all these brief prose narrative genres were published by the British, aided by Urdu scholars, at Fort William College in Calcutta.

Novels These short pieces of fiction, along with other better-known sources, such as Indian mythology and Persian legends, contributed to the later, full-length novels written in Urdu. In some cases, a humorous sketch was simply incorporated into a novel. An example is *Fasana-i-Azad* ('Story of Azad', 1878) by Ratannath Sarshar, one of the leading Urdu novelists of the nineteenth century. For the opening scenes, Sarshar simply borrowed two comic sketches he had previously published, one about a schoolmaster and the father of a poor student, the other about a poetry competition. Another example is *Fasana-i-Mubtala* ('Story of an Afflicted Person', 1885) by Nazir Ahmad. Midway through the novel, the author throws in a scene in which a troupe of entertainers enacts a mock prayer ritual.

Bengali

Early fiction A not dissimilar situation lay at the heart of the development of Bengali fiction in the nineteenth century. Again in Calcutta, early parodies and farcical writing paved the way for novels, although this time the short pieces were published in journals and newspapers. This kind of satire in Bengali was usually called *naksha* (from the Persian *naqshah*). The object of the parody was often the western-educated, Bengali urban clerk or office worker, the famous 'babu' who is spoiled, pretentious and often ridiculous. An early example is *Nababubilas* ('The New Babus' Merry-Making,' 1825) by Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay, which is a merciless parody of the poor babu. A later example, published serially between 1855- 1857, is *Alaler Gharer Dulal* ('The Spoilt Son of a First-Rate Family') by Pyarichand Mitra. This text, written with the talismanic social realism, forms a bridge from the early writings to the later, famous Bengali novels.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay The life of Bengali's greatest early novelist, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894) sums up the transitional nature of this century. Born in an orthodox Brahmin family, he was educated in English at Presidency College (now University of Calcutta) and became a magistrate in the Indian Civil Service until his retirement in 1891, but still found time to run a Bengali-language newspaper and write novels that are read today. One of his novels (*Anandamath*) contained a song ('Bande Mataram, 'Hail to thee, Mother') that became the rallying cry for Indian independence.

Bankim's novels Bankim's first novel was written in 1864 in English and was soon forgotten. His first Bengali novel, *Durgensandini*, came a year later and, though somewhat clunky and melodramatic, was wildly popular and began the modern Indian novel. He went on to write a dozen more novels, mostly historical romances, with the inevitable triumph of Hindus over Muslim oppression, but also a few on social themes. He also pioneered the autobiographical narrative (as in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*). Most scholars, confirming the author's own assessment, agree that his 'best' novel, or that which most approximates the modern genre in plotting and characterisation, is *Krishnakanter Uil* (*Krishnakanta's Will*, 1878).

Rabindranath Tagore Although Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) is better known as a poet, he also made a considerable contribution to Bengali fiction in this century through his exquisite short stories. In the 1890s he wrote and published dozens of stories, some of which showcase his wit, technical skill and powers of observation. The 'Kabuliwallah' ('Fruitseller from Kabul') is a moving story, in which the eponymous trader

speaks in the first person of his life in his adopted city of Calcutta and of his friendship with a four-year-old girl, who reminds him of his daughter back home in Kabul. An even more affecting story (filmed by S. Ray as 'Charulata') is 'Nastanirh' ('The Broken Nest'), which dissects the loneliness of a middle-class Calcutta family.

Tamil

Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai A first, somewhat clumsy, attempt at a novel in Tamil was made by Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai (1826-1889) with his *Piratapa Mutaliyar Carittiram* ('The Story of Piratapa Mutaliyar', 1885). The author was acquainted with both English and French literature, but the material and point of view for his novel came from his observations of life as a district judge. Unfortunately, he was not a creative writer, and he only managed to string together a series of improbably romantic episodes, interrupted by his homilies for reform. Nevertheless, and again despite the scholarly language, it was an important experiment.

Rajam Aiyer An altogether different man and writer was Rajam Aiyer (1872-1898), a Brahmin who wrote the first 'real' novel in Tamil, one that is now regarded as a classic. The plot of *Kamalampal Carittiram* ('The Fatal Rumour' or 'The Story of Kamalampal', 1893-1895) is a little implausible and the solution even more so, and it uses somewhat stilted prose. Nonetheless, it succeeds in creating believable characters. The author describes the petty nature of some people, but also the genuine grief and confusion of others. It is a novel of critical realism, something that few other Tamil writers have managed to produce till this day. It uncovers the injustice of a woman's position in a rural Brahmin family, but it does so with wit and panache.

Malayalam

Indulekha Early novels in Malayalam (the language of Kerala) are also mostly concerned with social issues. Considered the iconic early novel in this language, *Indulekha* (1889) by Chandu Menon (1847-1899) tells the story of the eponymous heroine, who defies convention and marries a man from another caste. Written by a high-caste man about high-castes, this novel of social reform replicates many late 19th-century novels in other languages.

Christian-convert novels Malayalam, however, also has a more interesting set of novels that depict the problems of caste inequality, slavery and women's oppression from a low-caste, christian-convert perspective. This is not unexpected since Europeans first came to India (in 1498) on the coast of what is now Kerala, and Christianity has influenced the literature and culture of that region more than any other part of the country. Two of these unusual novels are: *Saraswativijayam* ('The Victory of Knowledge,' 1892) by Pothiri Kunhambu and *Sukumari* ('Sukumari', 1897) by Joseph Muliyaal. Both begin with a death, something missing in the rosy-picture of *Indulekha*, and both are narrated in gritty detail.

Hindi

The detective novel, an overlooked strand of Indian fiction writing, surfaced in Hindi in the last decade of the century. Earlier fiction had elements of the detective novel (a crime and its solution), but in these fin de siècle works, suspense dominates and, crucially, the narration does not give everything away. A significant practitioner of this new kind of fiction was Devki Nandan Khatri (1861-1913), whose *Chandrakanta* (1888) is considered the first example of modern Hindi prose. Less well-known, however, is his detective novel *Virendravir athva Katora Bhara Khun* ('Virendravir or A Bowl of Blood', 1895), which may owe a large debt to Sherlock Holmes. The storytelling is skilfully handled by beginning in medias res (highly unusual at the time) and manipulating the point of view from third to first person.

Questions/Discussion

1. Very many of the early novels in India are named after the heroine (Kamamalpal in Tamil, Chandrakanta in Hindi and Indulekha in Malayalam, to name just a few). Is this unusual in world literature? If so, what does it suggest about Indian literature?
2. Many of these same novels, and others as well, are written in an early form of what we would call social realism. For more than two thousand years, poetry, myth and folk tales had dominated the literary imagination. Then, within three decades of its beginnings in the 1860s, this new genre had become a critical and popular fashion. What are the antecedents, if any, for this apparently radical shift in Indian literary history?

Reading

Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Early Novels in India* (Sahitya Akademi, 2002)

Sisir Kumar Das, *History of Indian Literature, 1800–1910. Western Impact, Indian Response* (Sahitya Akademi, 1991)

Stuart Blackburn and Vasudha Dalmia (eds.), *India's Literary History: Essays on the Nineteenth Century* (Permanent Black, 2004)

Text

From 'Nastanirh' by Tagore, trans. Lopa Banerjee

Bhupati had inherited a lot of money and generous ancestral property, so it was quite natural if he didn't bother to work at all. By sheer destiny, however, he was born a workaholic. He had founded an elite English newspaper and that was how he decided to cope with the boredom that his riches and time, which was endlessly at his disposal, brought to him.

Since childhood, Bhupati had a flair for writing and rhetoric and would relentlessly write letters to the editors of English newspapers. He also loved speaking in assemblies, even when he didn't have anything significant to add to the discourses.

Years passed by, and he grew increasingly confident and eloquent in his English composition and oratorical skills, which was further nourished as he continued to receive accolades and support from influential political leaders. They loved him as he was rich and accomplished and wanted him to join their ilk.

Eventually, his brother-in-law Umapati, a frustrated and failed lawyer, came to him with a plea: "Bhupati, it's high time you publish your own newspaper. You possess the perfect background and necessary skills for it."

Bhupati was not only convinced but even inspired by the proposal. He believed getting published in newspapers and journals, that were run by other people, was demeaning. As the owner of his own publication, he could wield his pen and his own persona, liberated, uninhibited, and complete. With his brother-in-law to assist him, he embraced his new role as the founder and editor of a new publication.

Bhupati was young, passionate about his editorial work, current affairs and world politics to the point of addiction, and there was no dearth of people to arouse his passion for dissenting on an everyday basis.