

INDIAN FICTION

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Classical

Overview

Fiction produced during the classical period usually took the form of a moral story or fable, known in India as *nithikatha*, which is largely in prose, although sometimes the ‘lesson’ itself is in verse. Nearly all these numerous stories began as oral tales before being collected and written down in manuscripts by scribes and scholars. The collections often use what is called a ‘frame-story’ to give a narrative coherence to the otherwise disparate tales. These originally oral tales were collected and redacted in manuscript form sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era. Some were composed in Pali, but most were in Sanskrit, although all were eventually written down in every Indian language.

Pancatantra

Contents The *Pancatantra* (‘Five-Books’) is a collection of nearly 100 animal fables. The frame-story is that a pundit instructs three ignorant princes in the art of statecraft, using these moral stories as lessons. The work is divided into five sections, each focusing on an aspect of statecraft, although each has more general significance. The five topics are: The Separation of Friends, The Gaining of Friends, War and Peace, Loss of Gains and ill-Considered Action. Each of these sections is itself introduced by a frame-story, within which animals take turns telling a story.

History Although scholars suggest that the ‘original’ version of the *Pancatantra* was composed between about 200 BCE and 200 CE, the earliest manuscript (now lost) was a Pahlavi (Middle Persian) version written in 570 CE. The oldest surviving version of the *Pancatantra* in an Indian language is a Sanskrit text found in Kashmir, edited by a Jain monk and dated 1199 CE. This influential version is considered the first ‘clean’ copy since the Jain scholar apparently consulted all extant manuscripts before producing his master copy.

Popularity The popularity of the stories derives from the fact that they are believed to be the advice of a Brahmin, delivered in classical Sanskrit and addressing fundamental dilemmas of life. They function not only as admonitions on statecraft (like the 16th c. Italian text *The Prince*) and princely education, but also as entertaining tales about daily life.

Diffusion Stories in the *Pancatantra* diffused throughout India, where they are still found in every one of its major languages, in both oral and printed forms. Some tales have an international spread and have been recorded as far away as China and Wales. The chain of transmission began when a Sanskrit version was translated into Persian in the 6th c. CE, followed by translations into Syriac, Arabic, Greek, Latin, Spanish and other major languages of

Europe, where it was often called *The Fables of Bidpai* (or *Pilpai*). The first known English publication was the *Morall Philosophie of Doniin* 1570 CE.

Famous story One of most famous and popular stories (included in the section on ‘Ill-Considered Action’) is known as the ‘Brahmin and the Mongoose.’ It describes how a Brahmin’s wife rashly kills a mongoose that she believed had threatened her child. She then discovers her mistake (the child is untouched and the animal innocent) when her Brahmin husband speaks to her. Indeed, she discovers that, in fact, the mongoose had protected her child from a snake. This story, which is found as far west as Wales and is depicted in Indian temple sculpture, is type 178A in the Aarne-Thompson classification of international folk-tales.

Jataka

Lives of the Buddha The *Jataka* tales are similar to those in the *Pancatantra* (some tales are found in both collections), with the important difference that they were adapted to tell the story of the previous lives of the historical Buddha. In most variants of the *Jataka* stories, each tale has a similar structure. First there is a folktale in prose, in which the Buddha-to-be appears as one of the characters, either human or animal. This is then followed by a brief commentary in verse that links the story to an aspect of the Buddha’s teaching

Origins Linguistic analysis suggests that the composition of the *Jataka* tales in Pali (the language of early Buddhist scriptures) began in the 2nd or 3rd century BCE. Several recognisable tales are sculpted in stone on Buddhist monuments dating from that period. The stories are also found scattered throughout the Buddhist Pali canon (the *Tripitaka*, or ‘Three Baskets’), including 35 that were collected for religious instruction and form one section of that canon.

Jataka Katha The most influential redaction of the tales was compiled many centuries later, in the 5th century CE by Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka. This collection of about 550 tales, the *Jataka Katha*, is traditionally ascribed to a Sinhalese Buddhist monk named Buddhaghosa. Interestingly, the earliest surviving manuscript of this text is a Chinese translation from Tibetan also dated to the 5th century CE.

Jatakamala Among other influential compilation of these tales is the *Jatakamala* (c. 400 CE) ascribed to Arya Sura. Several caves at Ellora, near Bombay and datable to about 700 CE, contain scenes of the *Jataka* tales and quotations from this particular text. This Sanskrit text contains 34 tales that illustrate the ‘perfections’ of the Buddha, a concept developed largely in Mahayana Buddhism. Curiously, however, this influential variant of the stories does not include the crucial ‘frame-story.’

Diffusion While these Buddhist morality stories did not travel as widely as the more secular *Pancatantra*, several versions of the collection exist, for example, in Tibetan, Persian, Sinhalese, Thai and Burmese. A 9th-century CE stupa at Borobudur on Java has the 34 stories of the *Jatakamala* carved in stone.

Popular tale One of the most popular *Jataka* tales is called ‘Prince Sattva.’ In this story, the Bodhisattva (‘Buddha-to-be’) sees a starving tigress about to eat her own cubs. In desperation, the Bodhisattva kills himself, offering his flesh to the animal, so that she and her children might live. When the Bodhisattva’s disciples see what has happened, they praise his generosity and lack of selfishness.

Legacy

Although some scholars assume that these early examples of story writing evolved into the modern short story and novel, there is actually little evidence for this pleasing idea. While some content was borrowed by modern writers, the inspiration for modern novels and short stories came mainly from other, more contemporary sources.

Questions

1. The trail of the *Pancatantra* leads from India to Europe, and some early Indian stories found their way into European oral tradition. Not many, however. How do stories cross linguistic and cultural borders? Does it really, as the cliché goes, take only one bilingual person? Why do some stories migrate and others do not?
2. The *Jataka* tales were used to spread Buddhism, although monks also studied philosophical and theological texts (called *sutras*).

Compare the tales with those other philosophical texts, especially the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Choose one specific tale and analyse its language and message with the more official texts.

3. The frame-story is a common literary device that gives coherence to an otherwise disparate collection of tales. Compare the frame-stories of the *Pancatantra* and the *Jataka* with the frame-stories in other famous story collections, such as the *Arabian Nights*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Decameron*.

Reading

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Texts

1. The story of the loyal Mongoose, from the *Pancatantra*, trans. Ryder

There was once a Brahman named Godly in a certain town. His wife mothered a single son and a mongoose. And as she loved little ones, she cared for the mongoose also like a son, giving him milk from her breast, and salves, and baths, and so on. But she did not trust him, for she thought: 'A mongoose is a nasty kind of creature. He might hurt my boy.' Yes, there is sense in the proverb:

A son will ever bring delight,
Though bent on folly, passion, spite.
Though shabby, naughty, and a fright.

One day she tucked her son in bed, took a water-jar, and said to her husband: 'Now, Professor, I am going for water. You must protect the boy from the mongoose.' But when she was gone, the Brahman went off somewhere himself to beg food, leaving the house empty.

While he was gone, a black snake issued from his hole and, as fate would have it, crawled toward the baby's cradle. But the mongoose, feeling him to be a natural enemy, and fearing for the life of his baby brother, fell upon the vicious serpent halfway, joined battle with him, tore him to bits, and tossed the pieces far and wide. Then, delighted with his own heroism, he ran, blood trickling from his mouth, to meet the mother; for he wished to show what he had done.

But when the mother saw him coming, saw his bloody mouth and his excitement, she feared that the villain must have eaten her baby boy, and without thinking twice, she angrily dropped the water-jar upon him, which killed him the moment that it struck. There she left him without a second thought, and hurried home, where she found the baby safe and sound, and near the cradle a great black snake, torn to bits. Then, overwhelmed with sorrow because she had thoughtlessly killed her benefactor, her son, she beat her head and breast.

At this moment the Brahman came home with a dish of rice gruel which he had got from someone in his begging tour, and saw his wife bitterly lamenting her son, the mongoose. 'Greedy! Greedy!' she cried. 'Because you did not do as I told you, you must now taste the bitterness of a son's death, the fruit of the tree of your own wickedness. Yes, this is what happens to those blinded by greed. For the proverb says:

Indulge in no excessive greed
(A little helps in time of need) —
A greedy fellow in the world

Found on his head a wheel that whirled.'

2. From the *Jataka Tales*, trans. HT Francis and EJ Thomas

Once on a time at the foot of a certain mountain there were living together in one and the same cave two friends, a lion and a tiger. The Bodhisattva too was living at the foot of the same hill, as a hermit.

Now one day a dispute arose between the two friends about the cold. The tiger said it was cold in the dark half of the month, whilst the lion maintained that it was cold in the light half. As the two of them together could not settle the question, they put it to the Bodhisattva. He repeated this stanza:

In light or dark half, whensoever the wind
Doth blow, 'tis cold. For cold is caused by wind.
And, therefore, I decide you both are right.

Thus did the Bodhisatta make peace between those friends.

EARLY POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

Fiction flourished during this period, in which we find texts that are 'narrative-driven' and begin to resemble modern fiction. Although many texts are dull and pedantic romances, several influential story collections appeared in Sanskrit, Tamil and the little-understood language of Paisaci. The Sanskrit authors were patronised by minor courts that formed after the breakup of the Gupta Empire, while nearly all the Tamil writers were Jains connected to the Pallava or Chola courts.

Genre Fiction in Sanskrit used two styles, both considered *kavya*, a term commonly associated with classical Sanskrit lyric verse. However, it also encompasses two sub-genres of fiction storytelling. One could be called 'narrative poetry' because it uses easy but polished verse. The other could be called 'poetic prose' because it uses an ornate prose known as *katha*, which was very different to the simple prose of the *Jatakas* and *Pancatantra*. Tamil fiction continued to use epic poetry, but with a strong emphasis on storytelling.

Narrative poetry: Brhatkatha

Paradox The *Brhatkatha* ('The Great Story') is one of those paradoxes of Indian literary history: an absent text that is omnipresent. Tradition maintains that this vast collection of stories was written by a little-known Jain monk (Gunādhyā) in an extinct language (Paisaci) at the court of a kingdom (Sattavahana) whose dates are far from certain. Nevertheless, this now-lost text influenced most subsequent narrative traditions in India, north and south.

History Based on references from dated texts, notably Dandin's *Dasakumaracarita*, most scholars place the composition of the *Brhatkatha* in the 6th or 7th century CE. What we do know is that this foundation text was later adapted and appeared in several influential collections in the following centuries. The most famous of these adaptations, in Sanskrit, is the *Kathasaritsagara*, but there are also versions in Pali (the language of Theravada Buddhists), Prakrit, Apabhramsa (a regional dialect of Prakrit) and Tamil.

Poetic prose: Dandin

Dasakumaracarita The most impressive and perhaps influential prose work of this period is Dandin's *Dasakumaracarita* ('The Tales of the Ten Princes'). This entertaining story, written in Sanskrit in the 7th century CE, is a collection of exciting tales held together by a frame-story, which reveals its debt to oral tradition. The language of the *Dasakumaracarita* is comparatively uncomplicated Sanskrit. Extended compounds are numerous (the lasting effect of the ornamentation so loved by Sanskrit poets), but the incredibly long, page-filling sentences of other writers in the period are absent.

Contents The tales of the ten princes themselves are mostly secular, often amoral and usually humorous, a little like the ethos of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The characters are sharply-drawn, and much of the interest in the story lies in the realistic treatment of the people with whom the ten princes interact. Again, like Chaucer, we are introduced to merchants, prostitutes, wild hill people, thieves, peasants and scholars.

Poetic prose: Subandhu and Bana

Subandhu A contemporary and admirer of Dandin, Subandhu is known for only one surviving work, the *Vasavadatta*. This Sanskrit play describes the vicissitudes of the love of its eponymous heroine for a prince. While lacking the storytelling skills of Dandin, this prose author did write memorable descriptions, obviously borrowed from poetic genres of the time. However, his long-winded sentences sometimes run to more than two pages.

Bana Bana was the court poet of Harsha, whose kingdom dominated north India in the 7th century CE. Bana is known for two prose works: *Kadambari* (a romance) and *Harshacarita* (a biography). *Kadambari* might be seen as a deliberate attempt to improve on Subandhu's prose for it, too, is a romance narrated through a sequence of loosely linked scenes told with elaborate figures of speech. It is one of most story-driven texts of premodern India, indulging in a plot of multiple sets of separated lovers, past lives, talking parrots, apparent deaths and miraculous resurrections. Remarkably, the story is incomplete and was only finished by Bana's son, whose prose style does not match that of his father.

Tamil epic poetry

Perunkatai The Tamil retelling of the *Brhatkatha* is the *Perunkatai* ('Great Story'). From references to this text in other Tamil sources, we can date it to the 8th or 9th century CE. It was written by Konkuvelir, a Jain scholar as evidenced by the Jain maxims and terminology that fill the text (remember that the original *Brhatkatha* was also written by a Jain). The 16,000 verses use a common Tamil metre (*akaval*).

Contents The story told in *Perunkatai*, as with contemporary Sanskrit works in poetic prose, is a loosely connected series of court romances with a religious message. Princes and princesses fall in love, are unfaithful and suffer tragic loss, but manage to fly around in chariots and enjoy the pleasures of affluence. The kingdom, however, declines into chaos, until all is righted when the main characters become Jain monks and nuns. Although the story is not well-constructed, it avoids pure propaganda, and the author draws his characters with skill.

Civakacintamani A second, major Tamil narrative epic poem of this period is the *Civakacintāmaṇi* ('The Glorious Civaka'). It, too, was written by a Jain scholar (Tirutakkatevar), and it, too, borrows from Sanskrit originals as well as the *Perunkatai*. In turn, the beauty of its 3000-plus verses influenced the greatest of all Tamil epic poems, the *Ramayana* by Kamban (12th c. CE). The story of *Civakacintamani* is one of court intrigue, assassination and fatherless children. The child is the eponymous Civaka, who wades through a series of love affairs, but eventually avenges his father's death, wins back the kingdom and (like a good Jain hero) renounces the world.

Nilakeci Yet another Tamil epic poem by a Jain in this period is *Nilakeci*, which is a counter-blast to *Kundalakeci*, a lost Buddhist epic poem in Tamil. The *Nilakeci* tells the story of a demoness of the same name, who is known in Tamil folk religion but in this story is converted to Jainism. The nearly 900 stanzas were composed in the 10th century CE. The text is interesting primarily for what it reveals about sectarian disputes during the period.

Culamani *Culamani* ('The Crown Jewel') is yet another Tamil epic poem composed by a Jain in this period (probably the 10th century CE). However, this 2,000-verse epic uses existing folk-tale episodes (including the core motif of a prediction that a prince will marry a fairy-princess) to lead up to the predictable ending in which the hero renounces the world and gains release.

Questions

1. The Western literary genres of poetry and prose do not easily map onto Indian genres. *Kavya*, the overarching category for several different poetic and prose forms, is a case in point. Does this difference in terminology matter? Is it simply semantics? Or does it reveal a deeper conceptual difference between cultures?
2. Many of the story collections written during this period are rearrangements of earlier texts. What does this literary recycling reveal about Indian literature? Can we still speak of 'creativity' and 'literary skill' in such traditional literature?

3. Each of the four narrative epic poems in Tamil during this period was written by a Jain, and yet it is fair to say that Jain influence is absent in modern Tamil literature. Trace the history of Jainism in south India by following its literary trail.

Reading

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Text

From *Dasakumaracarita* XI, trans. by A.L. Basham

When this was done, she put the grains of rice in a shallow wide-mouthed, round-bellied mortar, took a long and heavy pestle of acacia-wood, its head shod with a plate of iron. With skill and grace she exerted her arms, as the grains jumped up and down in the mortar. Repeatedly, she stirred them and pressed them down with her fingers; then she shook the grains in a winnowing basket to remove the beards, rinse them several times, worshipped the hearth, and place them in water which had been five times brought to the boil. When the rice softened, bubbled and swelled, she drew the embers of the fire together, put a lid on the cooking pot, and strained off the gruel....

LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

During these centuries between the advent of Islam and the foundation of the Mughal Empire, Indian writers continued to produce ever more versions of the popular tale collections (*Pancatantra*, *Jataka* and *Brhatkatha*). One key difference, however, is that now those redactions were written in regional language as well as Sanskrit and Tamil. Indeed, by the end of this period, Sanskrit ceases to generate any new, major literary work. Jain influence in the southern languages was prominent, while in the north, writers produced a series of adaptations of Indian texts using Persian genres and metres.

Sanskrit

Kathasaritsagara ('The Ocean of Streams of Story') is a 12th-century version of the earlier (and lost) text known as *Brhatkatha*, but it also draws on the entire repertoire of Sanskrit story literature, including tales from the *Pancatantra*. Like those earlier texts, the *Kathasaritsagara* is a rambling compendium of tales, legends and the supernatural composed in an easy metre with prose sections interspersed. The author, Somadeva, put the story of a legendary prince at the centre of his narrative and built a number of other stories around it.

Vetalapancavimsati One section of the *Kathasaritsagara* that later found its way into most regional languages is the *Vetalapancavimsati* ('Twenty-Five Tales of a Vampire').

The story centres on a king who is tricked into helping an ascetic perform an esoteric ritual and is tasked with retrieving a corpse, which is hanging from a tree. When the unsuspecting king carries the corpse on his back, he finds it is inhabited by a 'spirit' (the *vetala* of the title). Fortunately, for the king, the *vetala* is a good storyteller and proceeds to narrate a series of 25 stories. Unfortunately, each story contains a riddle, which if the king cannot solve will result in his death. The series ends when the king fails to solve a riddle and walks away in resigned silence, an act of bravery that inspires the *vetala* to tell him how to outwit the ascetic, who had been planning to sacrifice him.

Hitopadesa The *Hitopadesa* is another Sanskrit collection of tales. Rather than the entertaining adventures of the vampire tales, however, this text is a series of moral fables. The primary source for this text is the *Pancatantra*,

borrowing not only many of its tales but also its frame-story. Like many of these story collections that borrow from earlier texts, the dating of the *Hitopadesa* is difficult. Some scholars, relying on internal references to other texts, favour the 9th or 10th century CE, but as the earliest surviving manuscript carries a date of 1377 CE, a later date seems reasonable.

Indo-Persian

Masnavi Indo-Persian writers of the period adapted the *masnavi* genre (rhyming couplets in a religious poem), made famous in Persia by Rumi, to tell stories based on Indian folk tales. One of the earliest is the *Esq-nama* by HasanDehlavi of Delhi (13th-14th c. CE), which was inspired by an oral tale from Rajasthan. This synthesis of Persian literary genre with Indian story content is characteristic of much of the literature of north India in this period.

Tuti-Nama Another famous adaptation from Sanskrit story literature is the ‘Story of the Parrot’ (*TutiNama*) by Nakhshabi in the 14th century CE. Nakhshabi’s life is typical of many during this period. A Persian physician born in Persia, he migrated to north India and found patronage under a minor Muslim ruler. While still in Persia, he had translated a Sanskrit version of the story (*Sukasaptati*, ‘Story of 70 Parrots’) and then adapted this to write the *TutiNama*. In his text, a single parrot tells 52 tales over as many nights in order to prevent its mistress from having a love affair while her husband is away (a delaying tactic of storytelling familiar to us from the *Thousand and One Nights*).

Tamil

A major Tamil text in which the art of storytelling is displayed in this period is *Kalingattuparani* written by Jayamkantar in the 12th century CE. Although this is essentially a ‘war poem’ (celebrating a famous victory by a Chola king over a northern king), it is an example of what we today would call ‘historical fiction.’ The author describes in detail the birth and maturity of his hero, followed by his military training and the campaigns that lead up to his ‘invasion’ of the north. The battle itself is fierce, leaving hundreds of men and elephants slaughtered. The victorious king has prayed to goddess Kali, and now she and her horde of hungry ghosts descend on the battlefield to gorge themselves on the flesh. All this is narrated in brisk, two-line stanzas that propel the story forward.

Kannada

Janna A major Kannada writer of the period is known simply as Janna (13th c. CE) because he was a Jain (as were many other writers in south India at this time). Janna was both a court poet and an architect responsible for the building of several Jain temples. His patron, the Hoysalaking VeeraBallala II, is also important because Kannada literature achieved its ‘Golden Age’ during his reign.

YashodharaCharite Janna’s masterpiece is the *YashodharaCharite*, a narrative poem borrowing episodes from Sanskrit literature. In Janna’s hands, the story becomes a vehicle for dramatizing Jain values and beliefs. The cycle of life-and-birth is endured without finding release because the main characters do not live according the primary Jain precept of non-violence. In one famous episode, a king plans to sacrifice two young boys to a goddess, but then relents. In another, a king kills his friend and steals his wife, who then dies of grief, prompting the king to burn himself on the widow’s funeral pyre.

Nemichandra A second influential Kannada writer who produced fiction in this period is Nemichandra. Unsurprisingly, he was patronised by the same Hoysala king (VeeraBallala II) who supported Janna. Nemichandra is best remembered for his *Lilavati* (c. 1170 CE), not to be confused with a mathematics treatise with the same title written about the same time).

Inspired by the earlier Sanskrit work *Vasavadatta* by Subhandu in the 7th century CE, *Lilavati* is a romance in which a prince and princess carry on a love affair through dreams, until, after suitably long delays, they meet and marry.

Telugu

Vikramarkacharitramu Among the many story collections written in Telugu in this period, *Vikramarkacharitramu* (‘Story of Vikramaditya’) is representative. Tales about a legendary king Vikramaditya appear to have circulated in Sanskrit and other languages from the early centuries of the Christian era before being anthologised in the great story collection of *Kathasaritsagara*. The stories, familiar from that collection, involve a

series of adventures by the eponymous king, who must escape vampires, disloyal servants, undeserved curses and treacherous women.

Questions/Discussion

1. Fiction in Indian literature before the influence of European literature is found mainly in oral stories written down and in 'historical fiction' in which a king's life is embellished by the author's imagination. How do these narrative forms differ from fiction written during this period in Europe? When does 'fiction' in the modern sense appear in English, German, French?
2. Indo-Persian writers did more or less the same thing as their native-born Indian writers: they adapted pre-existing, mostly Sanskrit, Indian story literature. However, they often used genres borrowed from Persian. How did this use of genre influence the fiction they wrote?

Reading

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EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Overview

Fiction writing in India took a variety of forms during this period. Historical fiction in Indo-Persian genres (*qissa/dastan* and *masnavi*) flourished at Muslims courts in Delhi and the Deccan, while an emphasis on romance and adventure features in a number of significant prose poems. Historical ballads also appeared, largely from Hindu writers and mainly in Tamil and Telugu. Themes of war and heroism appear to reflect the almost continuous warfare between Hindu, Muslim and European armies. Finally, a ground-breaking prose story was written in Tamil in the mid-18th century, though it did not appear in print until the following century. The stage was thus set for the emergence of Indian modern fiction.

Indo-Persian

Hamzanama The *Hamzanama* (or *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*, 'Adventures of Amir Hamza') is representative of the multiple literary and cultural influences that converge in this period. The picaresque text draws on the Indo-Persian genre of oral storytelling (*dastan/qissa*) to narrate the story of Amir Hamza, the legendary uncle of the prophet Muhammad. The hero is put through a series of escapades, including narrow escapes from deceitful friends and dangerous animals. Many versions of the work circulated orally and in manuscript, but a canonical text was produced when an illustrated Persian manuscript was commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar in about 1562 CE.

Padmavat Another multi-layered historical narrative in this period, with many versions and influences, is the *Padmavat*. Epic in scope, like the *Hamzanama* (and other narratives of the period), it is a fictionalised account of a 14th-century battle between a Hindu king and a Muslim attacker. Although written from a Hindu point of view, it shows the influence of Indo-Persian literary models. The story turns the bare bones of history into a morality tale that expresses the joy of transcendental love and the union of a human soul with god. We have a 1540 CE manuscript written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi in Awadhi (a north Indian language closely related to Hindi), but the story is much older and generated many later textual versions.

Urdu Urdu, which received little encouragement at the Mughal court in Delhi, flourished under the patronage of Muslim rulers in the Deccan, especially at the courts of Golconda and Bijapur. Sufficiently distant from Delhi, writers in these smaller kingdoms still drew on Persian literary forms but injected more Indian substance to forge a new literary identity of Deccani Urdu literature. The long historical narrative, in the *masnavi* genre, was their preferred vehicle of literary expression.

Kamal Khan Rustami Among the many talented writers of Deccani Urdu was Kamal Khan Rustami (17th c. CE). Supported by Muhammad Adil Shag of Bijapur, he wrote *KhawarNama* (1649 CE), which borrowed its title from a 14th-century Persian text. This long (23,000-line) *masnavi* is an historical narrative based on the military exploits of Ali, son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad.

Nusrati Nusrati, Rustami's contemporary, also wrote epic *masnavi* as court poet of the Bijapur ruler Ali Adil Shah II. He was a prolific writer, but his most celebrated work is *Ali Nama* (1665), a narrative poem chronicling the military campaigns of his patron. With vivid imagery and religious fervour, Nusrati describes how his Muslim patron defeated the Mughals and later the Mahrattas.

Romance

Telugu The *Pratapacharitramu* by Ekambaranathudu (late 16th c. CE) is an important milestone in the development of narrative fiction in Telugu. Although earlier works in the language had utilised prose interspersed with verse, this is the first fully fledged prose poem.

Kannada A similar status in the adjacent language of Kannada is held by Nanjundakavi (early 16th c). Among his many historical fictions, the best known is the colossal *RamanathaCharite*, in which he invents a complex plot of palace intrigue. A queen falls in love with her stepson, who refuses her advances, after which her love turns destructive. But the writer imbues the older woman's passion with dignity. In the end, of course, the prince wins glory by defeating an invading Muslim army.

Oriya An author who produced similarly original romantic narratives in the Oriya language was Narayana Das (also 16th c. CE). While he followed the tradition of earlier poets by weaving together mythological characters with folk tale motifs, unlike them he produced stories with a clear narrative line. His successor was NilambarBidyadhar (18th c. CE), whose *PrastabaChintamanish* shows a similar skill in telling the story of a prince who gets lost on a hunting trip. When he is taken in by forest dwellers, he falls in love with their daughter. A clichéd tale, perhaps, but told with a vivid imagination.

Tamil The category of romantic narrative poem is represented in Tamil by *Viralivitututu* ('The Message sent by a Virali [female singer]'). Written in the late 18th century by CuppiratipaKavirayar (b. 1758), it follows the fortunes of a young, educated man who leaves his wife after a domestic quarrel. He falls into a trap set by a prostitute, escapes and wanders from court to court before returning to his wife.

Ballads

MaturaiViran *MaturaiViran* ('The Hero of Madurai') is one of several Tamil historical ballads composed in the 17th and 18th centuries CE. This text, datable to 1680-1700, uses simple verse to tell the story of a low-caste man who violates social codes but becomes a local god. He elopes with a high-caste woman, defeats the army sent to punish him and is then enlisted by the king of Madurai to rid the city of thieves. The hero again runs off with a royal woman and is summarily quartered. When the repentant king asks a goddess to restore his limbs, the hero refuses and is worshipped as a god. Even today, MaturaiViran is still worshipped as a god in villages near the city of Madurai.

Muttuppattan Muttuppattan is another Tamil historical ballad, but with a very different kind of hero. In this story, which scholars have dated to the 17th century, the eponymous hero is a Brahmin who falls in love with two Untouchable women from a caste of leather-workers. In a very affecting scene, the Brahmin hero tries to convince their father that his love for his daughters is genuine. The father then asks him to make leather sandals (touching leather was taboo for Brahmins) as a demonstration of his love. The Brahmin does so and the marriage is held, but the hero is later killed when defending his father-in-law's cattle. He then becomes a god worshipped in local villages.

Tampimar The *Tampimar* ('Little Brothers') is a Tamil historical ballad set in Travancore, a kingdom that ruled most of modern-day Kerala and part of the Tamil country from 1729 until Independence in 1947. Unlike the other ballads, however, it includes named historical figures from that time, focusing on an internecine war between two factions of the ruling family of Travancore. Like the other ballads, though, the heroes (the two brothers) die a violent death and are deified by local people.

Desinku Raja Desinku Raja is an historical ballad written in Telugu, probably in the late 18th century. It narrates the heroism of a Hindu Raja (Desinku) who dies on the battlefield defending the fort of Gingee from a Muslim army. This work is raised above the level of ordinary storytelling by three tender scenes: when the queen says goodbye to the army on the eve of battle, when the raja's friend (a Muslim) dies from brave but foolhardy action and when the victorious Desinku is rewarded by his overlord.

Prose tale

While most of the narratives mentioned above were composed in verse, prose tales were also written and adapted in this period, as before, by drawing on existing story literature. One particular work, however, the story of 'Guru Simpleton' (*ParamattaKuruvinKatai*) occupies a unique place in the literary history of India. It is the first piece of fiction in an Indian language written by a European. C.J. Beschi (1680-1742?) was an Italian-born missionary who spent four decades living in the Tamil country, where he wrote not only an epic poem, two grammars and several essays, but also this first example of fiction—all in Tamil. Beschi's genius is that he took a series of existing oral tales and wove them into a (more or less) coherent story in eight chapters.

Questions/Discussion

1. The theme of Hindu valour against Muslim invaders is found in several examples of historical fiction produced in this period (echoing the Muslim versus Christian stories narrated in the medieval south Slav epics). On the other hand, themes of war and heroism do not feature prominently in the Indo-Persian narrative poems and stories of the same period. Is there a political or literary explanation for this anomaly?
2. The Urdu literature produced in the Deccan is not as well-known as the Indo-Persian literature produced in Delhi. Is this best explained by the greater scholarly and public attention given to the Mughal Empire? How was Deccani Urdu regarded by Hindu and Muslim scholars during the early modern period?

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Text

From the *Hamzanama*, trans. Mamta Dalal Mangaldas and Saker Mistri, 2008

Once upon a time, there lived in India a young emperor who loved to ride wild elephants. He used to roam far and wide with his soldiers, through the forests and mountains of his kingdom, crossing deep and fast-flowing rivers, in search of these mighty beasts.

One day, when the young emperor was out riding in the forests of Narwar in North India, he saw a herd of wild elephants. He chased them deep into the woods and ordered his men to use rope snares and capture the elephants. The huge legs of the elephants became entangled in the ropes and as they struggled to free themselves, the emperor leapt on to the back of the leader of the herd. Digging his heels behind the matriarch's ears, he commanded the wild beast to be calm. Once the elephants were subdued, the emperor left his soldiers in charge, and rode back to the camp to rest in his tent.

On the evening of the elephant hunt, the sun set quietly over the forests. It did not want to disturb the Ruler of Rulers, the Badshah, the Noblest Emperor of all times: Akbar the Great. In Akbar's camp the men were bustling about, waiting for Darbar Khan, Akbar's court storyteller. The emperor loved listening to tales of magic and adventure, and took his storyteller with him wherever he went. Akbar sat in a large and resplendent tent, drumming his fingers impatiently on the rubies and diamonds on his throne.

When Darbar Khan finally entered the royal tent, Akbar leapt up to embrace him and said fondly, ‘Come, and amuse us with one of your stories.’ Then he turned to his men, ‘Darbar Khan can tell a different story every day, for a whole year. He is a wonderful storyteller. When he describes a rainstorm, you will shiver and feel the cold wind on your face. If he portrays a battle scene, the very ground trembles with the sound of horses and elephants in full charge.’

Often the storytelling continued for many hours and was accompanied by music and dancing. As he listened with his head propped on one hand, Akbar found himself wishing that he could read. It would be fun he thought to himself, to be able to read stories on his own—but then, he wouldn’t have the wonderful voice and expressive hands of Darbar Khan to transport him to these exciting new worlds.

The musicians took their places, and Darbar Khan in his scarlet robe, bowed low before the emperor. ‘Today’s tale my Badshah, is from your favourite book: the Hamzanama. There is no other book like it in the whole world. The paintings in the book are so dazzling that when you see them, it is as wondrous as seeing the sun and the moon for the very first time. The colours glow like the jewels in your majesty’s throne. And the hero of my story, the great Persian warrior Amir Hamza, is as strong and brave...,’ Darbar Khan smiled, ‘well, almost as strong and brave... as you, my Emperor.’



Image from the illustrated manuscript of *Hamzanama*, 1560s

19TH CENTURY

Overview

Short pieces of fiction (sketches, short stories and the like) dominated the first half of the century. Longer narratives, with elements of social 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 short stories in these 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 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 comic 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 *Nabababubilas* ('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 *AlalerGharerDulal* ('The Spoilt Son of a First-Rate Family') by PyarichandMitra. This text, written with 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 ('BandeMataram, 'Hail to thee, Mother') that became the rallying cry for Indian independence.

Bankim's novels Bankim's first novel, written in English in 1864, was soon forgotten. By contrast, his first Bengali novel, *Durgesnandini*, 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 (made famous by Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*). Most scholars confirm the author's own assessment that his 'best' novel, or that which most approximates the modern genre in plotting and characterisation, is *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 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 and somewhat clumsy attempt at a novel in Tamil was made by Samuel Vedanayakam Pillai (1826-1889) with his *PiratapaMutaliyarCarittiram* ('The Story of PiratapaMutaliyar', 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.

RajamAiyer An altogether different man and writer was RajamAiyer (1872-1898), a Brahmin who wrote the first modern novel in Tamil, one that is now regarded as a classic. The plot of *KamalampalCarittiram* ('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 pettiness of villagers but also their genuine grief and confusion. It also reveals the injustice of a woman's position in a rural Brahmin family, and it does so with wit and panache. This combination of social realism and literary skill has rarely been achieved in Tamil literature.

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 novels Malayalam, however, also has a more interesting set of novels that depict the problems of caste inequality, slavery and women's oppression written the perspective of a low-caste, Christian convert. This is not

unexpected since Europeans first came to India (in 1498) on the coast of 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 PothiriKunhambu 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 Hindi 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 DevkiNandanKhatra (1861-1913), whose *Chandrakanta* (1888) is considered the first example of modern Hindi prose. Less well-known, however, is his detective novel *VirendravirathvaKatoraBharaKhun* ('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 shifting 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). What does this female-naming of novels suggest about Indian literature?
2. Many of these same novels, and others as well, are written in an early form of social realism. For more than two thousand years, poetry, myth and folk tales had dominated the Indian literary imagination. Suddenly, however, 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?

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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.

EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Overview

Indian fiction came of age in this period. Quickened by the nationalist spirit that swept the country, writers found new content and techniques with which to tell stories that spoke to a wider public. Literary magazines played a large role in popularising the new fiction, mostly short stories but also serialised novels. Having assimilated techniques from western literature, Indian writers were now charting the journey that would lead to international fame by the end of the century. As these developments in each of the fifteen literary languages of India follow a general pattern, only a few of the most interesting examples are presented below.

Urdu

Sadat Hasan Manto Fiction in Urdu was raised to a new level by the storytelling art of Sadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955). Unusual among fiction writers in India of this period, he specialised in the short story, and like Chekhov and Maupassant, he told stories with a fine eye for detail and character motivation. Some critics condemned his apparent fascination with violence and sex, but others praised his stories featuring prostitutes and pimps for their unsentimental humanity. Certainly he was prolific, publishing no less than 15 collections during his lifetime, with several more published posthumously. Among his best books are *Atis Paray*, ('Spares of Fire,' 1936) and *Cughad* ('The Fool,' 1948).

Hindi

Premchand Beginning with its first novel in 1882, Hindi fiction had been dominated by romance and adventure until Premchand (1880-1936). His father was a large landowner, who had his son educated in Persian and Urdu. Devastated by the early death of his mother, Premchand went on to become a bookseller, study English at a missionary school and teach school. His first novel was serialised in an Urdu weekly between 1903 and 1905, but thereafter he wrote in Hindi, publishing a dozen novels and more than 300 short stories.

Assessment Premchand not only wrote stories with contemporary social relevance, but also used fiction as a medium for change. Taken altogether, his fiction gives the reader a panoramic view of rural north India in the first half of the twentieth century. His output was uneven, sometimes falling prey to sentimentalism, as when corrupt officials and money-lenders are reformed, but often he creates characters with depth and emotional complexity. And if from time to time he lapses into idealistic didacticism and offers a happy ending, he still presents an objective picture of the realities and injustices of his society.

Sevasadan Premchand's first novel, *Sevasadan* ('House of Service', 1918), is representative of his work and reveals the hypocrisy of the 'pillars of society.' A liberal Hindu lawyer is unable to reform his ne'er-do-well nephew and later, through a few unconvincing plot twists, is implicated in forcing a married Brahmin woman into prostitution. He atones by funding an institution for former prostitutes, where they learn music and dance (courtesan's skills), work with their hands and raise children in a healthy environment.

Godan Published in 1936, *Godan* ('The Gift of a Cow') was Premchand's last novel and his masterpiece. In it he created a social world that stands for all of India, without obvious villains and heroes. There is the village, with every kind of character, plus the *zamindar* (landowner). And there is the city, where the *zamindar* also lives, along with 'modern' women, professionals, intellectuals, traditional Hindus and Muslims. The main character is Hori, a villager burdened with the obligation to keep a cow. Cheated by a Brahmin landowner, Hori remains loyal to the system he was born in and ends up dying in a ditch. His urban counterpart, the educated professor, is similarly unheroic. Failing to practice his self-professed Gandhian ideals, he is violent at times and takes a self-serving vow of chastity.

Bengali

Rabindranath Tagore Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the great poet, also wrote a series of provocative novels in the early decades of the century: *Cokher Bali* (1902), *Gora* (1910) and *Caturanga* (1916). Perhaps the most powerful was *Yogajog* (1929), a story of the struggle between masculine power and feminine resistance, coarseness and culture, and featuring a marital rape.

Sarat Chandra Chatterji The Bengali novel, however, found an even more outstanding practitioner in Sarat Chandra Chatterji (1876-1938). Like Tagore, he used the Bengali family as a prism for exploring the world of emotions, often focusing on women's lives. However, his stories move more quickly, with few authorial interventions, relying instead of sudden and dramatic shifts that maintain suspense. His novella *Badadidi* ('The Elder Sister,' 1913) brought him instant fame, and he remained extremely popular for his entire lifetime. While his most popular novel is arguably *Binder Chele* (1914), critics prefer *Srikanta* (1917-1933), a four-volume family saga.

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay (also Banerjee, 1894-1950) was a transitional figure between the early novelistic experiments in the 19th century and the fully-developed form of the 20th. Indeed, his biography reads like a blueprint for creating a modern Indian literature with its blend of tradition and innovation. His grandfather was an Ayurvedic doctor, while his father was a Sanskrit scholar and professional storyteller (*kathak*). Born as the eldest of five children in a rural village, Bandyopadhyay went to college and studied for an MA at Calcutta University. In total, he published 17 novels, 20 collections of short stories and several miscellaneous books (a travelogue, an autobiography, a translation of *Ivanhoe*, a Bengali grammar, and works on astrology and the occult). His eclecticism is notable but not uncommon among educated Bengalis of the time.

Pather Panchali *Pather Panchali* is the novel that catapulted Bandyopadhyay to national and then international fame. Published in 1929 as the first part of a trilogy known as *The Apu Trilogy*, it was quickly translated into several languages and brought to an even wider audience with the film adaptation by Satyajit Ray in the 1950s. The excellence of the novel lies more in its emotional atmosphere and characters than in plot structure or suspense. Rarely has an Indian novelist entered into the mind of a character as successfully as Bandyopadhyay does with the young boy Apu, and we are also treated to beautiful descriptions of the Bengali countryside. This is largely an autobiographical novel, which gives it a ring of truth but also enables the author to enhance fact with the dramatic power of fiction.

Tamil

Manikkodi It is characteristic of Indian literature that a short-lived literary magazine (*Manikkodi*, 'The Jewelled Flag') changed the history of Tamil fiction. Published in Madras from 1933 to 1936, it featured short stories that challenged the accepted manner of telling stories. Narratives were fractured, told from different points of view, and they highlighted the grotesque and the psychotic, sex and violence. The magazine launched the careers of most of the best fiction writers of the inter-war years, including B.S. Ramiah, Chellappa, Mauni and Putumaipittan.

Putumaipittan The most radical and interesting of these Tamil writers was Putumaipittan ('The Crazy One,' 1906-1948). In his brief literary career, he wrote nearly 100 short stories (some of which were unpublished and are being discovered even today), translated 50 stories from English into Tamil and wrote four non-fiction books (promoting his socialist ideals and condemning fascism, notably in his biography of Hitler).

God and Kandaswami Pillai Putumaipittan's best story, by critical consensus, is 'Katavulum Kantacuvami Pillaiyum' ('God and Kandaswami Pillai', 1934). The author anthropomorphises god and makes him endure the hardships of human existence, as he is led by Kandaswami Pillai (a publisher) on a tour around Madras. In a series of clever and humorous scenes, both god and his human guide reveal their foibles and dignity.

Kalki The Tamil novel, which had had several capable, even creative, practitioners, gained a wider following in the 1940s with the emergence of a storyteller who knew how to please readers. Kalki (R.A. Krishnamurthy, 1899-1954) used his magazine *Anandavikatan* as a vehicle for serialising his fabulously popular stories told in easy but rhythmic prose. Most of his novels are historical, transporting the reader back to the splendour of ancient Tamil kingdoms. Some critics felt his work was escapist, but no one could argue with his popularity.

Kalki's Life Kalki's father was a poor Brahmin who served as an accountant to a rich landowner in an isolated village. Kalki was educated there but did not finish high school. Instead he answered Gandhi's call for non-

cooperation and joined the Indian National Congress in 1921. He was arrested and went to jail twice but also worked on and later edited literary magazines, most famously *Anantavikatan*.

TiyagaBumiKalki combined his politics and his powerful storytelling in his most popular novel, *TiyagaBumi* ('The Land of Self-less Sacrifice,' 1939), which was also made into an equally famous film. Its hero is a Brahmin priest who offers shelter to Harijans made homeless by a hurricane and is excommunicated for this act of charity. Then his daughter is ill-treated by her westernised husband, finds herself homeless, gives birth to a child whom she entrusts to her father and goes wandering. Her father, the Gandhi-like figure, embarks on a programme of Harijan uplift. In the end, his daughter becomes rich and rejects her husband's request to return to him.

English

Indian fiction in English during the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by three novelists whose lives spanned all ten decades: Raja Rao (1908-2006), Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004) and R. K. Narayan (1906-2001). Raja Rao's most famous novel (*Kanthapura*, 1938) describes the reception of Gandhian ideals in rural India, while Raj Anand was an even more committed political writer, who helped to establish the Progressive Writers' Association. His novels (especially *Untouchable*, 1935) took on the task of exposing the indignities and inequalities in Indian society. However, it is the novels by R K Narayan, cleverly told with both empathy and humour, that have stood the test of time.

Questions/Discussion

1. The quantity and popularity of Indian fiction in this period might be partially explained by non-literary factors. With the rise of print and literacy, there were clearly more publications and more readers. And the nationalism fervour meant that more of them were anxious to read, not just books, but also newspapers and magazines. Is this correlation between print, nationalism and the novel found elsewhere in the world?
2. In this period, unlike the second half of the century, most popular fiction was written, published and read in regional languages, Bengali, Tamil, Hindi and so forth. This would change, after Independence, in favour of English-language Indian literature. What accounts for this radical shift in so short a time?
3. Recent research has cast doubt on the contrast often drawn between the romance of early Indian novel and the social realism of novels in this period. It is now suggested that the supposedly realistic novelists also invented imaginative worlds and experimented with new aesthetics. Certainly, many writers of fiction in this period went on to work in the film world. How did this shift of medium affect their storytelling?

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Text

'The Shroud', by Premchand, trans. F. Pritchett

At the door of the hut father and son sat silently by a burnt-out fire; inside, the son's young wife Budhiya lay in labor, writhing with pain. And from time to time such a heart-rending scream emerged from her lips that they both pressed their hands to their hearts. It was a winter night; everything was drowned in desolation. The whole village had been absorbed into the darkness.

Ghisu said, "It seems she won't live. She's been writhing in pain the whole day. Go on-- see how she is."

Madhav said in a pained tone, "If she's going to die, then why doesn't she go ahead and die? What's the use of going to see?"

"You're pretty hard-hearted! You've enjoyed [life](#) with her for a whole year-- such faithlessness to her?"

"Well, I can't stand to see her writhing and thrashing around."

It was a family of [Chamars](#), and notorious in the whole village. If Ghisu worked for one day, then he rested for three. Madhav was such a slacker that if he worked for an hour, then he smoked his chilam for an hour. Thus nobody hired them on. If there was even a handful of grain in the house, they both swore off working. When they'd fasted for a couple of days, then Ghisu climbed trees and broke off branches, and Madhav sold the wood in the market; and as long as that money lasted, they both spent their time wandering idly around. *When their hunger grew intense, they again broke off branches, or looked for some work.* There was no shortage of work in the village. It was a village of farmers; for a hard-working man there were fifty jobs. But people only sent for those two when they were forced to content themselves with getting out of two men the work of one.

If only the two had been [ascetics](#), then they wouldn't have needed any exercises in self-discipline to achieve contentment and patience. This was their very nature. Theirs was a strange life. Except for two or three clay pots, they had no goods at all in the house. Covering their nakedness with torn rags, free from the cares of the world, laden with debt-- they suffered abuse, they suffered blows too, but not grief. They were so poor that without the smallest hope of repayment, people used to lend them something or other. When peas or potatoes were in season, they would dig up peas or potatoes from the fields and roast and eat them, or break off five or ten stalks of sugarcane and suck them at night. Ghisu had spent sixty years of his life in this [pious](#) manner, and Madhav, like a dutiful son, was following in his father's footsteps-- or rather, was making his name even more radiant. This time too, both were seated by the fire, roasting potatoes that they had dug up from somebody's field. Ghisu's wife had passed away long ago. Madhav's marriage had taken place the year before. Since this woman had come, she had laid the foundations of civilization in the family. *Grinding grain, cutting grass, she arranged for a couple of pounds of flour,* and kept filling the [stomachs](#) of those two shameless ones. After she came, they both grew even more lazy and indolent; indeed, they even began to swagger a bit. If someone sent for them to work, then with splendid indifference they demanded double wages. That woman was dying today in childbirth. And these two were perhaps waiting for her to die, so they could sleep in peace.

Pulling out a potato and peeling it, Ghisu said, "Go see what shape she's in. We'll have the fuss over a [ghost-witch](#)-- what else! And here even the exorcist demands a rupee--from whose house would we get one?"

Madhav suspected that if he went into the hut, Ghisu would finish off most of the potatoes. He said, "I'm afraid to go in."

"What are you afraid of? I'm here, after all."

"Then *you* go and see, all right?"

"When my wife died, for three days I never even left her side. And then, won't she be ashamed in front of me? I've never seen her face-- and today I should see her naked body? She won't even have bodily ease: if she sees me, she won't be able to thrash around freely."

"I'm thinking, if a child is born-- what then? Dried ginger, brown sugar, oil-- there's nothing at all in the house."

"Everything will come. If Bhagwan [god] gives a child-- those people who now aren't giving a paisa, will send for us and give us things. I've had nine sons. There was never anything in the house, but this is how we managed every time."

A society in which those who labored night and day were not in much better shape than these two; a society in which compared to the peasants, those who knew how to exploit the peasants' weaknesses were much better off-- in such a society, the birth of this kind of mentality was no cause for surprise. We'll say that compared to the peasants, Ghisu was more insightful; and instead of joining the mindless group of peasants, he had joined the group of clever,

scheming [tricksters](#). Though indeed, he wasn't skilful in following the rules and customs of the tricksters. Thus while other members of his group became chiefs and headmen of villages, at him the whole village wagged its finger. But still, he did have the consolation that if he was in bad shape, at least he wasn't forced to do the back-breaking labor of the peasants, and others didn't take improper advantage of his simplicity and voicelessness.

Pulling out the potatoes, they both began to eat them burning hot. They had eaten nothing since the day before. They were too impatient to wait till the potatoes cooled. Both burned their tongues repeatedly. When the potatoes were peeled, their outer parts didn't seem so extremely hot. But the moment the teeth bit into them, the inner part burned the tongue and throat and roof of the mouth. Rather than keep that ember in the mouth, it was better to send it quickly along inward, where there was plenty of equipment for cooling it down. So they both swallowed very fast, although the attempt brought tears to their eyes.

Then Ghisu remembered a landowner's wedding procession, in which he had taken part twenty years before. The repelion that had been vouchsafed to him in that feast was a memorable event in his life, and even today its memory was fresh. He said, "I'll never forget that feast. Never since then have I had that kind of food, or such a full stomach. The girl's family fed [puris](#) to everyone. As much as they wanted! Great and small, everyone ate puris-- ones made with real ghee! Chutney, raita, three kinds of green vegetables, a flavorful stew, yoghurt, chutney, sweets. How can I tell you now what relish there was in that feast! There was no limit. Whatever thing you want, just ask! And however much you want, eat! People ate so much, ate so much, that nobody could even drink any water. And there the servers were-- setting hot, round, sweet-smelling pastries before you! You refuse, saying you don't want it. You push away the tray with your hand.

But that's how they are-- they just keep on giving it. And when everybody had wiped their mouths, then everybody got a *pan* as well. But how could I be in any shape for a *pan*? I couldn't stand up. I just staggered off and lay down on my blanket. He had a heart as big as the ocean, that landowner!"

Enjoying the story of these grand festivities, Madhav said, "If only somebody would give us such a feast now!"

"As if anybody would feast anybody now! That was a different time. Now everybody thinks about economy-- 'don't spend money on weddings, don't spend money on religious festivals!'. Ask them-- what's this 'saving' of the poor people's wealth? There's no lack of 'saving'. But when it comes to spending, they think about economy!"

"You must have eaten twenty or so puris?"

"I ate more than twenty."

"I would have eaten up fifty."

"I couldn't have eaten less than fifty. I was hale and hearty. You're not half of what I was!"

After eating, they both drank some water, covered themselves with their dhotis, curled up, and went to sleep right there by the fire, as if two gigantic serpents lay coiled there.

And Budhiya was still moaning.

In the morning, when Madhav went into the hut and looked, his wife had grown cold. Flies were buzzing on her face. Her stony eyes had rolled upward. Her whole body was covered with dust. In her stomach, the baby had died.

Madhav came running to Ghisu. Then they both together began loudly lamenting and beating their breasts. When the neighbors heard the weeping and wailing, they came running. And following the ancient custom, they began to console the bereaved.

But this wasn't the occasion for an excessive show of grief. They had to worry about the shroud, and the wood. Money was as scarce in their house as meat in a raptor's nest.

Father and son went weeping to the village landlord. He hated the very sight of their faces. A number of times he had beaten them with his own hands-- for theft, or for not coming to work as they had promised. He asked, "What is it, [Ghisua](#), why do you weep? Nowadays we don't even see you around. It seems that you no longer want to live in the village."

Ghisua fell prostrate on the ground, and said with tear-filled eyes, "Master, I'm in great trouble! Madhav's wife passed away last night. All day she was writhing in pain, Master; we two sat by her bed till midnight. Whatever medicines we could give her, we did. But she slipped away. Now we have no one to care for us, Master-- we're devastated-- our house is destroyed! I'm your slave. Now who but you will take care of her final rites? Whatever money we had at hand was used up on medicines. If the Master will show mercy, then she'll have the proper rites. To whose door should I come except yours?"

The Landlord Sahib was a compassionate man. But to show compassion to Ghisu was to try to dye a black blanket. He felt like saying, "Get out of here! *Keep the corpse in your house and let it rot!* Usually you don't come even when you're called-- now when you want something, you come and flatter me! You treacherous bastard! You villain!" But this was not the occasion for anger or revenge. Willingly or not, he pulled out two rupees and flung them down. But he didn't open his lips to say a single word of consolation. He didn't even look in Ghisu's direction-- as if he'd discharged a duty.

When the Landlord Sahib gave two rupees, then how could the village merchants and money-lenders have the nerve to refuse? Ghisu knew how to beat the drum of the landlord's name. One gave two paises, another gave four paises. In an hour, Ghisu had collected the sum of five rupees in ready cash. Someone gave grain, someone else gave wood. And in the afternoon Ghisu and Madhav went to the market to get a shroud. Meanwhile, people began to cut the bamboo [poles](#), and so on.

The sensitive-hearted women of the village came and looked at the body. They shed a few tears at its helplessness, and went away.

(3)

When they reached the market, Ghisu said, "We've got enough wood to burn her, haven't we, Madhav?"

Madhav said, "Yes, there's plenty of wood. Now we need a shroud."

"So let's buy a light kind of shroud."

"Sure, what else! While the body is being carried along, night will come. At night, who sees a shroud?"

"What a bad custom it is that someone who didn't even get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she's dead."

"After all, the shroud burns along with the body."

"What else is it good for? If we'd had these five rupees earlier, we would have given her some medicine."

Each of them inwardly guessed what the other was thinking. They kept wandering here and there in the market, until eventually evening came. [Sometimes they went to one cloth-seller's shop, sometimes to another. They looked at various kinds of fabric, they looked at silk and cotton, but nothing suited them.] The two arrived, by chance or deliberately, before a wine-house; and as if according to some prearranged decision, they went inside. For a little while they both stood there in a state of uncertainty. [Then Ghisu went to the counter and said, "Sir, please give us a

bottle too.]" *Ghisu bought one bottle of liquor, and some sesame sweets.* [After this some snacks came, fried fish came]. And they both sat down on the verandah and [peacefully] began to drink.

After drinking a number of cups in a row, both became elevated.

Ghisu said, "What's the use of wrapping her in a shroud? After all, it would only be burned. Nothing would go with her."

Looking toward the sky as if persuading the angels of his innocence, Madhav said, "It's the custom of the world-- why do these same people give thousands of rupees to the Brahmins? Who can tell whether a reward does or doesn't reach them in another world?"

"Rich people have wealth-- let them waste it! What do we have to waste?"

"But what will you tell people? Won't people ask where the shroud is?"

Ghisu laughed. "We'll say the money slipped out of my waistband-- we searched and searched for it, but it didn't turn up. [People won't believe it, but they'll still give the same sum again.]"

Madhav too laughed at this unexpected good fortune, *at defeating destiny in this way*. He said, "She was very good, the poor thing. Even as she died, she gave us a fine meal."

More than half the bottle had been finished. Ghisu ordered two measures of puris, a meat stew, and spiced liver and fried fish. There was a shop right next to the wine-house. Madhav ran over and brought everything back on two leaf-plates. The cost was fully one and a half rupees. Only a few paise were left.

Both then sat eating puris, with all the majesty of a tiger in the jungle pursuing his prey. They had no fear of being called to account, nor any concern about disgrace. They had passed through these stages of weakness long ago. Ghisu said in a philosophical manner, "If my soul is being pleased, then won't she receive religious merit?"

Madhav bowed his head in pious confirmation. "Certainly she'll certainly receive it. Bhagwan, you are the knower of hearts-- take her to [Heaven](#)! We're both giving her our heartfelt blessing. The feast I've had today-- I haven't had its equal in my whole life!"

After a moment a doubt arose in Madhav's heart. He said, "How about it-- we'll go there too someday, won't we?"

Ghisu gave no answer to this childish question. *He looked reproachfully at Madhav.* [He didn't want the thought of heavenly matters to interfere with this bliss.]

"When she asks us, there, why we didn't give her a shroud, what will you say?"

"Oh, shut up!"

"She'll certainly ask."

"How do you know that she won't get a shroud? Do you consider me such a donkey? I've lived in this world for sixty years-- and have I just been loitering around? She'll get a shroud, and [a very good one]-- *a much better than we would have given*."

Madhav was not convinced. He said, "Who will give it? You've gobbled up the rupees! [It's me she'll ask-- I'm the one who put the [sindur](#) in the parting of her hair.]"

Ghisu grew irritated. "I tell you, she'll get a shroud. Why don't you believe me?"

"Who will give the money-- why don't you tell me?"

"The same people will give it who gave it this time. But they won't put the rupees into our hands. *And if somehow we get our hands on them, we'll sit here and drink again just like this, and they'll give the shroud a third time.*"

As the darkness deepened and the stars glittered more sharply, the tumult in the wine-house also increased. One person sang, another babbled, another embraced his companion, another pressed a glass to his friend's lips. Joy was in the atmosphere there. Intoxication was in the air. How many people become '[an ass with a glass](#)'! *They came here only to taste the pleasure of self-forgetfulness.* More than liquor, the air here elevated their spirits. The disaster of life seized them and dragged them here. And for a while they forgot whether they were alive or dead-- or [half-alive](#).

And these two, father and son, were still sipping with relish. Everyone's eyes had settled on them. How fortunate they were! They had a whole bottle between them.

After he had finished eating, Madhav picked up the leaf-plate of leftover puris and gave it to a beggar who was standing there looking at them with hungry eyes. And for the first time in his life he felt the pride and delight and thrill of giving.

Ghisu said, "Take it-- eat your fill, and give her your blessing. She whose earnings these are has died, but your blessing will certainly reach her. Bless her with every hair on your body-- these are the payment for very hard labor."

Madhav again looked toward the sky and said, "She'll go to Heaven-- she'll become the Queen of Heaven!"

Ghisu stood up, and as if swimming in waves of joy he said, "Yes, son, she'll go to Heaven! She never tormented anyone, she never oppressed anyone; even while dying, she fulfilled the greatest desire of our lives. If she doesn't go to Heaven, then will those fat rich people go-- who loot the poor with both hands, and go to the Ganges to wash away their sin, and offer holy water in temples?"

This mood of piety too changed; variability is the special quality of intoxication. It was the turn of despair and grief. Madhav said, "But the poor thing suffered a great deal in her life. Even her death was so painful!" Covering his eyes with his hands, he began to weep, [and sobbed loudly].

Ghisu consoled him: "Why do you weep, son? Be happy that she's been liberated from this net of illusion. She's escaped from the snare; she was very fortunate that she was able to break the bonds of worldly illusion so quickly."

And both, standing there, began to sing, "[Temptress](#)! Why do your eyes flash, temptress?"

The whole wine-house was absorbed in the spectacle, and these two drinkers, deep in intoxication, kept on singing. Then they both began to dance-- they leaped and jumped, fell down, flounced about, gesticulated, [strutted around]; and finally, overcome by drunkenness, they collapsed.

Late 20th Century

Overview

Trends In the immediate aftermath of Independence, Indian short stories tended to reveal a sense of loss and confusion. While the politically motivated writing of the previous decades did not disappear, the point of view shifted from an examination of external material conditions to a probing of the interior states of individuals. Over the course of this period, however, the short story gradually gave way to the novel, and the 'Indian novel' became virtually synonymous with the 'Indian English novel.'

Globalisation This is largely the result of the globalisation of English literature. When the economic policies of the Indian government were relaxed in the 1990s, western publishing houses set up offices in the country to scout new talent and offer lucrative contracts. They were aware that there are approximately 125 million English-readers in India and roughly 400 million worldwide. Indians writing in English had achieved international attention before, but the recent success is impressive. V. S. Naipaul won the Booker Prize in 1971, Ruth Praver Jhabwala won in 1975, Rushdie in 1981, Arundathi Roy in 1998, Kiran Desai in 2006 and Aravind Adiga in 2008. A less publicized trend has been the emergence of Dalit writers, especially women, in regional languages.

Short story

Nirmal Verma Nirmal Verma (1929-2005), also a novelist, is one of the founders of the 'new short story' movement in Hindi. He published twelve collections of stories, starting in 1959 with *Parinde* ('Birds'), whose title story is often cited as his best. Like so many of his contemporaries, Verma was active in politics and spent ten years in Prague as the guest of the Soviet-controlled government. He resigned from the Communist Party in 1956 after the invasion of Hungary.

Mahashweta Devi Whereas Verma wrote about the urban middle-classes, Mahashweta Devi (1926-2016) was a Bengali academic and a committed political writer, focusing on the lives of tribal communities. She wrote close to 100 novels and published 20 collections of stories. She, too, was a communist and was fired from her job at the post office for her political activities.

U.R. Anantha Murthy Anantha Murthy (1932-2014) was an elegant writer of short stories (and novels) in Kannada. Although he was a professor of English literature, he stirred up controversy by repeatedly stating that an Indian writer in English has a less immediate contact with an Indian audience than does a writer in a regional language.

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer Vaikom Muhammad Basheer (1908-1994) wrote a series of powerful short stories (and novels) in the 1950s and 1960s. He, too, created a national debate through his refusal to use standard Malayalam and instead to rely on the dialect of his Muslim community. His fiction contains both fierce social realism (criticism of the backward practices of Muslims in Kerala) and explorations of the interior experiences of his characters.

C.S. Lakshmi C.S. Lakshmi ('Ambai', b. 1944) is a feminist critic, scholar and author in Tamil. Her journalism ranges widely over current affairs, but she is best known for her short stories, especially *Cirukukal Muriyum* ('Wings will be Broken,' 1968) and *Vitin Mulaiyiloru Camaiyalarai* ('A Kitchen in the Corner of the House', 1988). Her stories are not distinguished by literary style or language, and neither are they humorous or original. Instead, they look uncompromisingly at the everyday reality of women, revealing both their vulnerability and their strength.

Novel

R. K. Narayan R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) dominated the field of Indian English fiction for most of the century. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Narayan was never a political writer, and his fiction is often criticised for its apolitical stance and neglect of colonialism. However, he was too keen an observer of human nature to be indifferent to injustice. Most of his novels, in fact, explore some kind of social problem, though not the spectacular ones favoured by many of his contemporaries.

Malgudi Unlike most successful Indian authors, Narayan is not known for any single novel. He didn't write a masterpiece (which probably explains why, though shortlisted several times, he never received the Nobel Prize). Instead, all his books were equally brilliant, especially in their evocation of Malgudi, their fictional setting. Like the most memorable fictional settings, it is both true to experience and manipulated for effect.

The Guide Most critics regard *The Guide* (1958) as Narayan's best novel. It is both a parody of Indian culture and a poignant love story. Its hero is Raju, the guide of the title, who loiters at the local railway station, waiting to fleece the next innocent traveller. Before long he meets and falls in love with Rosie, ends up in jail for fraud and forgery but on release is mistaken for a holy saint by a villager. When he undertakes a fast and prevents a flood, his reputation, seemingly but not entirely without his contrivance, grows and grows until he becomes known all over India, attracting film crews, even from Hollywood. But no plot summary can tell the story of this novel, with its shifts in narration, doubling back in time and adding layer upon layer of irony.

Contemporary

Novelists Following R.K. Narayan's generation, high-quality novels have been written by several authors. Anita Desai (b.1937), who was shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times, wrote a sensitive and moving portrait of a Delhi family in *Clear Light of Day* (1980). More lyrical are the novels by the Kerala-born Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), whose *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955) was a best-seller. In recent years, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhuri and Rohinton Mistry (shortlisted for the Booker in 1991, 1996 and 2002 respectively) have all won international reputations.

Aravind Adiga The most recent Booker-winning novel is *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga (b. 1974). Written in the form of letters from its hero (Balram) to the Chinese Premier, 'from one entrepreneur to another,' as Balram says, it chronicles the effect of global capitalism on India. Balram himself is a poor village boy, who goes to the big city and makes a success, but only by murdering and stealing along the way. Aravind Adiga has great fun in lampooning the official rhetoric of progress, but the bitter cynicism is a long way from Narayan's gentle irony.

Shoba De One name that rarely appears on a list of Indian English writers is Shoba De (b. 1948), yet she is the most popular novelist and journalist in the country. To date she has written 17 novels that, with titles such as *Starry Nights* and *Sultry Days*, might be called 'soap opera literature' and compared to Jackie Collins. Her sales figures are impressive, and she has filled a (rather large) literary niche.

Chetan Bhagat If De's novels tell the tale of middle-class women in contemporary India, those written by Chetan Bhagat (b. 1974) hold up a mirror for the men. His eight novels (beginning in 2004) have broken all sales records by selling in the millions. By comparison, the Booker-winning novels by Roy, Desai and Adiga have sold in the range of 50,000-100,000 copies each. In describing the success story of young men, Bhagat's novels are entertaining, youth-focused and aspirational.

Dalit writing

Marathi Since the early 20th century, Indian writers had created Dalit (Untouchable, Harijan) characters, but in the second half of the century Dalits themselves began to write their own stories. The landmark publication in 1978 of Daya Pawar's *Balute* ('Share') was followed by several more novels in Marathi in the 1980s. One researcher has found 86 life-stories by Marathi Dalits. One of the best, *Akkarmashi* ('Outcaste,' 1984) by Limbale, is the life-story of a bastard son born to a Dalit woman seduced by her landlord. Marathi is the natural home of such writing because it is the region where a major Dalit liberation struggle began in the 1920s.

Tamil Another major anti-caste movement during the same period, this time in the Tamil country, might explain the emergence of Dalit life-writing in Tamil. The two most important of these Tamil novels have been written by Bama: *Karuku* ('Blades') in 1992 and *Sangati* ('Events') in 1994. *Karuku* tells the life-story of a Dalit Catholic woman, using the idioms of her community rather than standard Tamil. The novel demands the reader's attention, an effort that is repaid by insights into a spiritual journey outside the Hindu mainstream.

Hindi *Joothan* ('Left Overs', 1997) by Omprakash Valmiki tells the story of a caste of scavengers, who subsist on what others throw away. Starting in the 1950s, the novel reveals the hollowness of Gandhian programmes of Untouchable uplift. Through sheer force of will (and reading the real-life novelist Premchand), the scavenger boy becomes educated and achieves literary success as a poet.

Questions/Discussion

1. No matter how one theorises post-colonial literature in India, it is difficult to avoid the fact that the novel is an imported genre. Although it has developed in India for about 150 years and become indigenised, it remains unconnected to the deep historical patterns of literary culture in the country. That may explain why (with few exceptions) Indian novelists have yet to find a way to write historical novels that integrate the past into the present.
2. It is also true that the international success of the Indian novel in English is both a legacy of colonialism and a manifestation of today's globalised literary culture. The lasting effect of the success of Indian English fiction on the regional literatures of India, though too early to assess, is likely to be substantial.

3. The major development in fiction written in regional languages has been the popular success of Dalit writing, which is very different to the English-language, block-busting best sellers of Shoba De and ChetanBhagat. However, they all share the theme of aspiration. Perhaps mass-market, English-language fiction is closer to contemporary realities than the critically-acclaimed English-language fiction of international festivals.

Reading

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Text

‘A Devoted Son,’ by Anita Desai

When the results appeared in the morning papers, Rakesh scanned them barefoot and in his pajamas, at the garden gate, then went up the steps to the verandah where his father sat sipping his morning tea and bowed down to touch his feet.

“A first division, son?” his father asked, beaming, reaching for the papers.

“At the top of the list, papa,” Rakesh murmured, as if awed. “First in the country.”

Bedlam broke loose then. The family whooped and danced. The whole day long visitors streamed into the small yellow house at the end of the road to congratulate the parents of this *Wunderkind*, to slap Rakesh on the back and fill the house and garden with the sounds and colors of a festival. There were garlands and halwa, party clothes and gifts (enough fountain pens to last years, even a watch or two), nerves and temper and joy, all in a multicolored whirl of pride and great shining vistas newly opened: Rakesh was the first son in the family to receive an education, so much had been sacrificed in order to send him to school and then medical college, and at last the fruits of their sacrifice had arrived, golden and glorious.

To everyone who came to him to say “*Mubarak*, Varmaji, your son has brought you glory,” the father said, “Yes, and do you know what is the first thing he did when he saw the results this morning? He came and touched my feet. He bowed down and touched my feet.” This moved many of the women in the crowd so much that they were seen to raise the ends of their saris and dab at their tears while the men reached out for the betel-leaves and sweetmeats that were offered around on trays and shook their heads in wonder and approval of such exemplary filial behavior. “One does not often see such behavior in sons anymore,” they all agreed, a little enviously perhaps. Leaving the house, some of the women said, sniffing, “At least on such an occasion they might have served pure ghee sweets,” and some of the men said, “Don’t you think old Varma was giving himself airs? He needn’t think we don’t remember that he comes from the vegetable market himself, his father used to sell vegetables, and he has never seen the inside of a school.” But there was more envy than rancour in their voices and it was, of course, inevitable—not every son in that shabby little colony at the edge of the city was destined to shine as Rakesh shone, and who knew that better than the parents themselves?

And that was only the beginning, the first step in a great, sweeping ascent to the radiant heights of fame and fortune. The thesis he wrote for his M.D. brought Rakesh still greater glory, if only in select medical circles. He won a scholarship. He went to the USA (that was what his father learnt to call it and taught the whole family to say—not America, which was what the ignorant neighbors called it, but, with a grand familiarity, “the USA”) where he pursued his career in the most prestigious of all hospitals and won encomiums from his American colleagues which were relayed to his admiring and glowing family. What was more, he came back, he actually returned to that small yellow house in the once-new but increasingly shabby colony, right at the end of the road where the rubbish vans

tipped out their stinking contents for pigs to nose in and rag-pickers to build their shacks on, all steaming and smoking just outside the neat wire fences and well tended gardens. To this Rakesh returned and the first thing he did on entering the house was to slip out of the embraces of his sisters and brothers and bow down and touch his father's feet.

As for his mother, she gloated chiefly over the strange fact that he had not married in America, had not brought home a foreign wife as all her neighbors had warned her he would, for wasn't that what all Indian boys went abroad for? Instead he agreed, almost without argument, to marry a girl she had picked out for him in her own village, the daughter of a childhood friend, a plump and uneducated girl, it was true, but so old-fashioned, so placid, so complaisant that she slipped into the household and settled in like a charm, seemingly too lazy and too good-natured to even try and make Rakesh leave home and set up independently, as any other girl might have done. What was more, she was pretty—really pretty, in a plump, pudding way that only gave way to fat—soft, spreading fat, like warm wax—after the birth of their first baby, a son, and then what did it matter?

For some years Rakesh worked in the city hospital, quickly rising to the top of the administrative organization, and was made a director before he left to set up his own clinic. He took his parents in his car—a new, sky-blue Ambassador with a rear window full of stickers and charms revolving on strings—to see the clinic when it was built, and the large sign-board over the door on which his name was printed in letters of red, with a row of degrees and qualifications to follow it like so many little black slaves of the regent. Thereafter his fame seemed to grow just a little dimmer—or maybe it was only that everyone in town had grown accustomed to it at last—but it was also the beginning of his fortune for he now became known not only as the best but also the richest doctor in town.

However, all this was not accomplished in the wink of an eye. Naturally not. It was the achievement of a lifetime and it took up Rakesh's whole life. At the time he set up his clinic his father had grown into an old man and retired from his post at the kerosene dealer's depot at which he had worked for forty years, and his mother died soon after, giving up the ghost with a sigh that sounded positively happy, for it was her own son who ministered to her in her last illness and who sat pressing her feet at the last moment—such a son as few women had borne.

For it had to be admitted—and the most unsuccessful and most rancorous of neighbors eventually did so—that Rakesh was not only a devoted son and a miraculously good-natured man who contrived somehow to obey his parents and humor his wife and show concern equally for his children and his patients, but there was actually a brain inside this beautifully polished and formed body of good manners and kind nature and, in between ministering to his family and playing host to many friends and coaxing them all into feeling happy and grateful and content, he had actually trained his hands as well and emerged an excellent doctor, a really fine surgeon. How one man—and a man born to illiterate parents, his father having worked for a kerosene dealer and his mother having spent her life in a kitchen—had achieved, combined and conducted such a medley of virtues, no one could fathom, but all acknowledged his talent and skill.

It was a strange fact, however, that talent and skill, if displayed for too long, cease to dazzle. It came to pass that the most admiring of all eyes eventually faded and no longer blinked at his glory. Having retired from work and having lost his wife, the old father very quickly went to pieces, as they say. He developed so many complaints and fell ill so frequently and with such mysterious diseases that even his son could no longer make out when it was something of significance and when it was merely a peevish whim. He sat huddled on his string bed most of the day and developed an exasperating habit of stretching out suddenly and lying absolutely still, allowing the whole family to fly around him in a flap, wailing and weeping, and then suddenly sitting up, stiff and gaunt, and spitting out a big gob of betel-juice as if to mock their behavior.

He did this once too often: there had been a big party in the house, a birthday party for the youngest son, and the celebrations had to be suddenly hushed, covered up and hustled out of the way when the daughter-in-law discovered, or thought she discovered, that the old man, stretched out from end to end of his string bed, had lost his pulse; the party broke up, dissolved, even turned into a band of mourners, when the old man sat up and the distraught daughter-in-law received a gob of red spittle right on the hem of her organza sari. After that no one much cared if he sat up cross-legged on his bed, hawking and spitting, or lay down flat and turned gray as a corpse. Except, of course, for that pearl amongst pearls, his son Rakesh.

It was Rakesh who brought him his morning tea, not in one of the china cups from which the rest of the family drank, but in the old man's favorite brass tumbler, and sat at the edge of his bed, comfortable and relaxed with the string of his pajamas dangling out from under his fine lawn night-shirt, and discussed or, rather, read out the morning news to his father. It made no difference to him that his father made no response apart from spitting. It was Rakesh, too, who, on returning from the clinic in the evening, persuaded the old man to come out of his room, as bare and desolate as a cell, and take the evening air out in the garden, beautifully arranging the pillows and bolsters on the divan in the corner of the open verandah. On summer nights he saw to it that the servants carried out the old man's bed onto the lawn and himself helped his father down the steps and onto the bed, soothing him and settling him down for a night under the stars.

All this was very gratifying for the old man. What was not so gratifying was that he even undertook to supervise his father's diet. One day when the father was really sick, having ordered his daughter-in-law to make him a dish of *sojihalwa* and eaten it with a saucerful of cream, Rakesh marched into the room, not with his usual respectful step but with the confident and rather contemptuous stride of the famous doctor, and declared, "No more *halwa* for you, papa. We must be sensible, at your age. If you must have something sweet, Veena will cook you a little *kheer*, that's light, just a little rice and milk. But nothing fried, nothing rich. We can't have this happening again."

The old man who had been lying stretched out on his bed, weak and feeble after a day's illness, gave a start at the very sound, the tone of these words. He opened his eyes—rather, they fell open with shock—and he stared at his son with disbelief that darkened quickly to reproach. A son who actually refused his father the food he craved? No, it was unheard of, it was incredible. But Rakesh had turned his back to him and was cleaning up the litter of bottles and packets on the medicine shelf and did not notice while Veena slipped silently out of the room with a little smirk that only the old man saw, and hated.

Halwa was only the first item to be crossed off the old man's diet. One delicacy after the other went—everything fried to begin with, then everything sweet, and eventually everything, everything that the old man enjoyed.

The meals that arrived for him on the shining stainless steel tray twice a day were frugal to say the least—dry bread, boiled lentils, boiled vegetables and, if there were a bit of chicken or fish, that was boiled too. If he called for another helping—in a cracked voice that quavered theatrically—Rakesh himself would come to the door, gaze at him sadly and shake his head, saying, "Now, papa, we must be careful, we can't risk another illness, you know," and although the daughter-in-law kept tactfully out of the way, the old man could just see her smirk sliding merrily through the air. He tried to bribe his grandchildren into buying him sweets (and how he missed his wife now, that generous, indulgent and illiterate cook), whispering, "Here's fifty paise," as he stuffed the coins into a tight, hot fist. "Run down to the shop at the crossroads and buy me thirty paise worth of *jalebis*, and you can spend the remaining twenty paise on yourself. Eh? Understand? Will you do that?" He got away with it once or twice but then was found out, the conspirator was scolded by his father and smacked by his mother and Rakesh came storming into the room, almost tearing his hair as he shouted through compressed lips, "Now papa, are you trying to turn my little son into a liar? Quite apart from spoiling your own stomach, you are spoiling him as well—you are encouraging him to lie to his own parents. You should have heard the lies he told his mother when she saw him bringing back those *jalebis* wrapped up in filthy newspaper. I don't allow anyone in my house to buy sweets in the bazaar, papa, surely you know that. There's cholera in the city, typhoid, gastroenteritis—I see these cases daily in the hospital, how can I allow my own family to run such risks?" The old man sighed and lay down in the corpse position. But that worried no one any longer.

There was only one pleasure left in the old man now (his son's early morning visits and readings from the newspaper could no longer be called that) and those were visits from elderly neighbors. These were not frequent as his contemporaries were mostly as decrepit and helpless as he and few could walk the length of the road to visit him anymore. Old Bhatia, next door, however, who was still spry enough to refuse, adamantly, to bathe in the tiled bathroom indoors and to insist on carrying out his brass mug and towel, in all seasons and usually at impossible hours, into the yard and bathe noisily under the garden tap, would look over the hedge to see if Varma were out on his verandah and would call to him and talk while he wrapped his *dhoti* about him and dried the sparse hair on his head, shivering with enjoyable exaggeration. Of course these conversations, bawled across the hedge by two rather deaf old men conscious of having their entire households overhearing them, were not very satisfactory but Bhatia occasionally came out of his yard, walked down the bit of road and came in at Varma's gate to collapse onto the

stone plinth built under the temple tree. If Rakesh was at home he would help his father down the steps into the garden and arrange him on his night bed under the tree and leave the two old men to chew betel-leaves and discuss the ills of their individual bodies with combined passion.

“At least you have a doctor in the house to look after you,” sighed Bhatia, having vividly described his martyrdom to piles.

“Look after me?” cried Varma, his voice cracking like an ancient clay jar. “He—he does not even give me enough to eat.”

“What?” said Bhatia, the white hairs in his ears twitching. “Doesn’t give you enough to eat? Your own son?”

“My own son. If I ask him for one more piece of bread, he says no, papa, I weighed out the *ata* myself and I can’t allow you to have more than two hundred grams of cereal a day. He *weighs* the food he gives me, Bhatia—he has scales to weigh it on. That is what it has come to.”

“Never,” murmured Bhatia in disbelief. “Is it possible, even in this evil age, for a son to refuse his father food?”

“Let me tell you,” Varma whispered eagerly. “Today the family was having fried fish—I could smell it. I called to my daughter-in-law to bring me a piece. She came to the door and said no. . . .”

“Said no?” It was Bhatia’s voice that cracked. A *drongo* shot out of the tree and sped away. “No?”

“No, she said no, Rakesh has ordered her to give me nothing fried. No butter, he says, no oil. . . .”

“No butter? No oil? How does he expect his father to live?”

Old Varma nodded with melancholy triumph. “That is how he treats me—after I have brought him up, given him an education, made him a great doctor. Great doctor! This is the way great doctors treat their fathers, Bhatia,” for the son’s sterling personality and character now underwent a curious sea change. Outwardly all might be the same but the interpretation had altered: his masterly efficiency was nothing but cold heartlessness, his authority was only tyranny in disguise.

There was cold comfort in complaining to neighbors and, on such a miserable diet, Varma found himself slipping, weakening and soon becoming a genuinely sick man. Powders and pills and mixtures were not only brought in when dealing with a crisis like an upset stomach but became a regular part of his diet—became his diet, complained Varma, supplanting the natural foods he craved. There were pills to regulate his bowel movements, pills to bring down his blood pressure, pills to deal with his arthritis and, eventually, pills to keep his heart beating. In between there were panicky rushes to the hospital, some humiliating experience with the stomach pump and enema, which left him frightened and helpless. He cried easily, shriveling up on his bed, but if he complained of a pain or even a vague, gray fear in the night, Rakesh would simply open another bottle of pills and force him to take one. “I have my duty to you papa,” he said when his father begged to be let off.

“Let me be,” Varma begged, turning his face away from the pills on the outstretched hand. “Let me die. It would be better. I do not want to live only to eat your medicines.”

“Papa, be reasonable.”

“I leave that to you,” the father cried with sudden spirit. “Leave me alone, let me die now, I cannot live like this.”

“Lying all day on his pillows, fed every few hours by his daughter-in-law’s own hand, visited by every member of his family daily—and then he says he does not want to live ‘like this,’” Rakesh was heard to say, laughing, to someone outside the door.

“Deprived of food,” screamed the old man on the bed, “his wishes ignored, taunted by his daughter-in-law, laughed at by his grandchildren—*that* is how I live.” But he was very old and weak and all anyone heard was an incoherent croak, some expressive grunts and cries of genuine pain. Only once, when old Bhatia had come to see him and they sat together under the temple tree, they heard him cry, “God is calling me—and they won’t let me go.”

The quantities of vitamins and tonics he was made to take were not altogether useless. They kept him alive and even gave him a kind of strength that made him hang on long after he ceased to wish to hang on. It was as though he were straining at a rope, trying to break it, and it would not break, it was still strong. He only hurt himself, trying.

In the evening, that summer, the servants would come into his cell, grip his bed, one at each end, and carry it out to the verandah, there sitting it down with a thump that jarred every tooth in his head. In answer to his agonized complaints they said the doctor sahib had told them he must take the evening air and the evening air they would make him take—thump. Then Veena, that smiling, hypocritical pudding in a rustling sari, would appear and pile up the pillows under his head till he was propped up stiffly into a sitting position that made his head swim and his back ache.

“Let me lie down,” he begged. “I can’t sit up any more.”

“Try, papa, Rakesh said you can if you try,” she said, and drifted away to the other end of the verandah where her transistor radio vibrated to the lovesick tunes from the cinema that she listened to all day.

So there he sat, like some stiff corpse, terrified, gazing out on the lawn where his grandsons played cricket, in danger of getting one of their hard-spun balls in his eye, and at the gate that opened onto the dusty and rubbish-heaped lane but still bore, proudly, a newly touched-up signboard that bore his son’s name and qualifications, his own name having vanished from the gate long ago.

At last the sky-blue Ambassador arrived, the cricket game broke up in haste, the car drove in smartly and the doctor, the great doctor, all in white, stepped out. Someone ran up to take his bag from him, others to escort him up the steps. “Will you have tea?” his wife called, turning down the transistor set. “Or a Coca-Cola? Shall I fry you some *samosas*?” But he did not reply or even glance in her direction. Ever a devoted son, he went first to the corner where his father sat gazing, stricken, at some undefined spot in the dusty yellow air that swam before him. He did not turn his head to look at his son. But he stopped gobbling air with his uncontrolled lips and set his jaw as hard as a sick and very old man could set it.

“Papa,” his son said, tenderly, sitting down on the edge of the bed and reaching out to press his feet.

Old Varma tucked his feet under him, out of the way, and continued to gaze stubbornly into the yellow air of the summer evening.

“Papa, I’m home.”

Varma’s hand jerked suddenly, in a sharp, derisive movement, but he did not speak.

“How are you feeling, papa?”

Then Varma turned and looked at his son. His face was so out of control and all in pieces, that the multitude of expressions that crossed it could not make up a whole and convey to the famous man exactly what his father thought of him, his skill, his art.

“I’m dying,” he croaked. “Let me die, I tell you.”

“Papa, you’re joking,” his son smiled at him, lovingly. “I’ve brought you a new tonic to make you feel better. You must take it, it will make you feel stronger again. Here it is. Promise me you will take it regularly, papa.”

Varma's mouth worked as hard as though he still had a gob of betel in it (his supply of betel had been cut off years ago). Then he spat out some words, as sharp and bitter as poison, into his son's face. "Keep your tonic—I want none—I want none—I won't take any more of—of your medicines. None. Never," and he swept the bottle out of his son's hand with a wave of his own, suddenly grand, suddenly effective.

His son jumped, for the bottle was smashed and thick brown syrup had splashed up, staining his white trousers. His wife let out a cry and came running. All around the old man was hubbub once again, noise, attention.

He gave one push to the pillows at his back and dislodged them so he could sink down on his back, quite flat again. He closed his eyes and pointed his chin at the ceiling.