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THEMATIC CONCERNS IN INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH—PAST TO THE PRESENT

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Abstract

India, as a nation has the unique distinction of accepting foreign influences and not just incorporating them into daily lives but also nativising them and making them part and parcel of everyday living. The best example to prove these phenomena is the acceptance of English, a foreign language, as our own. Indian English Literature has been growing in leaps and bounds till this day. Indian English Writers have written about a variety of issues which cater to the infinite areas of interest of the reading public. Indian English novels have proved their mark in the global literary scenario by the manner in which the writers have captured the interest and imagination of the reader through poignant portrayals of various themes such as East - West conflict, multi-culturalism, social realism, gender issues, foibles and follies of human nature, ecological concerns, magic realism, diasporic writings and the like. Some of the dominant themes which have captured the imagination of the readers and have managed to create an everlasting niche for themselves are historical, political and nationalist themes, social realism, Indian diaspora and Immigration, individual

experiences, feminism and women's Empowerment. Post-modern English writings exhibit confidence in tackling new themes and experiment with new techniques and approaches to handle these themes. The present day Indian English writers are rapidly expanding India's literary horizons in novels and short stories and have accomplished a phenomenal quantity of work with a magnificent diversity of themes. The unique kaleidoscope of themes in Indian English writing showcases the authenticity and uniqueness of the Indian English writers.

Keywords: Kaleidoscope, Nativising, Authenticity, Uniqueness, New Technique,

Kaleidoscope of Themes in Indian Writing in English

Though English is foreign in its origin, it has been adopted in India as a language of understanding and awareness, education and literary expression besides being an important medium of communication amongst the people of various regions. Indian writing in English began much

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before the establishment of the British colonial rule in India. It has survived the collapse of the British Empire. The root cause for the origin of Indian writing in English is largely due to the English education provided by the Christian missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth century's.

Also, Indians showed high adaptability to the Western education. Indian writing in English has come of age in the last two hundred years. Today's Indian writers are not only confident but also competent to express themselves in English. Thus, they have managed to create a typical and distinct lingo, idiom and terminology – in short, an entirely novel lingua franca, which is at once Indian and cosmopolitan in nature. The Indian writers have proved their creativity and ingenuity by the manner in which they have nativised the English language and restructured it to fit into the Indian context. An exceptional and unique feature of much of the Indian literature in English has been the stylistic influences from the local languages.

The term used to designate Indian writing in English has been varied and ingenuous - from "Anglo -Indian," "Indo-Anglian," "Indo-British," "Commonwealth," to "Indian-English," and "Indo-English". The racial and ideological suggestion these terms carry have not given them general acceptability. In recent times

the phrase "Indian writing in English" or "Indian English literature" has been most widely accepted by literary scholars. The renowned literary critic, M.K. Naik in his book, *A History of English Literature* defines Indian English literature as "literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality." Indian English Literature pertains to that body of work by writers from India, who pen strictly in the English language. English literature in India is also intimately linked with the works of associates of the Indian diaspora.

Indian writing in English has turned out to be the new face of Indian culture. Indian writers - poets, novelists, essayists, and dramatists have been making momentous and considerable contributions to world literature. In the past few years, Indian English Literature has attained an independent status in the realm of World Literature.

Indian Writing in English deals with a wide range of themes. It reflects Indian culture, tradition, social values and even Indian history through the depiction of life in India and Indians living elsewhere. The recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience of the modern predicaments. Prof. M. K. Naik remarks ".....|one of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was

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probably a fountain head of story-telling, the novel as we know today was an importation from the west". India's substantial contribution to world literature is largely due to the profusely creative literary works generated by Indian novelists in English. Their works contemplated and deliberated on multifarious range of issues like nationalism, freedom struggle, social realism, individual consciousness and the like. Indian writing in English has distinguished itself as a remarkable force in world fiction.

This has been achieved by novelists who have excelled in expressing their inner creative urges in English language, which is an alien tongue for them. It is to the credit of these novelists that they have overcome the hurdles of writing in a foreign language and have even evolved a distinctive style for themselves by mastering the intricacies of the language and assimilating in it the hues and flavors of the Indian - sub continent. Raja Rao famously argued in 1938, in the preface to his novel *Kanthapura*, about how English language has adapted to Indian conditions: "English is not an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up - like Sanskrit or Persian was before - but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can only write as Indians. Our method of

expression will someday prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American."

Indian English novels have proved their mark in the global literary scenario by the manner in which the writers have captured the interest and imagination of the reader through poignant portrayals of various themes such as East - West conflict, multi-culturalism, social realism, gender issues, foibles of human nature, ecological concerns, magic realism, diasporic writings and the like. English is increasingly being used by writers to give shape to the conflicting dilemmas and issues that confront the human psyche. The Indian English writers use it with enviable ease and their writings are a proof of the mastery they have acquired over a foreign language. The popularity of these Indian English writings aptly vouch for the ardour, spirit and verve of the Indian English writer. A close look at the various works by Indian English writers reveals that their works are not an imitation of English literary styles and themes but are highly original and intensely Indian both in theme and spirit. They have given a new shape and colour to English literature in the same way as the Australians and Americans have evolved their own literature in their respective countries.

Some of the dominant themes which have captured the imagination of the

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readers in the early period and have managed to create an everlasting niche for themselves are the historical, political and nationalist themes. It has been nearly 200 years since the publication of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's 'Sati' in 1818. During this tumultuous period, we have witnessed the laborious and problematic passage from colonial oppression and enslavement to political independence. English literature has been a means for Indians to give form and utterance to the hopes and despairs, the enthusiasm and apathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain, in the nation's history as it moved from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence, and again from independence to the arduous tasks of reconstruction.

According to M.K. Naik: "Thus during the period from 1857 to 1920 the Indian ethos gradually underwent a sea-change from the shock of defeat and frustration and the trauma of inferiority to a new found self-awareness and self-confidence. It is against this background that the work of the prominent writers of this period must be viewed..." Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy*, K.A. Abbas's *Inquilaab*, etc are a few examples of Indian writings in English revolving around the theme of the independence struggle and the aftermath of the freedom movement in post-independent

India. The Partition left an indelible impact on the psyche of a few writers and led them to highlight its ill effects in their writings. Prominent among such writers are Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Manohar Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, H.S. Gill's *Ashes and Petals*, Attia Hosain's *Sun Light on a Broken Column*.

Depicting social issues for the purpose of social reform was one of the major themes in the Indian writings in English during that period. Some of the distinguished works which played an instrumental role in bringing about social reform were, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*; R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friend*, *The Dark Room*; Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, *The Serpent and the Rope*, *The Cow of the Barricades*; G. V. Desai's *All About Hatter*; Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* and Kamla Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, *A Silence of Desire and Possession*. These works depicted Indian society realistically by exploring the by lanes of the outcasts and peasants and the working people, especially the common man rather than the elite and the sophisticated, preferring the familiar to the fancied. The writings of this period extensively deal with several aspects of social reform such as exploitation of the untouchables, the landless peasants, tea garden workers and the problems of industrial labour.

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Another prominent aspect of the social fabric during this period was that it was the era of immigrants who left their lands to explore the new horizons. Many of them took to writing in English to describe their predicament and experiences. The major theme in their works is the dilemma of Indian immigrants torn between the two worlds. They evoke ideas of homeland, their personal feelings towards rootlessness, their problems of adjustments, suppression, frustration, anger, identity crisis, resistance, humiliation and moral dilemmas. Bharti Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter, Wife, Desirable Daughters, The Tree Bride*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies, The Namesake and Unaccustomed Earth* all belong to this category. This group of Indian English writers expresses their inner turmoil caused to the immigrants as they try to settle down in the alien land. Debjani Banerjee remarks that: "Contemporary writing from South Asian Diaspora bears the marks of a cultural encounter that combines the rewriting of history with nuanced responses to dislocation and marginalization by hegemonic structures. The raw energy of first generation politics is substituted by a more complex response to issues of race and unbalancing. The new writers retort to their attempted marginalization, not by dissolving into mainstream but by rendering their distinctive voices."

The Indian writers who wrote in English about their first-hand experience in foreign lands, delved upon the theme of East-West encounter and highlighted the interaction between the Oriental and Occidental people and cultures. This is best portrayed in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*, Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man, Some Inner Fury*, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust* and Balchandran Rajan's *The Dark Dancer and Too Long in the West*.

Some of the Indian English writers carved out a niche for themselves by extensively and intensively dealing with the individual problems and issues such as quest for identity, alienation, rootlessness, meaninglessness and human predicament. The prominent among these writers are Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas and Apprentice*, Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca and Fire on the Mountain*, Shastri Brata's *Confessions of an Indian Woman, Easter and She and He*, Saros Cowsjee's *Goodbye to Elsa* and Shiv K Kumar's *The Bone's Prayer and Nude before God* and Y.P. Dhawan's *Beyond the Guru and Journey through Hell*. Thus the second generation of Indian English writers projected the themes of, social reform, the Indian diaspora, the east-west encounter, degeneration of Values, existential issues.

A major development in modern Indian English writings is the growth of a

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feminist or woman-centered approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. The portrayal of the predicament of middle class educated Indian women, their quest for identity, issues pertaining to parent-child relationship, marriage and sex, and their exploitation are the hallmark of the modern Indian writings in English. These writings represents the contemporary modern woman's struggle to define and attain an autonomous selfhood. The women writers in English have been instrumental in popularizing this theme. The social and cultural change in the post-independent India has made women conscious of the need to define themselves, their place in society and their surroundings. The female characters in such writings are at great pains to free themselves from stultifying, traditional constraints. The female quest for identity has been a pet theme for many Indian English writers. They indicate the arrival of a new Indian woman, eager to defy rebelliously against the well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system. These female characters are modern, strong and take bold decisions to survive in the society.

The feminist thought and the feminist movements in the west had some influence on the women's movement in developing countries like India. Yet feminism as it exists today in India has

gone beyond its western counterparts. As Uma Narayan rightly puts it, "third-world feminism is not a mindless mimicking of Western agenda in one clear and simple sense. Indian feminism is clearly a response to the issues related to Indian women." Some of the prominent writers who have changed the concept of feminism in Indian English literature are Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Nayantara Sahgal and Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai.

Industrialization, urbanization, globalization, modernization, new historicism and women's empowerment and the changing social dynamics constitute the major themes of the modern Indian English writers. Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight Children*, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Circle of Reason*, *Shadow Lines*, *Sea of Poppies*, Tabish Kher's *An Angel in Pyjamas*, Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth*, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*, Anita Nair's *The Better Man* are some of the writings addressing modern existential issues. These are the third generation writers who have concentrated their themes around sociological, diasporic elements, feminine subjects, science and technologies, explorative writings and much more.

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The new English writings exhibits confidence in tackling new themes and experiments with new techniques and approaches to handle these themes. They focus on a vast and comprehensive canvas and invest their themes with epic dimensions. The new Indian English writer could compete with the best in the world, "it would be no exaggeration to say that the best English fiction in the world is being written by the Indians or those of Indian origin." Their works exhibit global concerns through the presentation of multi-cultural reality. The expansion of the scope of their thematic concerns and development of new forms of expression has won them many prestigious international awards. Their writings have won acclaim far and wide.

The present day Indian English writers are rapidly expanding India's literary horizons in novels and short stories and have accomplished to produce a phenomenal quantity of work with a magnificent diversity of themes. Writing in English, they have managed to successfully present their disarmingly intimate and often unconventional images of India to readers beyond their nation's borders. The new-age writers are brazenly and dauntlessly but emphatically handling themes like homosexuality, abortion and personal relations gone wrong. They are also lampooning national heroes and India's myths about itself. This is a proof of the

fact that the present generation of Indian English writers are gutsy and high-spirited to deal with themes and issues which were considered to be taboo and forbidden from public discourse. Mr. Shashi Tharoor says, "The most distinguishing feature of Indian writing in English is that it has acquired a certain self-confidence as a genre because there is a whole generation for whom there is no need to feel self-conscious about the use of this language or the kind of stories we tell in it." The unique kaleidoscope of themes in Indian English writing showcases the authenticity and uniqueness of the Indian English writers.

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