

The Emergence of Realism in Indian English Literature

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Abstract

Realism in literature aims to represent everyday experiences and the complexities of human life accurately. In Indian English literature, realism emerged as a significant literary movement during the colonial and post-colonial periods, reflecting the socio-political, economic, and cultural realities of India. This article explores the emergence and evolution of realism in Indian English literature, examining key authors and their works. Through detailed analysis, it highlights how Indian writers have utilized realism to critique social norms, address issues of caste and gender, and represent the struggles of ordinary people.

Keywords: Realism, Indian English literature, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya,

Introduction

Realism in literature, which developed in the mid-19th century in Europe, sought to depict life as it is, without idealization or romantic subjectivity. In the context of Indian English literature, realism became a tool to capture the multifaceted experiences of a colonized nation and its people. This literary movement provided Indian writers with a framework to explore the socio-economic and political issues of their times, offering a platform for voices that were often marginalized or silenced.

The transition from romanticism to realism marked a significant shift in Indian English literature. Romanticism's focus on idealism, nature, and individual emotion gave way to a more grounded portrayal of life, emphasizing the ordinary and the mundane. Realism became a means to document the social changes and upheavals brought about by colonial rule and the subsequent struggle for independence.

This article examines the emergence of realism in Indian English literature,

focusing on key authors such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Kamala Markandaya. By analyzing their works, it seeks to understand how realism has been used to address pressing social issues and provide a more nuanced representation of Indian society.

Mulk Raj Anand: Champion of the Marginalized

Mulk Raj Anand is often regarded as one of the pioneers of realism in Indian English literature. His works focus on the lives of the oppressed and marginalized, highlighting the injustices and inequalities prevalent in Indian society. Anand's novels, such as "Untouchable" (1935) and "Coolie" (1936), provide stark, unflinching portrayals of the hardships faced by the lower classes.

In "Untouchable," Anand tells the story of Bakha, a young sweeper who belongs to the untouchable caste. The novel provides a detailed account of a single day in Bakha's life, emphasizing the social ostracism and discrimination he faces. Anand's use of

realistic narrative techniques serves to highlight the everyday humiliations and struggles of the untouchables:

“They think we are dirt because we clean their dirt.”

Through Bakha’s experiences, Anand exposes the deep-seated prejudices and systemic injustices that perpetuate caste-based discrimination. His realistic portrayal of Bakha’s plight serves as a powerful critique of the caste system and a call for social reform.

In “Coolie,” Anand continues to explore themes of social injustice and exploitation. The novel follows Munoo, a young boy from a rural village, who moves to the city in search of a better life. Munoo’s journey is marked by exploitation and suffering, reflecting the harsh realities faced by many migrant workers:

“He felt he was a mere animal to be beaten and lashed and made to work, work, work.”

Anand’s focus on the socio-economic struggles of the lower classes and his unvarnished depiction of their lives make his works quintessential examples of literary realism. His commitment to social justice and his ability to capture the complexities of human experience have left a lasting impact on Indian English literature.

R.K. Narayan: Chronicler of the Ordinary

R.K. Narayan, another key figure in the development of realism in Indian English literature, is known for his subtle, humorous, and deeply human portrayals of everyday life in South India. Narayan’s fictional town of Malgudi serves as the

setting for many of his stories, providing a microcosm of Indian society.

In novels such as “Swami and Friends” (1935) and “The Guide” (1958), Narayan explores the lives of ordinary people, focusing on their aspirations, struggles, and relationships. His realistic narrative style and keen observation of human nature create a vivid and relatable portrayal of Indian life.

“Swami and Friends” follows the adventures of a young boy, Swaminathan, and his friends in Malgudi. Narayan’s depiction of childhood, with its innocence, curiosity, and mischief, is both realistic and endearing. The novel captures the everyday experiences of school life, family dynamics, and friendships, providing a snapshot of middle-class Indian society:

“He sat down, took out his book, and tried to read. But his mind was elsewhere. He gazed at the words without understanding.”

Narayan’s ability to depict the inner lives of his characters and the subtleties of their interactions makes his works enduring examples of literary realism. His focus on the ordinary and the mundane, coupled with his gentle humor and empathy, provides a rich, nuanced representation of Indian society.

In “The Guide,” Narayan explores the transformation of Raju, a tour guide, into a spiritual leader. The novel delves into themes of identity, deception, and redemption, reflecting the complexities of human nature and social change. Narayan’s realistic portrayal of Raju’s journey, with its moral ambiguities and personal struggles, exemplifies his skill in capturing the essence of human experience:

“Raju had come to realize that he was a human being after all, prone to the weaknesses and strengths of his kind.”

Narayan’s focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people, his nuanced characterization, and his keen observation of social dynamics make his works a significant contribution to the realist tradition in Indian English literature.

Kamala Markandaya: Realism and Social Commentary

Kamala Markandaya is another prominent writer who has made significant contributions to the realist tradition in Indian English literature. Her novels often address themes of rural life, economic hardship, and cultural conflict, providing a realistic portrayal of Indian society.

In “Nectar in a Sieve” (1954), Markandaya tells the story of Rukmani, a poor peasant woman, and her struggles to survive in a changing rural landscape. The novel highlights the impact of modernization and economic change on traditional ways of life, reflecting the harsh realities faced by rural communities:

“It is a cruel land, this India. They are right, our conquerors. But I think, if there is anything that makes India what it is, it is the belief of the people in their gods and in themselves.”

Markandaya’s realistic depiction of Rukmani’s life, with its hardships, losses, and moments of resilience, provides a powerful commentary on the socio-economic conditions of rural India. Her ability to capture the emotional depth and complexity of her characters adds a poignant human dimension to her social critique.

In “A Handful of Rice” (1966), Markandaya explores the struggles of a young man, Ravi, who moves from his village to the city in search of a better life. The novel addresses themes of urban poverty, economic exploitation, and social mobility, reflecting the challenges faced by the urban poor:

“He felt himself an outcast, not only in the city but also in the village that had once been his home.”

Markandaya’s realistic portrayal of Ravi’s journey, with its moments of hope and despair, provides a nuanced depiction of the socio-economic challenges faced by individuals in a rapidly changing society. Her focus on the lives of ordinary people and their struggles for survival and dignity makes her works a significant contribution to the realist tradition in Indian English literature.

Social Realism and the Post-Colonial Context

The emergence of realism in Indian English literature is closely linked to the socio-political context of colonial and post-colonial India. Writers used realism to address the complexities of Indian society, including issues of caste, gender, and economic inequality. The realist narrative provided a means to critique social norms and advocate for social change.

Caste and Social Inequality

One of the central themes addressed by realist writers in Indian English literature is the issue of caste and social inequality. The rigid caste system and the resulting social stratification have been subjects of intense scrutiny and critique in realist literature.

Mulk Raj Anand’s “Untouchable” and “Coolie” are prime examples of how

realism has been used to highlight the injustices and inequalities perpetuated by the caste system. Through detailed, empathetic portrayals of the lives of the lower castes, Anand exposes the systemic discrimination and exploitation faced by these communities.

In “Untouchable,” Anand’s depiction of Bakha’s daily life and his interactions with upper-caste individuals serves as a powerful indictment of the caste system. The novel’s realistic portrayal of Bakha’s experiences, from the humiliation of being denied access to water to the physical abuse he endures, underscores the pervasive nature of caste-based discrimination:

“The outcastes had to wait patiently till all the others had finished their ablutions and then only could they approach the pool.”

Similarly, in “Coolie,” Anand’s portrayal of Munoo’s journey and the exploitation he faces as a laborer highlights the socio-economic dimensions of caste discrimination. The novel’s focus on the intersection of caste and class provides a comprehensive critique of social inequality in colonial India.

Gender and Patriarchy

Realist writers in Indian English literature have also addressed issues of gender and patriarchy, highlighting the struggles and resilience of women in a patriarchal society. Through their realistic depictions of female characters, these writers provide a nuanced exploration of the challenges faced by women and their efforts to assert their agency.

Kamala Markandaya’s “Nectar in a Sieve” offers a poignant portrayal of Rukmani’s life, capturing the gendered dimensions of

poverty and social change. The novel’s focus on Rukmani’s experiences as a wife and mother, and her resilience in the face of adversity, provides a realistic depiction of the lives of rural women:

“I had learned to live with adversity, to look it in the face and outlast it. And yet, in this land where we have lived and toiled and died, it was not easy to reconcile oneself to hopelessness.”

Markandaya’s portrayal of Rukmani’s strength and perseverance in the face of immense challenges underscores the complexities of gender and social change in rural India. The novel’s realistic depiction of the intersection of gender, poverty, and social norms provides a powerful critique of patriarchy and its impact on women’s lives.

In “The Guide,” R.K. Narayan explores the character of Rosie, a woman who defies social norms to pursue her passion for dance. The novel’s realistic portrayal of Rosie’s struggles and her journey towards self-realization highlights the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society:

“She was an enigma to herself. A woman who had lived a life of servitude and then had broken free, only to find herself in another form of bondage.”

Narayan’s depiction of Rosie’s journey, with its complexities and contradictions, provides a nuanced exploration of gender and agency. The novel’s realistic portrayal of her struggles and triumphs offers a powerful commentary on the challenges faced by women in their quest for self-identity and autonomy.

Economic Exploitation and Urbanization

The themes of economic exploitation and urbanization are also central to the realist tradition in Indian English literature. Writers have used realism to depict the socio-economic challenges faced by individuals and communities in the context of rapid social and economic change.

In “A Handful of Rice,” Kamala Markandaya explores the impact of urbanization on rural-urban migrants. The novel’s realistic portrayal of Ravi’s journey from his village to the city, and his struggles to survive in an urban environment, highlights the socio-economic challenges faced by the urban poor:

“The city had its own rhythm, its own demands, and those who could not keep pace were crushed.”

Markandaya’s focus on the harsh realities of urban life, including economic exploitation and social marginalization, provides a powerful critique of the socio-economic conditions faced by migrant workers. The novel’s realistic depiction of the intersection of rural and urban life offers a comprehensive exploration of the impact of urbanization on traditional ways of life.

R.K. Narayan’s “The Financial Expert” also addresses themes of economic exploitation and social mobility. The novel follows the life of Margayya, a financial advisor, and his rise and fall in the world of finance. Narayan’s realistic portrayal of Margayya’s ambitions, successes, and failures provides a nuanced exploration of the complexities of economic life:

“Margayya had discovered that wealth was not an end in itself but a means to an end, and that end was the fulfillment of his desires and aspirations.”

Narayan’s focus on the socio-economic dimensions of Margayya’s life, and his realistic depiction of the impact of economic change on individual lives, provides a powerful commentary on the complexities of social mobility and economic exploitation.

Conclusion

The emergence of realism in Indian English literature represents a significant development in the literary landscape of India. Realism provided Indian writers with a framework to explore the socio-economic, political, and cultural realities of their times, offering a platform for voices that were often marginalized or silenced. Through detailed, empathetic portrayals of the lives of ordinary people, realist writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Kamala Markandaya have provided a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of Indian society.

The focus on themes such as caste and social inequality, gender and patriarchy, economic exploitation, and urbanization reflects the complexities of Indian life and the challenges faced by individuals and communities. The realist narrative, with its emphasis on accuracy and authenticity, has allowed writers to critique social norms, advocate for social change, and provide a more inclusive representation of Indian society.

As Indian English literature continues to evolve, the legacy of realism remains a powerful and enduring influence. The commitment to capturing the complexities of human experience and the socio-political realities of Indian society continues to inspire writers and readers alike, ensuring that the tradition of realism remains a vital and dynamic force in Indian literature.

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