

# South Asian Literature in English

An Encyclopedia



Edited by Jaina C. Sanga

*Mala Renganathan*

*South Asian  
Literature  
in English*

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For Monica

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## Preface

This encyclopedia covers topics related to literature written in English by authors who were either born in South Asia or who identify themselves with that region. The geographic areas that this volume focuses on are the nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

In the global marketplace of literature, South Asian writing in English has recently received unprecedented attention. The publication of Salman Rushdie's seminal novel, *Midnight's Children* in 1981 as well as the popularity of his subsequent works, Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize for *The English Patient* in 1992, Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things* in 1997, Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* in 2000, and V. S. Naipaul's Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003, are just a few of the notable highlights that have anchored a place for South Asian writing in English on the international literary scene.

While the novel, and to a lesser extent, the short story, are the two genres that are most widely circulated and consumed, it is important to note that there is a substantial amount of writing in English in other genres as well: poetry, drama, autobiography, and travelogues also vividly render the South Asian imagination. Contemplating the scope and limitations of each genre enables a richer, more comprehensive approach to the study of South Asian literature in English.

The South Asian experience imagined in English rehearses numerous salient characteristics. Many works call attention to the idea of Empire and interrogate the colonial moments of the subcontinents vertiginous history. The struggle for Independence, the contentious saga of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, the mass migration of Hindus and Muslims on both sides of the newly created borders, and the ensuing violence, have found provocative expression in the literature of India and Pakistan. The ethnic tensions in Sri Lanka, the long-standing conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tiger rebels that claimed more than 60,000 lives and displaced more than 1.5 million people from their homes have found voice in Sri Lankan literature. A brutal civil war fought for independence from Pakistan has figured in the Bangladeshi literary imagination. Ideas of nationalism and attempts to define the new nations have also been important concerns. The vulgar atrocities prompted by the caste system, the rampant communalism that continues to thwart secularism, and the growing sensitivity to the rights of women and disenfranchised minorities are vital issues that are consistently and systematically

represented in the literature. In some works, social and political issues and events are writ large, presented on a grand scale in generational sagas; in other works, they are miniaturized, distilled into images that depict the mundane business of everyday living.

Much of the writing focuses on the issue of identity, often juxtaposing notions of public and private, collective and individual, or local and foreign, in an attempt to expose the points of collision that mark the exegesis of hybrid constructions. Religion and politics begin to matter profoundly as discussions of progress are confronted with ancient traditions. South Asian authors writing in English tend to favor a secular humanist perspective: when religious orthodoxy is pitted against the changing social circumstances of an increasingly globalizing world, we see the emergence of a new type of identity—an identity that is built on tolerance, suspicious of undue past veneration, and embodied in the perspectives of an enlightened humanism. The notion of identity is an important focus in the poetry of the region: In the work of women poets, especially, there is a range of highly volatile emotive expression that attempts to describe women's issues in the sociopolitical construction of the nation. In the resultant complexity of some of their verse, we witness the extent to which identity is implicated in ethnic-, class-, and gender-based dissonances.

For many of the writers, particularly those who have left their native lands, the act of writing becomes a way to reclaim their homeland, and the notion of memory figures prominently in such narratives. The immigrant's story has in fact proved to be a fecund subject, and much like the Irish, Jewish, Chinese, and Polish writers, South Asians, too, have attempted to record the predicament of displacement, celebrating and/or questioning the act of straddling two cultures and coping with new worlds. These narratives are not merely stereotypical comic descriptions of immigrants, but rather realistic reflections of characters who are flawed, everyday people, and whose individual trials and triumphs help us see the complexity of the immigrant condition.

The settings of the narratives are as varied as the themes. Hari Kunzru's novel, *The Impressionist*, for instance, stretches from the Rajasthan desert, Agra, Fatehpur, and Bombay to London, Oxford, and finally to the remote West African landscape. Hanif Kureishi's work is set primarily in Britain. David Davidar's *The House of Blue Mangoes* is set in the lush, tropical spaces of southern India. Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories take place in urban American as well as Indian settings. Kamila Shamsie's *In a City by the Sea* is set in Karachi. Salman Rushdie's *Shame* is obviously set in Pakistan, but the narrator goes through great pains to tell us that the country is not Pakistan at all but an altogether fictitious place. Yet others, such as R. K. Narayan, create wholly imaginary locales for their stories.

Although this encyclopedia is clearly limited to South Asian writing in English, it is necessary to point out that the various writers use the English language in distinct ways. Many of the writers incorporate the syntax of everyday speech, or use Indianized words and phrases in their texts. Often, in an effort to authenticate place, character, or experience, writers parlay a certain subcontinental English diction that is marked by a specific cadence. Some writers prefer to use a standard, formal version of the language, while others experiment with the normative register and attempt to use the language in brave new ways.

The popularity of South Asian writing in English can be attributed to the fact that there is a definite context for this literature. The monumental rise of South Asian novelists in particular, has, appropriately enough, been compared to the burgeoning of the Latin American novelists of the 1970s and 1980s. The trinity represented by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa epitomized the novel tradition because they were regarded as the unofficial historians for their countries where political upheaval and military dictatorship had silenced individual voices. South Asian writers in English can be seen as the alternative interpreters of the subcontinents many histories. Their representations matter profoundly as they enable us to envision the various registers and textures of experiences of a vast and complicated region. Their narratives provide relevant commentaries on polemical cultural and political issues, provoking an assessment of the role of literature in imagining the nation.

What about the future of South Asian writing in English? Will South Asian writers be able to sustain their imaginative paradigms and persist in producing writing of high quality? And, is this a literature that will continue to influence future generations around the world? In recent years, the overwhelming literary and commercial success of the South Asian novel has meant big prizes and big advances for writers and huge profits for publishers. Literature in other genres still lags far behind, although it is gradually getting noticed in academic circles. While it may be difficult to judge the staying power of all the individual writers or to judge the long-term relevance of particular works, it is obvious, even from a cursory appraisal, given the brilliance and sophistication of this literature thus far, not to mention the sheer volume of on-going imaginative production, that South Asian literature will continue to make its mark on the world literary scene. Within South Asia, generally speaking, economic development has had a positive impact on cultural development, and especially during the past five decades, South Asia has generated more and more intellectuals who have turned their attention to artistic expression. As for diasporic South Asians, the trend some 20 years ago was to pursue professions in science and engineering; now, however, the trend has changed, howsoever marginally, and there is an increasing number of second generation immigrants who are encouraged by their parents to study the arts, and professions such as writing and filmmaking are less often considered perfunctory. Moreover, the literary audience around the world has become, generally, more globally aware, so that it is possible, for instance, to discuss a phenomenon such as “Bollywood”—as Manil Suri, Vikram Chandra, and others have done—and not be dismissed as totally incomprehensible.

The point of this volume is to provide a systematic and engaging discussion of some of the relevant literary topics so as to help beginning students as well as more advanced academic scholars gain a further understanding of South Asian literature. Since English literature in South Asia has gained prominence and momentum particularly after the end of British colonialism of the region, that is, post 1947, a majority of the entries focus on contemporary authors and literary issues. I have made a conscious effort, however, to include a few pertinent entries that describe pre-Independence subjects—“East India Company,” “Minute on Indian Education,” “Sir William Jones,” “British Raj,” “Imperial Myth,” and so on—in order to provide a more contextual approach to the study of South Asian literature in English.

This encyclopedia includes entries on novelists, novels, and cinematic adaptations of novels, as well as poets, dramatists, autobiographers, short-story writers, theoreticians, theoretical terms, themes, genres, literary movements, and key historical events. All the entries are arranged alphabetically, and vary in length from 200 to 3,500 words, depending on the nature and complexity of the topic. Each entry includes a thorough discussion of the topic, and, in the case of authors, each entry includes a biographical sketch as well as an assessment of their major works and themes. All the entries conclude with a "Further Reading" section that is meant to direct the reader to additional sources about the topic. A "Selected Bibliography" at the end of the volume is divided into three sections: the first includes anthologies that feature South Asian writing; the second contains general, critical secondary works; and the third provides a list of useful journals and periodicals.

Although there are several reference books that include discussions of South Asia, they are quite different in scope and purpose from this one. For example, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan*, edited by Francis Robinson (Cambridge, Eng. and New York: Cambridge UP, 1989) is a general reference volume on the region and does not have a specific literary focus. Books such as Daya De Silva's *Sri Lanka Since Independence: A Reference Guide to the Literature* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1992), although literary in focus, are area specific and do not address the South Asian region as a whole. The Sahitya Akademi (India's official academy of letters and literature) does publish excellent lists and references on South Asian literature, for instance, Amaresh Datta's *Sahitya Akademi Encyclopedia A-to-Z* (New Delhi, 1987), but again, these are quite different in scope and purpose from the current volume. This encyclopedia effectively complements *South Asian Novelists in English: An A to Z Guide* (Westport: Greenwood, 2003), which I have edited; however, this volume attempts a wider focus by incorporating poets, dramatists, films, theoreticians, and historical moments into the grand narrative.

I am acutely aware of the attendant problematics and limitations of this encyclopedia. Confining this volume to literature in English inadvertently posits the superiority of English over other indigenous languages. It is not as though South Asian literature written in the host of regional languages is less important; in fact, there is a recognizably long and sophisticated tradition of literature written in languages other than English. This volume does not intend to subvert the regional literatures, but rather attempts to recognize the prevalence of English as a modern, South Asian language. Moreover, South Asia is hardly a monolithic entity, and a volume such as this does run the risk of collapsing disparate identities and imposing an artificial sense of commonality amongst distinct agendas. However, the regions shared history of colonialism, and the fact that this literature is written in English does indeed provide a basis to explore some meaningful connections. To a large extent, the project of putting together an encyclopedia rehearses the Orientalist enterprise of cataloguing and organizing information; I am critically conscious of how such an endeavor is implicated in the process of canonization. Also, it must be emphasized that South Asian literature in English is by no means a tidy, compact category; it is rather a protean phenomenon, constantly evolving and shifting its parameters. This encyclopedia does not claim to be all-inclusive: lack of space and time

has prevented the inclusion of numerous entries. Despite its limitations, I hope this volume gives the reader a sense of the fascinating trajectory of the South Asian literary tradition.

I am immensely grateful to all the contributors, scattered around the world, who have written entries for this encyclopedia. Reading and editing their entries has significantly enriched my own perspectives of South Asian literature. My sincere thanks to Dr. George Butler, senior editor at Greenwood Press for his support and guidance; to Dr. Emmanuel Nelson, series advisor, for his friendship and encouragement; and to the publication, production, and marketing staff at Greenwood Press for all their hard work with this project. Thanks to Dr. Satchit Srinivasan for his help in researching South Asian history, and to photo expert Lisa Kirchner for procuring the fabulous photographs for this encyclopedia. With humble gratitude, I acknowledge Dr. Paul Love, director of the Study Center for Indian Literature in English and Translation (SCILET) at The American College in Madurai, and Dr. Niti Sampat-Patel, professor of English and film studies at St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, for serving on the editorial board of this encyclopedia. Their advice and expertise, as well as their meticulous reading of the manuscript, has made this a better book.

In *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, a collection of nine short stories, Divakaruni goes past the East-West binaries found in *Arranged Marriage* and shows various lives in a range of complexities. An elderly woman writes a letter to her friend in India, disguising her disillusionment with life in America with a son who has grown distant and his family to whom she has little value. A sister is unable to talk about her mother's terminal illness with her uncommunicative brother. An unmarried Indian woman tries to carve a life of her own in California, away from the watchful eyes of her family. A young Indian American woman tries to find an answer to an emotional crisis through the religious myths her Indian grandmother passed on to her. An Indian woman with an American husband visits her village in India to reconnect herself and her new family with her old roots. These are some of the complex life stories rendered in this volume.

Divakaruni's first children's book, *Neela: Victory Song*, looks at the Indian anticolonial movement from the perspective of a 12-year-old girl.

Divakaruni has been critically well received, especially in the United States. She has won many awards for her poetry and fiction. Most of her writings have elicited appreciative reviews for her dexterous fusion of lyricism, realism, myth, and powerful emotion. However, the unmistakable glorification of the adopted society at the cost of denigrating the Indian society she left behind is evident in some of her writings, such as *Black Candle*, *Arranged Marriage*, and even *Sister of My Heart*. But she has moved away from that predisposition in her newer writings *The Vine of Desire* and *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. In a conversation with Rajini Srikanth for the *Asian Pacific American Journal* (99), Divakaruni has defended all her portrayals as being guided by truth and

honesty, and compassion for her characters.

Husne Jahan

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## Dramatists of India

This study offers a critical assessment of six contemporary Indian dramatists: Asif Currimbhoy, Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, Pratap Sharma, Vijay Tendulkar, and P. S. Vasudev.

Asif Currimbhoy, born on August 15, 1928, is one of the leading Indian English playwrights with almost 30 plays in his repertoire. Currimbhoy descends from a baronet family of khoja Muslim industrialists in Goa. His liberal educational/familial background, his study and work abroad, and his extensive travel through India in his executive job for Burma-Shell have made his dramatic art diverse and unique. His first play *The Tourist Mecca* (1959) deals with the East-West relations seen in terms of an ideal love relationship. With *Doldrummers* (1960), he gained notoriety for his free representation of love and sex. In his next play *The Dumb Dancer* (1961), Currimbhoy projected the tragedy of a Kathakali dancer who identifies himself with the role he performs. *Thorns on a Canvas* (1962) airs strong views on censorship that makes a mockery of true art. In *Goa* (1964), Currimbhoy juxtaposes

a passionate but tragic love story with the topical events of the Indian annexation of the Portuguese colony.

Asif Currimbhoy's Bengal plays begin with *Inquilab* ("Revolution" 1970), which probes the tensions of the Indian youth triggered by the Naxalite's zeal to establish a new-world order. The satirical *Darjeeling Tea?* (1971) is a two-act comedy about tea planters and the many East-West contradictions that their colonial living manifests. *Sonar Bangla* ("Golden Bengal," 1972) is a potent play about the Bangladeshi Liberation War. *Om Mane Padme Hum!* ("Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus!" 1972) retells, in flashbacks and dream sequences, the story of the end of Lamaism in Tibet. *This Alien . . . Native Land* (1976) is a kind of memory play that probes into family conflicts.

Currimbhoy's other dramas include televised and one-act plays. The one-act *The Hungry Ones* (1966), an off-Broadway success, gives a moving portrait of an environment of poverty and violence. His other short plays—*The Refugee* (1971), *The Clock* (1959), and *The Miracle Seed* (1973)—are appreciated for their thematic variety, technical virtuosity, and experimental form and technique. He is considered an original voice in Indian drama.

Mahesh Dattani, born on August 7, 1958, is a Bangalore-based playwright writing in English. Dattani worked as copywriter in an advertising agency and also assisted his father in the family business. Theatre was always close to his heart from his childhood. His aptitude for crafts and dance was encouraged in his family. Dattani's active involvement in the Bangalore Little Theatre in his college days and his fond learning of Bharatnatyam and ballet helped him when he finally decided to turn to theatre. In 1984, he started his own theatre group called Playpen, which became the site for his acting, playwriting, and directorial ventures. Dattani won the

Sahitya Akademi award for his first collection of plays *The Final Solutions and Other Plays* (1994). He has nine dramas to his credit: six full length plays, two radio plays, and a one-act play.

*Where There's a Will* (first produced, 1988) is a provoking exhibition of patriarchal control, as seen in a Gujarati family. The story of family conflicts, especially between the father and the son, ends with the family's final rejection of paternal authority. *Dance Like a Man* (1989) retells in two acts—time present and time past—the inner struggles of a dancing couple. *Bravely Fought the Queen* (1991) explores family turmoil and questions the social roles of the man and the woman. *Tara* (1995) is a poignant story of a family's collective sin of maiming a female child in order to make her twin brother healthy. Dattani analyses the problems of social injustice and female infanticide with a feminist's zeal.

*The Final Solutions* (1993) is an exposition of communal hatred and violence inherent in common people. It is a commentary on the religious hypocrisy found in even liberal-minded people. *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (1998) is a frank portrayal of gay relationships. Dattani's two radio plays, *Do the Needful* (1997) and *Seven Steps around the Fire* (1999), are powerful in their appeal. The former reveals the futility in man-woman relations in the empty life of a gay husband and his flirtatious wife. The second radio play exposes social prejudices and pretensions in the Indian milieu.

Dattani's plays have evinced interest both in India and abroad. His use of innovative staging techniques assimilated in a well-constructed story reflecting modern Indian concerns has brought a new vitality to Indian drama in English.

Girish Karnad, born on May 19, 1938, is the prime playwright of contemporary Indian stage. Karnad is a native of Matheran near Bombay, and was brought up

in Dharwad, Karnataka. As a child, he grew up seeing the indigenous folk plays in his small town. He received a Rhodes scholarship (1960–63) and also won a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence award for 1987. He chaired the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, in 1974, and also chaired the Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi, from 1988 to 1993. Karnad writes his plays in Kannada and then translates them into English. He also acts and directs in films and television.

Girish Karnad's first play *Yayati* (1961) in Kannada still remains untranslatable. The play reflects his attempt to relate contemporary issues to old myths. Here, the Mahabharata story is of a son's exchange of youth with old age in order to fulfill his father's desire for eternal youth. Karnad's second play *Tughlaq* (1964) is a theatrical success and considered a classic. Karnad turns to history and dramatizes the ebbing fortunes of the fourteenth-century sultan of New Delhi, Mohammed Tughlaq. The theme of a king's enthusiastic idealism gradually fading into tyrant misrule is often linked to the post-Independence loss of faith in Nehruvian idealism.

Karnad's third play *Hayavadhana* (1971, English 1975), which won the Nāṭya Saṅgh and Sangeet Natak awards, is based on a Sanskrit story that he discovered in Thomas Mann's story of transposed heads. Karnad's ingenuity lies in capsuling an ancient story in an experimental form and in the Indian folk theatre tradition. With his heroine, Padmini, Karnad centers a woman into his play for the first time. The existentialist theme of search for identity and perfection is reflected in a double plot—in the consequences of the transposed head as seen in the two friends and in *Hayavadhana*'s struggle to get rid of his horse head. The futility of the search is also reflected in both the plots, with Padmini performing sati in the funeral pyre of the two friends, and with *Hayavadhana* turned into a complete horse rather than man.

*Anjumallige* (1971), a play based on incest, was not a theatrical success. *Nagamandala*, his second play with a female protagonist, is a retelling of two Kannada folktales by a woman in the oral tradition. Like Padmini (*Hayavadhana*), Rani too is caught in a dichotomous situation, between the reality of a tyrannical husband and the illusion of a snake lover. The multiple viewing of the story and its meta-theatrical form leave a rich commentary on the conflation of the epic and the dramatic narratives.

The Sahitya Akademi award winning *Tale-Danda* (1990), meaning "death by beheading" is about a twelfth-century Kannada poet's attempt to set up a caste-free society. *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), commissioned by the American Guthrie Theater, won him the Jnanpith award. The play belies the issue of fratricide viewed in a socioreligious backdrop. The tales of fraternal jealousy and violence in the Yavakri-Paravasu and Indra-Vishwarupa myths from Mahabharata are retold in a play-within-a-play framework.

Karnad's dramatic works are noted for their stageworthiness and contemporaneity. They have been widely translated and directed in several Indian languages including Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, and Tamil. His ingenuity lies in capsuling ancient myths in an experimental form and Indian folk theater tradition, thereby creating "a bridge between the elite and the folk" (Ramaswamy, "Indian Drama" 278).

Vijay Tendulkar, born on January 7, 1928, is a versatile and prolific Marathi playwright. He began his career as journalist and gradually changed over to playwriting. Tendulkar's powerful plays in Marathi are widely translated and performed. They have won him the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi award and the Padma Bhushan title. Tendulkar has written 28 full-length dramas, 24 one-act plays, and 11 children's plays, many of which have been translated into English.

Vijay Tendulkar's first major work that gave him recognition was *Manus Navache Bet* ("An Island called Man," 1955). It projects the inherent violence in the modern self-alienated man. *Gidhade* ("The Vultures," 1971) is a bold portrayal of the controversial subject of extramarital relations. *Shantata ! Court Chalu Ahe!* ("Silence! The Court is in Session," 1968) dramatizes a shocking mock trial of a woman accused of illicit relations. Tendulkar explores, within the play-within-a-play mode, the vulnerability of his heroine (Leela Benare) silenced by the vulgar hypocrisies of the people surrounding her. The collective destruction of the woman's integrity, the hypocrisy of the Indian middle class and its innate sadism, the social alienation, failure and ennui in modern human life are some issues that unfold as the play progresses.

*Sakharam Binder* (1972) faced strong censorship for its shocking depiction of naturalism. *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1973) employs the ballet form to project the violence, the sensuality, and the corrupting power games played by men. *Kamala* (1981) is a satire on the success-oriented modern world and its pursuit of goals at the expense of human values. The play re-evaluates the institution of marriage in the light of women as victims of men's success.

Vijay Tendulkar treats human complexities and dangerous transitions in the Indian middle-class life, especially in an industrialist society. Like Currimbhoy's works, his plays are depictions of his keen observation of the people around him. He is considered one of the most productive and consistent Indian playwrights. His contribution to Indian drama is unique. He has brought revolutionary changes in the Marathi stage. Through his plays, he has created vital commentaries on the Indian political, social, economic, and moral degeneration and on the tragic plight of the suffering individual, especially the female.

Pratap Sharma, a novelist and dramatist, is known for his successful but controversial plays: *A Touch of Brightness* (1968) and *The Professor Has a Warcy* (1970). *A Touch of Brightness* focuses on Bombay's brothels and its debased inhabitants. *The Professor* once again dramatizes a controversial issue, that of child rape. The horrific scenes have made his plays unpalatable to Indian theatre enthusiasts. This fact is probably responsible for their unpopularity on the Indian stage.

P. S. Vasudev is a minor playwright, whose short play *The Forbidden Fruit* (1967) is noteworthy. This miniplay is a farcical satire on corruption in the government offices. Vasudev makes use of the myth of Adam and Eve in order to present the evils of sexual passion. The play is critically acclaimed for its compactness, clarity of presentation, and its sensational building up of suspense and climax.

Mala Renganathan

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# South Asian Literature in English

## An Encyclopedia • Edited by Jaina C. Sanga

South Asian writing in English has recently received unprecedented critical and popular attention. The publication of Salman Rushdie's seminal novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) and the popularity of his later works, Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize for *The English Patient* in 1992, and V. S. Naipaul's Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003 are just a few of the highlights that mark the significance of South Asian writing in English. The first reference of its kind, this encyclopedia covers topics related to literature written in English by authors who were either born in South Asia or who identify themselves with that region.

The volume focuses on writers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Included are several hundred alphabetically arranged entries on novelists, novels, and cinematic adaptations, as well as poets, dramatists, autobiographers, short story writers, theoreticians, critical terms, themes, genres, literary movements, and key historical events. Entries are written by expert contributors and suggest works for further reading. The encyclopedia includes a chronology and closes with a selected, general bibliography of anthologies and critical studies. Given the enormous popularity of South Asian literature in English, this reference is essential for all libraries.

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