



## THE ROLE OF 19TH CENTURY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE IN REAWAKENING THE INDIANS

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### ABSTRACT

*The 19<sup>th</sup> century in India is considered as the time of Indian Renaissance. The reawakening or the rebirth of knowledge which brought about a significant change in the mindset of majority of the Indians took place in this very century. Though Bengal was at the centre of this revolution, it had a countrywide impact. Many writers, poets and Indian scholars took up the task of writing in English. They wrote with great enthusiasm, with an objective to change the thinking of the masses. Though at the national level freedom was a primary concern, the proper education to the Indians was the need of the hour.*

**Key Words** - 19<sup>th</sup> Century, India, Renaissance, reawakening, rebirth, knowledge, mindset, Bengal, revolution, writers, poets, scholars.

### INTRODUCTION

The 19th Century happens to be a significant one in India's chronicles. The British Rule in India exposed Indians to the Western thought and education. It was also the time when several social reformers advocated the need of English education in order to educate the Indians who were not willing to come out of the false notions. In fact, the real awakening of the people took place in this very century. Indian English literature in the initial stages was the product of a cultural environment of interacting traditions. It was a blending of the new trend of modernists and nationalism, the indigenous traditions, the western traditions and other such elements. In the early decades of the British rule in India, English language

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performed dual functions. It was a sort of weapon of colonialism on one hand and on the other hand it flourished the spirit of freedom, modernity and nationality among Indians. It was a process of synthesis wherein some educated Indians took English language with great enthusiasm. Indians realized that English education and the western thought which comes with it is actually helpful in overcoming the age old superstitions and blind beliefs of the native Indians. Some practices and customs were in fact, evils in the social structure of India. It was in this context that the beginning of English education also marked the Indian Renaissance. It was not about just educating the Indians but to change their mindset altogether. The feeling of being under the foreign rule was hunting the Indians and at the same time the prevalent traditions were not exactly going to take Indians forward. There were several issues within Indian society that needed rethinking and reconsiderations. The majority of the Indians were not in favour of the new developments in science and technology. The rapid growth in industrialization in Europe was also reflected in India through colonizers. The advantages of these developments were rather misunderstood by the Indians. They primarily stuck to their age old traditions and customs.

The creative writing of the Indians in English language was described by the term “Indo-Anglian.” These were the scholars whose mother tongue was not English. One of the foremost scholars who started writing in English was Raja Rammohan Roy. He could write and speak English fluently. His English was more utilitarian rather than creative. He was a social reformer who relentlessly pleaded for English education. *His The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness (1823)* were, in fact, a guiding force to those who took up writing in English. His attempt was to reach the international readers and make them understand the principles of leading a harmonious life. He was strongly against the evil practices in Indian society. His targeted readers were the educated Indians who can educate the orthodox Indians who believed in the harsh superstitions. He fought for the better status for women in Indian society. Women, back then, were suppressed, oppressed and harassed like anything. It was important to bring about the change in the mentality of the men from Indian society. In 1823, Henry Derozio’s volume of poems was published. Derozio died very young at the age of 22 of Cholera but within this time, he wrote some wonderful poems which were patriotic in spirit. His poem, *To India, My Native Land* was loved by all the Indians who knew English language. Thus, Indian writing in English also promoted freedom and the spirit of nationalism. It must be noted that the term ‘Indian Writing in English’ was used derogatively. The Britishers thought that the Indians could not write in English effectively. In fact, all these Indian scholars proved the Britishers wrong. One more renowned poet Khashiprasad Ghosh published his collection of poetry in 1830 entitled *Shair and Other Poems*. Ghosh used poetry as a free form of expression. In fact, both Khashiprasad Ghosh and Henry Derozio admired the romantic poetry in England which was being written around the same time. These two poets imitated the British romantic poets such as Lord Byron and

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John Keats. In 1835, Lord Macaulay's *Minutes* on Indian education appeared and the English education became almost apparent. The policy of the British government was very clear. They wanted to produce Indians who were British in thinking and Indian in origin. The need of quality education was stressed by Macaulay. In fact, the British government needed clerk and they thought the Indians can be trained for this purpose by imparting proper education.

The centre of this Indian Renaissance was, in fact, Bengal. Most of the scholars who could use English effectively as a medium of expression and communication were from Bengal. The account of this newly educated Bengal can be found in *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) by Nirad C. Chaudhary. It should be noted that in mid-nineteenth century, the students in Bengal greeted Kalimata by saying 'Good Morning Kalimata.'

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Dutt family was the influential writers. Three sisters and a brother from the family wrote novels and poetry in English. They took the Indian English literature to the considerable heights. Toru Dutt's *Bianca or the Young Spanisih Maiden* (1870) is thought to be the first novel by an Indian woman writer. The multicultural environment was presented by Toru Dutt in this novel. It had a great impact on the sensibilities of the Indian readers who could read English. Before that Bankimchandra Chatterjee wrote *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864). This is supposed to be the first Indian novel in English. It should be noted that many Bengali novels were translated into English around this time. Michael Madhusudan Dutt published his translated work in English. Towards the end of nineteenth century, a significant work by Manmohan Ghosh was published. It was titled *Love Songs and Elegies* (1898). Manmohan Ghosh was a pioneer of Indian writing in English when it comes to the expression of his own thought and feelings with regard to several issues. The personal touch to any writing by the Indian in English was given for the first time.

The major development that took place in this century was the setting up of the three universities in 1857 in the Presidency States of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. The universities at the time were known as the presidency universities. English education became official and formal after that. It felt removing the inferiority complex among Indians regarding the use of English language. Indian studied British Literature with great interest. It helped in the broadening of the views and visions of the Indians. At the fag end of this century the western scholars Max Muller, William Jones and others took interest in Indian civilization and culture. The study of ancient Indian Vedas was undertaken by these scholars. Indian English literature blessed to have many accomplished masters in the next that is twentieth century. However, the roots were powerfully created by the nineteenth century scholars. It was a century in which the organic process of cultural assimilation took place. It was a century of Indian Renaissance wherein the various dimensions came to the fore.



Literature is an art and not a social document. Still, it shapes the overall outlook and thought process of people. The wave of western thought free from the clutches of the age old beliefs reached India with the beginning of English education and with it as if the process of new civilization began. The Indian English Literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century proved to be a vehicle for the Indian Renaissance.

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