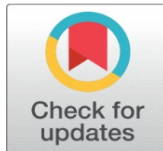


BETWEEN IMITATION AND RESISTANCE: EARLY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE UNDER BRITISH COLONIAL RULE

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.6079](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.6079)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex evolution of early Indian English literature during the British colonial period, focusing on the thematic tension between imitation and resistance. Introduced through colonial education policies such as Macaulay's Minute of 1835, English became both a tool of imperial control and a medium for Indian self-expression. Early Indian writers, shaped by missionary and colonial institutions, initially adopted Western literary forms and language, imitating British models in poetry, prose, and narrative structure. However, this phase of imitation gradually gave way to nuanced forms of resistance, as Indian authors infused their works with indigenous themes, cultural pride, and social critique. Through hybrid literary expressions that merged Indian traditions with English idioms, writers negotiated between two worlds—asserting native identity while engaging with colonial modernity. This hybrid voice laid the foundation for a transition toward nationalist literature in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, where English was used more assertively to challenge colonial ideologies and articulate visions of independence. The article concludes that early Indian English literature, though born in the crucible of colonialism, played a vital role in shaping India's literary and political awakening, leaving a lasting legacy in the canon of postcolonial literature.

Keywords: British Colonialism, Indian English Literature, Imitation, Resistance, Hybrid Voice, Macaulay's Minute, Colonial Education, Nationalist Literature, Cultural Identity, Postcolonial Discourse



1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of British colonialism in India marked not only a significant political and economic upheaval but also a profound transformation in the cultural and intellectual fabric of the subcontinent. One of the most far-reaching impacts of colonial rule was the institutionalization of English education, particularly after the implementation of Lord Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education in 1835. This policy aimed to create a class of English-educated Indians who would serve as intermediaries between the colonial rulers and the indigenous population. Over time, English became the language of administration, education, and upward mobility, leading to the emergence of a new class of Indian intellectuals who were fluent in the language of their colonizers.

It was within this colonial framework that Indian English literature began to take shape. Indian writers, educated in British literary traditions and often writing for colonial or missionary audiences, started producing creative works in English. This literature was not a natural evolution but rather a product of cultural collision and negotiation—a hybrid literary form born of the colonial encounter. Early Indian English writings, therefore, must be seen as texts situated at

the crossroads of two civilizations: one that imposed itself through colonial power and another that sought to assert its voice within and against that dominance.

A central tension that characterizes early Indian English literature is the binary between imitation and resistance. On the one hand, many Indian writers adopted English literary forms, imitated Western themes, and aspired to match the literary sophistication of British authors. On the other hand, their writings often subtly or overtly resisted colonial narratives by embedding indigenous values, reasserting native identity, or critiquing the social and political injustices of British rule. This dual movement—imitating the colonizer while resisting their hegemony—renders early Indian English literature a deeply paradoxical and fascinating field of study.

Studying this body of literature is significant for several reasons. It provides insight into how colonized subjects navigated cultural dislocation and linguistic alienation. It also reveals how literature became a site for both complicity and contestation—where Indians could express admiration for British ideals while also reclaiming agency and redefining their sense of self. Early Indian English literature, thus, is not merely a derivative extension of British literary traditions; it is a complex, layered response to colonialism that reflects the intellectual struggles, aspirations, and resistance of a society undergoing rapid transformation. By examining these early writings through the lens of imitation and resistance, we can better understand the formative years of Indian English literature and its enduring legacy in postcolonial discourse.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: COLONIAL EDUCATION AND THE RISE OF ENGLISH LITERATURE IN INDIA

The historical emergence of Indian English literature is inextricably tied to the larger project of colonial education initiated by the British in the 19th century. One of the most defining moments in this project was Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education, delivered in 1835. In this influential document, Macaulay argued in favor of replacing traditional Indian systems of education, which were rooted in Sanskrit and Persian, with English-language instruction. He dismissed the value of indigenous knowledge systems and famously advocated for the creation of "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." This vision was at the heart of the Anglicist-Orientalist debate, where the Anglicists, led by Macaulay, supported Western education through English, while the Orientalists favored the preservation and promotion of native languages and literatures.

With the triumph of the Anglicist position, English was officially introduced as the medium of higher education in India. This led to the proliferation of missionary schools, colleges, and other colonial educational institutions, which became the primary sites for disseminating Western knowledge and literary traditions. Missionaries, in particular, played a crucial role in spreading literacy and instilling Christian moral values through English-language education. These institutions did not merely teach grammar and composition; they exposed Indian students to the canon of British literature—Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and others—thereby shaping the literary sensibilities of an emerging generation of Indian writers.

This new education system gave rise to a class of English-educated Indians, who were not only proficient in the language of the colonizer but also deeply familiar with its literary and philosophical traditions. This class, comprising clerks, teachers, lawyers, and aspiring intellectuals, became the first generation of Indians to write creatively in English. They found in English both a tool for professional advancement and a means of engaging with ideas of modernity, reform, and self-expression. However, their writings also reflected the tensions of being educated in a foreign language and worldview, while still rooted in their indigenous cultural and social milieu.

The result was a transformation of the Indian literary space and its readership. Literature written in English was primarily aimed at the elite, urban, and educated classes who had access to colonial education. This literature often dealt with themes of identity, reform, and cultural conflict, reflecting the writers' dual consciousness. At the same time, the presence of English as a literary language opened up a new domain where Indian voices could be heard by both colonial authorities and international audiences. Thus, colonial education not only facilitated the birth of Indian English literature but also created a new space for literary experimentation, cultural negotiation, and intellectual resistance within the confines of empire.

3. IMITATION: COLONIAL INFLUENCE ON LANGUAGE, FORM, AND THEMES

The early phase of Indian English literature was deeply shaped by the colonial influence, particularly in terms of language, literary form, and thematic choices. Indian writers, educated in British-run institutions and exposed to English literary traditions, naturally gravitated towards imitating the models they had studied. This imitation was not merely a stylistic preference but often a necessity for acceptance and publication in the literary circuits that were dominated by colonial sensibilities. Writing in English meant adhering to the linguistic, grammatical, and aesthetic standards set by the British, and in doing so, many Indian authors closely followed the literary forms and conventions of their colonizers.

The language itself posed a significant challenge. English, being foreign to the Indian cultural and emotional world, required Indian writers to express native experiences in a non-native tongue. Early writers often adopted a formal, ornate, and sometimes archaic English style that mirrored the Victorian prose and poetic diction they admired. This resulted in a certain stiffness or artificiality in their expressions, as they attempted to align their narratives with the expectations of English literary taste. The works of writers like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio exemplify this. Derozio, one of the first Indian poets to write in English, was deeply inspired by Romantic poets like Byron and Shelley. His verses echoed their emotional depth, revolutionary spirit, and lyrical style, even as he sought to address the realities of Indian life.

Literary forms such as the lyric poem, the novel, and the essay were borrowed directly from English traditions. Indian writers of this era did not invent new genres but rather adapted existing Western forms to articulate their own concerns. For instance, the novel—a relatively new form in the Indian literary landscape—was introduced and popularized through English education. Writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, while primarily known for their work in Bengali, also experimented with English-language fiction. His novel *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), considered one of the earliest Indian English novels, follows the structure of Victorian domestic fiction and employs the narrative techniques of the English realist tradition.

Thematically, early Indian English literature reflected a deep engagement with Western ideals. Issues such as reason, individualism, liberty, morality, and social reform were central to many of these works—mirroring the dominant concerns of English literature of the Enlightenment and Victorian eras. Indian writers frequently engaged with these ideas, sometimes using them to critique Indian society rather than colonial rule. In this way, the early literature often revealed a form of internalized colonial gaze, wherein Western civilization was held up as a model of progress and rationality, and Indian society was depicted as backward and in need of reform.

However, this imitation should not be read purely as mimicry. It was also a strategic act—an attempt to enter a global literary arena from which Indians had long been excluded. Writing in English, in the language of power, gave Indian authors access to colonial and international readerships. Their use of British literary forms and themes was not simply a capitulation to colonial norms but a necessary first step in mastering the tools of the empire. It was through imitation that Indian writers gained the confidence, recognition, and skill that would later allow them to subvert, challenge, and eventually reshape English literature into a vehicle for indigenous voices.

Thus, while early Indian English literature may appear heavily imitative on the surface, it laid the groundwork for a more assertive literary tradition. It reflected the complex psychological, cultural, and political dimensions of writing under colonial rule—a phase where imitation was both a limitation and a learning ground for literary resistance.

4. RESISTANCE: SUBTLE AND OVERT CHALLENGES TO COLONIAL IDEOLOGIES

While early Indian English literature bore the marks of colonial influence in language, form, and content, it also served as a medium of resistance—both subtle and overt—to the ideologies of British imperialism. Even as Indian writers adopted English as the medium of expression, they used it to question, critique, and reframe colonial narratives. This duality—writing in the colonizer's tongue while challenging the legitimacy of colonial domination—lies at the heart of early literary resistance and is a testament to the complexity and richness of Indian English literature during the colonial period.

Subtle forms of resistance often emerged through the themes and subjects that writers chose to explore. While outwardly conforming to English literary conventions, many Indian authors infused their texts with indigenous values, cultural pride, and social critique. One of the most telling strategies of resistance was the reassertion of Indian identity

within English narratives. Poets like Toru Dutt and Henry Derozio, though heavily influenced by English Romanticism, drew inspiration from Indian mythology, history, and spirituality. Toru Dutt, for instance, translated Sanskrit poems and composed original works like *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*, which brought Indian stories into the English literary domain. By doing so, she carved a space for Indian cultural heritage within a language historically used to marginalize it.

Early fiction also became a site of resistance. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, though structurally imitative of the English domestic novel, delved into Indian familial relationships, social hierarchies, and moral complexities. Even while using English forms, such narratives highlighted distinctly Indian experiences and values, often presenting a nuanced picture of Indian society that defied the colonial stereotypes of a "primitive" or "irrational" people. These narratives subtly undermined the colonial project of cultural superiority by portraying Indian characters as rational, complex, and morally driven individuals.

In other cases, resistance was more overt. Reformist and nationalist writers used English literature as a platform to critique colonial oppression and call for social transformation. Raja Rammohan Roy, though primarily known for his political and social reform efforts, wrote extensively in English, using essays and petitions to question British policies and advocate for Indian autonomy. His writings challenged not only indigenous social ills like Sati and caste discrimination but also the inequities of colonial governance. Similarly, later figures like Dadabhai Naoroji and Gopal Krishna Gokhale used English eloquence as a rhetorical tool to confront the British on their own terms, contributing to the emergence of a politically charged prose that blended literary style with anti-colonial sentiment.

Literary resistance also manifested through irony, ambivalence, and appropriation. Some writers subtly mocked British moral superiority or questioned the ethical basis of colonialism through their works. This resistance was often indirect, masked in allegory, symbolism, or seemingly innocuous critiques of society that doubled as critiques of colonial ideology. The very act of writing about Indian realities in English, and forcing the colonizer to confront native voices in their own language, was a subversive move. It challenged the imperial monopoly over meaning and redefined the function of English as a language not just of rule but of resistance.

Moreover, the emergence of nationalist thought found gradual expression in Indian English writing, particularly towards the end of the 19th century. While early literature may not have called for outright rebellion, it planted the seeds of self-awareness, cultural pride, and intellectual defiance. It offered a counter-narrative to colonial historiography and created a foundation for the more radical literary and political movements that followed in the 20th century.

Overall, resistance in early Indian English literature was not always confrontational or revolutionary in tone—it often manifested through narrative choices, thematic emphasis, and cultural reclamation. These early writers engaged in a quiet but powerful struggle to assert their voice, reclaim their heritage, and critique the structures of empire from within. Their works represent the beginning of a long literary journey in which English, once the language of subjugation, became a tool for self-definition and emancipation.

5. THE HYBRID VOICE: NEGOTIATING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

One of the most defining characteristics of early Indian English literature is its hybrid voice—a literary expression that exists in the liminal space between the colonizer and the colonized, between tradition and modernity, and between native identity and foreign influence. This hybridity was not accidental; it was a consequence of historical necessity. Indian writers who chose to write in English were navigating two distinct cultural worlds: the indigenous world rooted in Indian values, languages, and traditions, and the colonial world defined by British education, literature, and political control. The result was a unique literary voice that neither fully conformed to British norms nor entirely rejected them, but instead fused them in complex and creative ways.

This hybrid voice reflected a dual consciousness—a concept famously explored by postcolonial scholars. Indian writers internalized the literary aesthetics, ethical values, and rationality of Western literature, but they could not detach themselves from their cultural origins. Their creative output thus bore traces of both. In the poems of Toru Dutt, for instance, we see a synthesis of European poetic forms like the sonnet and ode with Indian myths, legends, and spiritual philosophies. Her work was deeply Romantic in tone, but its content often celebrated ancient Indian heroes and heroines, thus bridging a gap between the cultural past of India and the literary forms of the West.

This negotiation between two worlds was also evident in the themes and characterizations. Early Indian English fiction frequently featured protagonists caught between tradition and change, reflecting the societal shifts taking place in colonial India. The characters often grappled with moral dilemmas, identity crises, and cultural contradictions—mirroring the author's own struggles in reconciling Indian sensibilities with Western ideals. The hybrid voice thus became a narrative tool to portray the complexity of colonial subjectivity, challenging the binary of colonizer and colonized by presenting more layered and humanized experiences.

The language itself became a site of hybridity. Indian writers employed English, but it was not always the Queen's English. It was an English textured with Indian idioms, metaphors, and syntax. Even when grammatically correct, the rhythm and sensibility of this English were shaped by native linguistic patterns. This localized English carried within it the echoes of mother tongues—Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Urdu, and others—transforming it into a new linguistic mode that could convey uniquely Indian experiences. This early experimentation laid the groundwork for the later evolution of Indian English as a distinctive literary idiom, famously seen in the works of post-independence writers like R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, and Arundhati Roy.

Moreover, the hybrid voice allowed Indian writers to speak to multiple audiences at once. On one hand, their use of English gave them access to colonial institutions, publishers, and global readerships. On the other, by embedding Indian cultural content and concerns into their writing, they addressed Indian readers who shared their historical and social context. In doing so, they performed the delicate task of translation—not just between languages, but between worldviews, histories, and ideologies.

In essence, the hybrid voice in early Indian English literature represents a powerful form of literary negotiation. It was neither an act of blind imitation nor outright rebellion, but a creative reconciliation of divergent influences. Through this voice, early Indian writers claimed space within the English literary tradition while simultaneously reshaping it to include Indian stories, philosophies, and identities. This hybridity was not a sign of weakness or confusion—it was a mark of resilience and innovation in the face of cultural domination. It allowed Indian writers to redefine both themselves and the language they had inherited from the empire.

6. LEGACY AND TRANSITION: FROM EARLY WRITERS TO NATIONALIST LITERATURE

The legacy of early Indian English literature, shaped by the complex interplay of imitation, resistance, and hybridity, laid the essential groundwork for the more assertive, politically charged, and nationally conscious literature that emerged during the late colonial period. These early pioneers—despite working within the constraints of colonial language, censorship, and audience expectations—played a critical role in defining a literary identity for modern India. Their contributions were foundational, not just in terms of language and form, but in their exploration of cultural, moral, and political themes that would later become central to nationalist literature.

As the 19th century progressed and political consciousness deepened, the tone and focus of Indian English writing began to shift. While the early writers often engaged in subtle critiques or cultural reclamation, the later writers moved toward explicit nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment. The writings of figures like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, though initially marked by Victorian influence, evolved to inspire patriotic fervor through works like *Vande Mataram*, which became a rallying cry for Indian independence. The emotional and symbolic power of literature began to be harnessed more deliberately as a tool of resistance and mobilization.

By the early 20th century, literature became inseparable from the freedom movement. Writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghose, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Mahatma Gandhi used English not just to express cultural pride or critique colonialism but to articulate a coherent vision of national identity, self-rule (*swaraj*), and civilizational renewal. Tagore, writing in both Bengali and English, infused his work with a deeply philosophical critique of imperialism while upholding universal humanism. Aurobindo's prose and poetry reflected a synthesis of Indian spirituality and revolutionary zeal, while Gandhi's writings, particularly *Hind Swaraj*, used English as a medium to challenge the very foundations of Western civilization and modernity.

This transition marked a shift from the apologetic and imitative posture of the early writers to a confident, self-aware nationalist voice. Yet, it would be inaccurate to view the early literature as irrelevant or outdated. Instead, the early Indian English writers laid the intellectual and aesthetic scaffolding for later developments. They normalized English as a legitimate medium for Indian self-expression, tested the limits of literary form, and experimented with

inserting Indian subjectivity into a Western linguistic and cultural framework. Their efforts made it possible for later writers to inherit and transform English literature into something distinctively Indian.

Furthermore, the early phase helped internationalize the Indian cause. Through English, Indian writers could address not only domestic readers but also global audiences, thereby shaping international perceptions of India's culture, politics, and aspirations. This was crucial in garnering global support for India's independence movement and situating Indian literature within world literature.

In summary, the legacy of early Indian English literature is profound and enduring. It served as a transitional bridge between colonial pedagogy and nationalist consciousness. The movement from imitation to resistance, and eventually to a confident assertion of cultural and political identity, reflects the evolution of India's literary and national self-image. The writers of this formative era, despite their limitations, were instrumental in forging a new path—one that would eventually lead Indian English literature to global prominence and cultural significance.

7. CONCLUSION

The journey of early Indian English literature under British colonial rule is marked by a complex interplay of imitation, resistance, and cultural negotiation. Emerging from the colonial education system and shaped by the ideological influence of the British Empire, early Indian writers found themselves in a unique position—using the language of their colonizers to express the experiences, values, and aspirations of a colonized people. While their initial works were heavily influenced by Western literary traditions in terms of language, form, and themes, these writings were far from mere imitations. They gradually evolved into powerful expressions of cultural identity, social reform, and subtle political dissent.

Through the strategic use of English, early Indian authors created a hybrid literary voice that blended Western forms with indigenous content. This hybridity became a site of both conformity and contestation, allowing writers to question colonial ideologies while gaining literary legitimacy. The very act of writing in English was a form of resistance, as it challenged the empire's monopoly over narrative authority and opened a space for Indian perspectives within global literary discourse.

As political awareness grew and the freedom struggle intensified, this literary foundation paved the way for more overtly nationalist writings. The legacy of early Indian English literature thus lies not only in its stylistic and thematic contributions but also in its role as a precursor to the literary movements that would accompany and support India's march toward independence.

In retrospect, early Indian English literature represents a vital phase in the evolution of India's literary and cultural identity. It documents the intellectual awakening of a nation under foreign rule and reflects the resilience of its writers who, despite operating within colonial constraints, laid the groundwork for a literature that would one day speak with an independent and powerful voice.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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