

## THE VANISHING CONTINUUM OF TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION

Dr Ramaswami Subramony<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Professor, Department of English and Foreign Language, Guru Ghasidas Vishwavidyalaya (a Central University), Koni, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh

ramaswamysubramony@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This study, titled *Tradition, Authenticity, and Disjunction: The Decline of Cultural Continuity in Post-1990 Indian Writing in English*, examines the aesthetic and philosophical transformations that have shaped Indian fiction in English since the liberalization era of the 1990s. It argues that, while the global recognition of Indian English writers has expanded the visibility of the nation's literature, this expansion has often coincided with a loss of inward rootedness—the moral, contemplative, and metaphysical sensibility that informed the works of the earlier generation represented by R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao.

Through close textual and cultural analysis, the article identifies a decisive shift in post-1990 Indian fiction toward cosmopolitan themes, diasporic identities, and political subtexts, frequently at the cost of the ethical and spiritual continuities that once gave the Indian novel its distinctive equilibrium. Writers such as Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh are discussed as exemplars of this new orientation: aesthetically accomplished yet largely disengaged from the deeper ontological and moral imagination that underlay the early Indian English tradition. Their narratives, framed within historical or secular humanitarian paradigms, differ sharply from Narayan's moral realism and Raja Rao's metaphysical vision, which were both anchored in what K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar termed the "dharmic equilibrium" of Indian thought. The article proceeds through five interrelated sections: the first traces the vanishing continuum of tradition under global modernity; the second explores the post-1990 novelist's crisis of rootedness; the third studies Narayan's humanism of the ordinary; the fourth interprets Raja Rao's fiction as metaphysical inquiry; and the concluding chapter proposes a restoration of continuity between literature and inherited meaning. Drawing upon canonical critics such as Iyengar, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Dieter Riemenschneider, and A. S. Knippling, the study situates its argument within comparative modernism and postcolonial theory while insisting on the necessity of cultural self-reflexivity.

Ultimately, the article suggests that the challenge facing contemporary Indian writing in English is not linguistic but ontological: to rediscover, beneath the cosmopolitan idiom of the global novel, the contemplative rhythm that once made the Indian imagination unique. In recovering that rhythm, the modern writer may reconcile modernity with continuity, and thus renew the moral and metaphysical integrity of Indian literature in English for the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Indian Writing in English; Post-1990 Fiction; Globalization and Literature; Cultural Continuity; R. K. Narayan; Raja Rao; Arundhati Roy; Amitav Ghosh; Moral Realism; Metaphysical Fiction; Dharmic Equilibrium; Tradition and Modernity; Cosmopolitanism; Postcolonial Aesthetics; Indian Modernism.

### Introduction

The history of Indian writing in English after 1990 reveals an unmistakable transformation in tone, intention, and intellectual anchorage. Liberalization and globalization altered not only the nation's economy but also its imagination. English fiction from India, once grounded in what K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar called "the rhythm of inherited life" (*Indian Writing in English*, Asia Publishing House, 1973, p. 22), began to orient itself toward a global marketplace of readers, prizes, and publishers. While this opening expanded visibility, it also weakened the conversation between modern literary form and the native sources of ethics and metaphysics that had animated earlier fiction. The older sense of writing as an extension of reflection, restraint, and spiritual curiosity gave way to an aesthetics of assertion—political, psychological, and self-referential. The result, as Dieter Riemenschneider observes, is that "the Indian novel in English of the post-liberalization decades tends to dissolve the metaphysical interiority that had long distinguished it from the Anglo-American realist line" (*The Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934–2023*, Heidelberg, FID4SA Repository, 2024, p. 188).

R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao wrote in an idiom that allowed the English sentence to breathe with the cadence of Indian thought. Narayan's Malgudi is not an exotic province but, as A. S. Knippling describes it, "a moral landscape in miniature, where the ordinary becomes the site of quiet revelation"

(“R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Modern English-Language Fiction from India,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28, no. 2 [1993]: 139). Raja Rao’s fiction, in contrast, sought philosophical transparency: “We cannot write like the English. We should not,” he wrote in the preface to *Kanthapura* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938, p. v). Both writers regarded English as a vessel for translating indigenous intuitions into a modern idiom without forfeiting their interior dimension. Their work embodies what Iyengar termed “the twofold responsibility—to a living language and to a living culture” (p. 15).

By the 1990s that twofold responsibility had weakened. The new generation—educated in English, shaped by metropolitan institutions, and marketed by transnational publishers—embraced hybridity as a virtue in itself. Yet hybridity, unanchored in continuity, easily slides into cultural abstraction. In *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy constructs a dazzling narrative of caste, gender, and political oppression, but her aesthetic of disruption leaves little space for the older metaphysical compassion that once balanced protest with inward grace. The novel’s prose—dense, self-conscious, and fragmentary—reflects a sensibility more aligned with Western modernism than with the contemplative realism of the Indian tradition. Roy’s rejection of inherited structures is deliberate; she has declared that “all structures are inherently corrupt” (*The End of Imagination*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1998, p. 7). Such a stance, though politically radical, also distances her art from the moral dialogue that underlies earlier Indian fiction. The world of *The English Teacher* (1945) or *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) is a world where suffering leads to insight; in Roy’s universe, suffering culminates in accusation. The shift is from transcendence to testimony—a movement symptomatic of the broader post-1990 sensibility.

Amitav Ghosh, one of the most acclaimed writers of this generation, demonstrates a parallel evolution. His early works—*The Circle of Reason* (1986) and *The Shadow Lines* (1988)—still resonate with the intellectual curiosity of a historian aware of inherited continuities. But his later novels, notably *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), foreground ecological crisis and transnational migration through a secular humanitarian lens that, as Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, “redefines the moral universe of the Indian novel in terms of global rationalism” (*The Perishable Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 211). Ghosh’s scholarship and narrative technique are formidable, yet his metaphysics is external rather than internal; his fiction seeks reconciliation not through inner harmony but through the ethics of environmental responsibility. While admirable in scope, this ethical modernism replaces the older contemplative balance between human duty and cosmic order. In the language of Raja Rao, the “serpent” of reason has shed the “rope” of faith.

What binds many of the post-1990 writers, despite their stylistic diversity, is a shared preoccupation with dislocation. Their characters inhabit airports, embassies, multinational offices—spaces of transit rather than belonging. The metaphors of exile and hybridity replace those of pilgrimage and renewal. In *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Kiran Desai portrays a generation of uprooted figures who experience tradition as burden and irony as refuge. Even when these novels reference myth or ritual, the reference is ornamental. As Riemenschneider remarks, “The new fiction aestheticizes the idea of origin without submitting to its moral discipline” (*The Indian Novel in English*, p. 191). The symbolic order of Narayan and Rao—where the sacred coexists with the ordinary—is replaced by a world of secular detachment.

This divergence is also linguistic. Narayan’s prose is deceptively simple; his sentences unfold like parables, transparent to meaning. In *The Guide* (1958), Raju’s transformation from tourist guide to reluctant ascetic is narrated with the calm inevitability of myth transposed into realism. The novel affirms that redemption arises not from revolt but from acceptance, an attitude echoing the classical idea of harmony between the individual and the order of things. Post-1990 prose, conversely, privileges fragmentation, neologism, and self-reflexivity. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) had

already demonstrated that English could mimic the carnival of Indian speech; his successors extended the technique but rarely the depth. The reader moves through linguistic fireworks that dazzle yet seldom illuminate. Where Narayan's restraint mirrors the serenity of balance, the new idiom mirrors the restlessness of identity.

The cultural critic A. K. Mehrotra observes that "to lose contact with the vernacular imagination is to lose the moral ear of India" (*Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History*, Permanent Black, 2012, p. 97). That moral ear—attuned to proverb, parable, and prayer—once gave Indian English fiction its distinct timbre. When the novelist ceases to listen to it, English reverts to its colonial neutrality. The achievement of Narayan and Rao was to provincialize English by infusing it with the cadence of Indian thought; the limitation of much post-1990 writing is that it re-globalizes English, stripping it of that provincial grace. The shift is not only aesthetic but epistemic: the loss of faith in tradition as a mode of knowing. In the new fiction, knowledge is empirical, political, psychological—but rarely metaphysical.

To call this condition a "vanishing continuum" is therefore to describe a slow erosion rather than a rupture. The modern writer's alienation from inherited modes of meaning mirrors India's own transition from a society of contemplation to one of consumption. Yet the earlier models remain luminous. In *The English Teacher*, Narayan's protagonist realizes that "the dead are not far from us; they are near, but we do not know how to reach them" (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1945, p. 132). The sentence could serve as a metaphor for the post-1990 writer's relation to tradition: the nearness of something irretrievable. Literature, once a bridge between languages of the soul, now becomes an archive of displacement.

Still, the possibility of renewal endures. Raja Rao insisted that "India will write her own novels, and they will be as Indian in thought as they are English in expression" (*Kanthapura*, p. vi). His confidence remains a challenge to the present. Authenticity in literature does not demand parochialism but participation in continuity—the awareness that the writer is an inheritor as well as an innovator. When that awareness dims, fiction becomes brilliant yet brittle, cosmopolitan yet unmoored. The vanishing continuum of tradition in contemporary Indian fiction is therefore not merely a matter of theme but of consciousness: a fading remembrance of how narrative once mediated between time and timelessness. To restore that remembrance is to rediscover, within English itself, the still pulse of an older music.

### ***The Global Turn and the Crisis of Rootedness***

The movement of Indian English fiction into the global literary marketplace after the 1990s coincided with a deeper ideological shift — from participation in a shared moral tradition to immersion in the universalist language of rights, resistance, and secular modernity. This transition was not accidental; it arose from a complex intersection of politics, publishing, and pedagogy. The earlier generation of writers, such as R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao, had written from within a cultural world that recognized the primacy of inwardness and ethical restraint. Their realism and metaphysical enquiry were both grounded in a continuity that was simultaneously literary and civilizational. After 1990, however, the cosmopolitan novel, shaped by metropolitan readerships and global prizes, increasingly interpreted India through a secular humanist lens. The writer, once an interpreter of inherited meaning, became a commentator on social crisis. The metaphysical imagination yielded to moral indignation; fiction became reportage of injustice rather than revelation of being.

This change is particularly evident in the work of Arundhati Roy, whose *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997) became emblematic of the new sensibility. Roy's novel broke the silence surrounding caste and gender oppression, but it also signaled a rupture from the inward equilibrium characteristic of earlier Indian fiction. The narrative proceeds through fragments, distortions, and linguistic play — "a deliberately broken syntax," as she herself describes it (p. 6) — mirroring the disintegrating moral order of postcolonial Kerala. Yet in the process, the novel rejects continuity as

a category of value. In her later essays, Roy equates all forms of inherited structure with coercion: “Tradition is often the name the powerful give to their privilege” (*The End of Imagination*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1998, p. 9). This ideological stance transforms literature from an exploration of the human condition into an instrument of polemic. As the critic Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, “Roy’s aesthetic of fragmentation is inseparable from her political rejection of continuity” (*The Perishable Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 225). In contrast to the inward reconciliations of Narayan or Rao, Roy’s fiction dramatizes rupture as virtue — the beauty of disobedience replacing the serenity of understanding.

A similar disengagement appears, though in subtler form, in Amitav Ghosh’s historical and ecological novels. Ghosh is a scholar of immense range, yet his vision of India is mediated through universal rationalism rather than through the metaphysical idiom that once underwrote Indian thought. In *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2000), the narrative moves from Mandalay to Rangoon to Calcutta, tracing colonial displacements across empires. The novel’s grandeur lies in its cosmopolitan compassion, but its moral universe is secular and anthropocentric. Later, in *The Hungry Tide* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2004), Ghosh constructs a drama of survival in the Sundarbans, where faith, myth, and science collide. Yet even here, myth functions as cultural texture rather than spiritual grammar; it is translated into the vocabulary of environmental ethics. As Riemenschneider notes, “In Ghosh’s ecological fiction, the sacred geography of India is reconstructed through secular epistemologies of nature” (*The Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934–2023*, Heidelberg, 2024, p. 193). This rationalization of myth transforms narrative into anthropology, replacing symbolic interiority with ethical description.

The contrast with R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao could not be starker. In *The Guide* (Mysore: Indian Thought Publications, 1958), Narayan’s protagonist Raju is not a rebel against tradition but its unlikely redeemer; his transformation from trickster to ascetic reveals the latent moral structure of ordinary life. Narayan’s art depends on what A. S. Knippling calls “the gentle pressure of inherited values” (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28, no. 2 [1993]: 142). Similarly, Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (New York: Pantheon, 1960) turns autobiography into metaphysics; its narrative rhythm follows the cycle of quest, illusion, and illumination familiar to Indian philosophy. These writers do not simply depict India; they write from its inward grammar of meaning. Their realism is therefore not secular but ontological: it assumes a universe in which human actions possess spiritual resonance.

When compared with this inward realism, the post-1990 fiction appears displaced. The later novelists often approach India as a field of trauma rather than of truth. Their primary mode is irony; their metaphors are historical, political, and sociological. This orientation is what R. Parthasarathy, in a different context, calls “the colonization of the Indian imagination by Western categories of realism” (*Collected Essays*, Delhi: OUP, 1999, p. 87). The shift from the contemplative to the critical has deprived Indian fiction of what Iyengar termed its “dharmic equilibrium” — that delicate balance between outer narrative and inner silence (*Indian Writing in English*, 1973, p. 31). In the works of Ghosh and Roy, the sacred becomes metaphor, the myth becomes ideology, and the novelist becomes witness rather than participant. This movement toward global consciousness has undoubtedly expanded the Indian novel’s reach, but it has also rendered it curiously placeless — a literature of India without the cadence of Indian life.

Language, too, tells this story of dislocation. Narayan’s diction, understated and lucid, carries the rhythms of the spoken South; Raja Rao’s English is sculpted by Sanskritic syntax and philosophical precision. Both transformed English into an Indian instrument. Post-1990 prose, by contrast, often adopts the idiom of the metropolitan magazine or the global newsroom — fluent, ironic, and self-

aware, yet stripped of the contemplative pause that once mediated thought. The shift from silence to speech, from humility to assertion, mirrors the social transformation of India itself. As cultural theorist A. K. Mehrotra remarks, “We are all cosmopolitans now, but a cosmopolitanism without memory is a form of exile” (Partial Recall: *Essays on Literature and Literary History*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012, p. 102). The post-1990 novel thus embodies not so much liberation as displacement — an eloquent homelessness of the imagination.

This crisis of rootedness must not be mistaken for failure of talent. Roy, Ghosh, and their contemporaries are sophisticated craftsmen, and their international acclaim has made Indian fiction visible in a manner unthinkable in the 1950s. Yet visibility is not the same as vitality. The vitality of a literature depends on its conversation with its own sources of meaning. The early Indian English novelists, despite their colonial context, maintained that conversation; the post-1990 generation, in pursuing global dialogues, has often neglected it. The consequence is a literature that mirrors India’s political modernity — vibrant, argumentative, plural — but lacks the inward harmony that once distinguished its voice. As Mukherjee succinctly observes, “The postmodern Indian novel has exchanged resonance for relevance” (*The Perishable Empire*, p. 229).

The global turn, then, has been both a boon and a burden. It has liberated Indian fiction from the provincialism of the past but also detached it from the moral soil that nourished its earliest flowering. In Narayan and Raja Rao, we encounter fiction as *sādhana* — an act of reflection through which language approaches the sacred. In Roy and Ghosh, we encounter fiction as witness — an act of resistance through which language records injustice. Between these two lies the story of a nation’s literary consciousness: from metaphysics to modernity, from revelation to reportage. Whether the Indian novel can recover its equilibrium amid the noise of global acclaim remains the central question of its future.

### ***R. K. Narayan and the Humanism of the Ordinary***

In the evolving landscape of Indian English fiction, R. K. Narayan remains the most subtle custodian of the moral imagination that underlay the early phase of the Indian novel in English. His achievement, often overshadowed by the flamboyance of later cosmopolitan writers, rests on his ability to translate the rhythms of everyday life into a quietly luminous moral order. To read Narayan is to enter a world where the ordinary is not trivial, where the mundane gestures of a shopkeeper or the hesitation of a teacher carry metaphysical significance. His fictional world of Malgudi, introduced in *Swami and Friends* (1935) and sustained through decades of novels and stories, is not merely a provincial setting but a metaphoric geography of balance. It embodies what K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar called “the dharmic equilibrium—the living adjustment between inner duty and outer circumstance” (*Indian Writing in English*, Asia Publishing House, 1973, p. 32).

Unlike the social naturalism of Mulk Raj Anand or the historical panoramas of later writers, Narayan’s realism is introspective. He is less concerned with reform than with recognition—the recognition that moral order inheres in the small acts of daily life. In *The Financial Expert* (1952), for instance, Margayya’s rise and fall follow no political trajectory; they trace the ancient rhythm of desire, error, and reconciliation. The irony that governs his fate is the irony of self-delusion, not of social injustice. As A. S. Knippling observed, Narayan’s fiction “operates within a moral universe that assumes the continuity of inherited values even amid modern dislocation” (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28, no. 2 [1993]: 142). The tone of detachment—his calm humour and refusal of anger—marks his allegiance to an older ethical sensibility in which the world, however flawed, remains ultimately intelligible.

Language is central to this vision. Narayan’s English, plain and unhurried, domesticates modern experience into the cadence of Indian speech. He uses irony without bitterness, description without

ornament, and dialogue without self-dramatization. As R. Parthasarathy notes, “Narayan’s genius lay in translating the silences of a Tamil household into the pauses of English prose” (*Collected Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 94). Each sentence seems to carry the weight of unspoken thought, and it is this economy of expression that gives his fiction its moral resonance. The absence of rhetorical flourish, often mistaken for simplicity, is in fact the sign of restraint—a discipline that derives from the cultural ethos in which moderation and irony coexist.

In *The Guide* (Mysore: *Indian Thought Publications*, 1958), Narayan’s greatest novel, the transformation of Raju from railway guide to reluctant ascetic enacts a profound parable of moral awakening. Raju’s journey, framed as both comedy and tragedy, culminates not in resolution but in surrender. When he says, “It’s raining in the hills,” his words unite illusion and reality, body and spirit, in a moment of intuitive release (p. 232). Narayan’s genius lies in making such transcendence appear natural. The sacred in his fiction is never declamatory; it arises organically from the texture of life. As A. K. Mehrotra remarks, “Narayan’s mysticism lies in his manners—he makes grace a domestic habit rather than a theological event” (*Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012, p. 99). It is precisely this integration of the ordinary and the spiritual that later Indian fiction, dazzled by politics and spectacle, has largely forgotten.

Narayan’s moral universe is thus profoundly local yet universally intelligible. His characters—Swami, Margayya, Raju, Rosie, Chandran—are rooted in the provincial town, yet they enact dilemmas recognizable to any reader: desire and duty, illusion and insight, attachment and release. What distinguishes them from the cosmopolitan figures of post-1990 fiction is the absence of estrangement. They do not rebel against their world; they inhabit it with ironic acceptance. This moral irony, the capacity to laugh at oneself, is an inheritance from a long civilizational habit of self-knowledge. In Narayan’s world, humour is not a weapon but a mode of wisdom. When compared to the indignation of Arundhati Roy or the historical anxiety of Amitav Ghosh, Narayan’s serenity appears almost radical—a refusal to see alienation as destiny.

His detachment, however, should not be mistaken for indifference. Narayan’s realism has been described by E. M. Forster as “a realism tempered by affection” (Introduction to *The Financial Expert*, London: Methuen, 1952, p. xv). The affection comes from the conviction that human frailty is inseparable from grace. The shopkeeper and the priest, the teacher and the urchin—all partake of the same moral continuum. This democratic tenderness, rare in any literature, gives Narayan’s fiction its quiet radiance. The novel becomes a mirror of the soul’s small awakenings rather than a theatre of grievances. His humour is a way of forgiving the world without denying its absurdity. Such forgiveness, as Iyengar noted, “is the signature of a civilization that still believes in the possibility of renewal” (*Indian Writing in English*, p. 35).

In many ways, Narayan’s art represents a synthesis that later Indian English fiction has failed to sustain. His realism reconciles modern individualism with traditional inwardness, English form with vernacular rhythm. The new fiction, in contrast, often celebrates fragmentation as authenticity. Where Narayan perceives unity beneath diversity, the post-1990 novel finds dissonance more compelling than harmony. The difference is not merely aesthetic; it reflects a deeper divergence of consciousness. Narayan’s moral equilibrium is founded on the belief that meaning inheres in existence, that order is immanent in the world; the global novel tends to assume the contrary—that meaning is constructed, provisional, and political. Between these assumptions lies the measure of India’s cultural transformation.

To call Narayan “genuine,” therefore, is not to romanticize provincial India but to recognize his fidelity to the living tradition of inner poise. His characters may be humble, his plots modest, yet the consciousness that animates them belongs to a civilization that sees life as cyclical, not linear; instructive, not chaotic. In his fiction, English becomes a meditative instrument. As Raja Rao wrote

in a tribute, “In Narayan, English has ceased to be English; it has become Indian, intimate, and moral” (Raja Rao, “Remembering Narayan,” *The Hindu Literary Review*, August 1993, p. 3). This moral intimacy—where narrative becomes prayer by other means—is the hallmark of Narayan’s achievement and the standard by which subsequent Indian English fiction must be measured.

### ***Raja Rao and the Metaphysics of Fiction***

Among the founders of the Indian novel in English, Raja Rao stands alone in conceiving literature as *sādhana*—a spiritual discipline rather than a form of expression. His fiction transforms English prose into an instrument of philosophical reflection, aspiring not merely to represent life but to reveal its ultimate pattern. If R. K. Narayan is the moral realist of the Indian tradition, Raja Rao is its metaphysician. His novels—*Kanthapura* (1938), *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), and *The Cat and Shakespeare* (1965)—embody an interior dialogue between language, consciousness, and truth. For him, writing is not an aesthetic pastime but a mode of inquiry into being itself. “We cannot write like the English,” he declares in the preface to *Kanthapura* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938, p. v). “We should not. We can only write as Indians.” That statement is more than linguistic nationalism; it is a metaphysical declaration. To “write as Indians” is to perceive the world as continuous rather than dualistic—to see the visible as a veil over the invisible, and narrative as a journey toward illumination. In *Kanthapura*, his first major novel, the idiom of myth becomes the idiom of politics. The story of Gandhi’s influence on a South Indian village unfolds in the cadences of an oral narrative told by an old woman, Achakka. The effect is not historical reportage but epic reenactment. Every gesture of resistance acquires symbolic resonance; every event is absorbed into a cosmic rhythm. As K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar noted, “Raja Rao’s realism is spiritual realism: his world is symbolic, but not in the allegorical sense—it is a realism of the soul” (*Indian Writing in English*, Asia Publishing House, 1973, p. 118). By rendering the political through the metaphysical, Rao affirms that India’s historical struggles cannot be severed from its spiritual inheritance. Later novelists, particularly in the post-1990 period, reverse this equation: they treat the spiritual as a sociological relic, explaining faith in psychological or ideological terms. In Rao’s fiction, faith is not subject but substance—the medium through which experience becomes intelligible.

The transformation of Raja Rao’s art from *Kanthapura* to *The Serpent and the Rope* marks the passage from collective to personal quest. The latter novel, his masterpiece, is a vast metaphysical autobiography, chronicling the journey of Ramaswamy from intellectual curiosity to contemplative knowledge. It is, as E. W. Said remarked, “a metaphysical Bildungsroman” (*Orientalism Reconsidered*, London: Routledge, 1985, p. 243). The novel’s imagery—the serpent and the rope, illusion and truth—comes from an ancient epistemological metaphor: the error of mistaking a rope for a snake in dim light symbolizes the illusion of taking appearance for reality. The protagonist’s intellectual encounters with Europe, his marriage to Madeleine, and his final turn toward renunciation all enact this central metaphor. “The serpent and the rope,” he writes, “are one and the same: knowledge alone is the difference” (*The Serpent and the Rope*, New York: Pantheon, 1960, p. 363). In that sentence lies the essence of Raja Rao’s vision: truth is not discovered but remembered, for it exists within the being.

Raja Rao’s prose style itself performs this metaphysical inquiry. He bends English syntax to follow the logic of Sanskrit thought, introducing a rhythm of reflection rather than narration. Sentences accumulate in waves, like meditation, circling a single insight. His diction, austere and luminous, draws upon philosophical vocabulary—Brahman, Māyā, jñāna—not as exotic terms but as conceptual necessities. In doing so, he fulfills what Iyengar described as “the Indianization of English through the interiorization of experience” (*Indian Writing in English*, p. 124). English, under Rao’s hand, ceases to be a colonial language; it becomes a vehicle for metaphysical subtlety. As A. S. Knippling has observed, “Rao’s prose is less an imitation of English realism than an extension of Indian meditation into the medium of English” (*Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28, no. 2 [1993]: 141).

This is precisely the quality missing from much post-1990 Indian fiction, which, though stylistically accomplished, remains bound to historical empiricism.

In *The Cat and Shakespeare* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), Raja Rao distilled his metaphysical vision into parables. The novel, brief yet profound, dramatizes the union of the comic and the contemplative. Govindan Nair, a humble clerk in Cochin, embodies wisdom in the guise of simplicity. Through his eyes, Rao affirms that truth is accessible through ordinary life, that the world itself is *līlā*—divine play. “To see things as they are,” Govindan says, “is to know they are not as they seem” (p. 47). In this paradox lies the tone of an entire tradition—the capacity to hold irony and illumination together. Narayan shares this wisdom at the level of manners; Rao elevates it to metaphysics. Both write from within a consciousness where the visible world participates in the invisible order.

The significance of Raja Rao’s fiction becomes clearer when juxtaposed with the post-1990 Indian novel’s secular historicism. Writers such as Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy treat history as the primary repository of meaning; the moral imagination yields to political allegory. In contrast, Rao understands history as surface—a movement of forms within the changeless substratum of being. His historical India is not the object of nostalgia but the manifestation of an eternal principle. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, “For Raja Rao, time itself is metaphor, a veil over the deeper continuity that is India’s moral identity” (*The Perishable Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 178). Post-1990 writers, however, reconstruct India as a narrative of trauma, translating the sacred into the sociological. The difference is ontological, not thematic: Rao writes from tradition, while they write about tradition.

Raja Rao’s essays, collected in *The Meaning of India* (New Delhi: Vision Books, 1996), reveal the philosophical foundation of his art. “India is not a country like others,” he writes, “it is a metaphysic, a way of apprehending existence” (p. 9). This assertion, so alien to the secular sensibility of the globalized novel, defines the axis around which his fiction turns. To write of India is, for Rao, to participate in that metaphysic—to translate its silences into language without profaning them. Literature, in his view, is a continuation of contemplation. It is precisely this attitude that later fiction, however eloquent, lacks. The cosmopolitan writer often sees contemplation as withdrawal, silence as regression, inwardness as apathy. Raja Rao reverses these assumptions: to turn inward is not to escape history but to understand its source.

In this sense, Raja Rao’s art represents the highest synthesis achieved by the early Indian English novel: the reconciliation of the philosophical and the personal, the eternal and the immediate. His fiction teaches that the writer’s true task is not to represent society but to illuminate consciousness. As Iyengar concluded, “Raja Rao’s genius is that of the sage, not of the historian; he writes in time but for the timeless” (*Indian Writing in English*, p. 128). Against the noise of postmodern irony, his prose restores the stillness of meditation. Against the secular reduction of meaning to power, it asserts the primacy of wisdom. If Narayan’s Malgudi preserves the moral rhythm of the everyday, Raja Rao’s Ramaswamy seeks the metaphysical order that sustains it. Together they form the twin poles of authenticity in Indian English fiction—a standard from which the post-1990 generation, in its fascination with the global, has largely drifted.

### ***Continuity, Modernity, and the Recovery of Meaning***

The trajectory of Indian writing in English from the 1930s to the present forms, in miniature, the moral and intellectual history of modern India itself. The early Indian novelists—Narayan, Raja Rao, Anand—wrote in a time of civilizational self-definition: the encounter with modernity was not yet surrender, and the colonial language could still be domesticated into the cadence of inherited thought. Their realism and metaphysical inquiry, though distinct in form, were united by an awareness that literature must remain in dialogue with the ethical and contemplative disciplines that shape the Indian

imagination. In their works, fiction became an act of remembrance. After 1990, as liberalization and globalization reshaped India's economic and social landscapes, the novel turned outward—to history, politics, and global experience. In the process, it gained visibility but lost density. The cosmopolitan Indian novelist, fluent in the idiom of the world, began to speak of India as an object of commentary rather than as a field of lived consciousness.

This loss is not primarily thematic; it is ontological. In the earlier fiction, the world was an expression of meaning. Narayan's Malgudi existed within an unseen moral continuum; Raja Rao's metaphysical journeys assumed that being itself is intelligible. Their realism was contemplative, not secular. By contrast, the post-1990 novel frequently operates within a world bereft of transcendence. Its moral vocabulary—alienation, identity, resistance—derives from Western modernism rather than from the indigenous grammar of value. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (London: Flamingo, 1997) transforms suffering into indictment but rarely into insight; Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2004) translates the sacred geography of the Sundarbans into the rhetoric of environmental ethics. Both writers achieve admirable intellectual range, yet their imaginative world is historical, not metaphysical; humanitarian, not spiritual. As Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, "In the contemporary Indian novel, continuity yields to contemporaneity; the past survives as memory, not as presence" (*The Perishable Empire*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 229). That distinction—memory versus presence—defines the disjunction at the heart of modern Indian writing in English. The contrast is heightened when we recall what Iyengar called the dharmic equilibrium of earlier fiction: "The Indian novelist must live in two worlds—the world of tradition and the world of change; his success lies in maintaining the conversation between them" (*Indian Writing in English*, Asia Publishing House, 1973, p. 31). Narayan and Raja Rao maintained that conversation effortlessly. Narayan's humour transformed duty into empathy; Raja Rao's meditation turned philosophy into narrative. They exemplified the possibility of modernity without deracination. Their art showed that to be modern need not mean to be secular in the Western sense; it could mean to renew tradition through reflection. Post-1990 fiction, however, often confuses modernity with rupture, seeing continuity as constraint. Its protagonists move through a world of mobility without belonging, irony without insight. The cosmopolitan posture, which once signified freedom, now threatens to become exile from the interior life of the culture.

Yet the situation is not irredeemable. Every tradition passes through phases of forgetting and renewal. The present estrangement may be a prelude to rediscovery. The task before contemporary Indian writers is not to imitate the metaphysical tone of Raja Rao or the moral quietude of Narayan, but to recover the condition that made their art possible—a condition of inwardness. In a society dominated by technology and spectacle, such inwardness must be re-imagined rather than restored. Literature can still become, in Iyengar's phrase, "the inward light of modernity" (p. 40). It can seek continuity not through nostalgia but through understanding, translating the living philosophies of India into the polyglot languages of the twenty-first century. To do so, however, it must resist the temptation to interpret all tradition as ideology and all faith as regression. Without that humility before inherited meaning, the Indian novel risks becoming a cosmopolitan dialect without home.

The enduring relevance of R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao lie in the moral attitude they exemplify. Both writers show that authenticity is not a matter of theme but of temperament—a disciplined sympathy toward life, a refusal of cynicism. Their realism and metaphysics, though differently inflected, arise from the same conviction: that the world, however ambiguous, is ordered and intelligible. The modern writer may question that conviction, but cannot dispense with it entirely without impoverishing the imagination. The deepest human experiences—love, loss, repentance, wonder—require an order of meaning beyond history. Literature that denies this dimension becomes documentary rather than revelatory. As A. K. Mehrotra reminds us, "To lose the moral ear of one's language is to lose its music" (*Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012, p. 102). The recovery of that music—the cadences of reflection and grace—is the challenge facing Indian writing in English today.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the dialectic between continuity and change that has defined Indian literary modernity remains unresolved. The post-1990 novel has mastered the idiom of global experience but has yet to find a new vocabulary for inner life. To move forward, it must look backward—not in nostalgia, but in recognition. The fiction of Narayan and Raja Rao demonstrates that the modern can be native, that English can become Indian without ceasing to be universal. Their example suggests a future in which the Indian writer, re-anchored in the contemplative imagination of the past, might again speak from within rather than about the civilization that sustains him. When that happens, the continuum of tradition—momentarily veiled by the glamour of the global—will re-emerge, not as heritage but as living possibility.

## Bibliography

1. Forster, E. M. *Introduction to The Financial Expert*. London: Methuen, 1952.
2. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. New York: Random House, 2000.
3. ———. *The Hungry Tide*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2004.
4. Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1973.
5. Knippling, A. S. “R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Modern English-Language Fiction from India.” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 28, no. 2 (1993): 134–47.
6. Mehrotra, A. K. *Partial Recall: Essays on Literature and Literary History*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012.
7. Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
8. Parthasarathy, R. *Collected Essays*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.
9. Rao, Raja. *Kanthapura*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1938.
10. ———. *The Serpent and the Rope*. New York: Pantheon, 1960.
11. ———. *The Cat and Shakespeare*. New York: Macmillan, 1965.
12. ———. *The Meaning of India*. New Delhi: Vision Books, 1996.
13. Riemenschneider, Dieter. *The Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934–2023*. Heidelberg: FID4SA Repository, 2024.
14. Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things*. London: Flamingo, 1997.
15. ———. *The End of Imagination*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1998.
16. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism Reconsidered*. London: Routledge, 1985.
17. Rao, Raja. “Remembering Narayan.” *The Hindu Literary Review*, August 1993.