

## BEYOND EUROCENTRISM: RECLAIMING INDIAN CRITICAL TRADITIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*Indian literary criticism has long been entangled in a paradoxical relationship with Western critical traditions. While Indian literature has achieved global recognition, its critical frameworks remain largely derivative of Western epistemologies. This paper explores the colonial underpinnings of Indian literary criticism, analyzing the impact of Western theoretical models on Indian critical discourse. Drawing upon the perspectives of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, C. D. Narasimhaiah, and G. N. Devy, this study critiques the pervasive Eurocentrism in Indian criticism and highlights the need for indigenous theoretical frameworks rooted in India's rich literary traditions. The paper further discusses the intellectual legacy of ancient Indian poetics—from Bharata's *Natyashastra* to Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka*—as a means to reclaim India's critical consciousness. By juxtaposing Indian and Western critical traditions, the study advocates for a more self-reliant and culturally contextualized approach to Indian literary criticism. The paper ultimately argues that Indian criticism must shed its colonial anxieties and assert its own intellectual autonomy to foster a decolonized and independent literary discourse.*

**Keywords:** Indian Literary Criticism; Postcolonial Theory; Decolonization; Western Criticism; Bharata; *Natyashastra*; G. N. Devy; K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar; C. D. Narasimhaiah; Eurocentrism; Indian Aesthetics.

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K R Srinivasa Iyengar, himself an acknowledged critic, once stated about Indian criticism that No doubt there is a “frenzy of critical endeavour” but no “really outstanding work has emerged” and that there appears to be no Indian parallel to the western concept of the sublime. And he is not the only one to have such thoughts on Indian Literary criticism. Another big name in the field is of C D Narsimhaiah who states about Indian criticism that “We hardly have any standards of our own - so much of our work is almost always derivative - this is so even with regard to our own literature -the reason why it is hard to tell an Indian critic by his work.”

Indian literary criticism has not been looked down upon by the west only but also by many of the Indian academicians who find inadequacies in the field. Critics depend on western tools to discuss and analyse texts that are purely Indian and forcefully yoke the two without even realising in some instances that no criticism can be worthwhile without taking into account the social and cultural reality of that time and place. The ignorance of the rich tradition of criticism in India,

and by India I do not mean just Sanskrit or Hindi but other languages too which have striking examples of aesthetics and criticism, has kept the Indian criticism still in a colonised state. One of the reason is that we still are mentally colonised. The west is still fair for us. Critics find their endeavour of employing Western theoretical tools to analyse Indian texts, both old and new, fruitfully satisfying. From the dawn of modern Indian criticism, which corresponded with the expansion of new literary forms like the short story, the novel, and the contemporary prose-play, Western critique was clearly discernible. From the dawn of contemporary Indian critique, this impact was clear-cut. The fundamental concepts and inclinations have remained the same alongside the changes in Western thought. Originally simply English criticism influencing Indian critics, over time influences from Russian, French, and German schools also began to find their way into the mainstream. M. K. Naik's extreme dependence on western criticism led him to argue that literary criticism has to grow out of one's own cultural setting to be completely matured. Naik briefly reviews the state of Indian literary criticism and finds it "almost entirely derivative and imitative of standard western critical schools and their precepts; He further states that most of us appear to be largely ignorant of the ancient Indian literary tradition and critical thought (158). He feels that theoretical considerations directly affect practical criticism. He shows how G. V. Desani's All About Hatterr, and the romantic poetry of Torn Dutt, Shri Aurobindo, Tagore and Sarojini Naidu suffer because of Eurocentric standards.

Our dependency on western criticism has led the critics from the West to have poor opinion about literary criticism in particular and Indian Writing in English in general. One such opinion is that of H. H. Wilson who triumphantly states that "Indian criticism... has always been in its infancy. It never learned to connect causes and effects. ... It never became either poetical or philosophical. Technicalities were the only objects within its comprehension". The reason of inviting such a mean comment is that our thinking has been so deeply permeated with the critical attitudes and values of the West. It has become practically impossible for the modern Indian scholars to give up the habit of interpreting literature through the Western media. And over and above this is the felt superiority of the Indian academicians writing in English. None less than Makrand Paranjape feels that writers in Indian Languages are hostile towards those writing in English and in their hatred, they forget to what extent the English wallahs have contributed to Indian Literature starting from Michael Madhusudan Dutt. He at another place states that the Indian English critics rarely cite each other and as per him it is usually "me and the west" syndrome dominating the academic discourse. The internal conflict somehow contributes to the fact that while Indian Creative Writing in English has now secured a respectable place on the world's literary map, Indian critical writing in English still continues to be largely ignored, both in India and then inevitably abroad. G N Devy has a peculiar, but somewhat acceptable to some extent, explanation for the tendency of looking up to the western criticism by the Indians. He, in his Function of Literary Criticism in India, mentions that the traditional Indian respect for learning of languages and poetry was instantly reflected in the unresisting acceptance of British Literature and English Criticism. Since Indian critics in our ancient history had been treated as sages—Bharatmuni, Anandavardhan, abhinavgupta—In our imagination, we bestowed comparable honour on the figures like Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold and Eliot. In reality not one of

these had the slightest sympathy for Indian Culture. Ruskin thought of Indian art as a senseless barbaric mass while Eliot a staunch conservative, supported Imperialism.

C D Narasimhaiah's irritation on aping the west in criticism by the Indian critics is visible in the following quote "now Aristotle, now the Neo-classicists, then Romantics and lately the New Critics without absorbing them to suit to our present needs" (1966: 20). In his essay 'The Function of Criticism in India' he further states that "With a vigorous tradition like this in day-to-day living we have still preferred to practise our endless mimicry on the intellectual plane - yesterday it was the British, today it is the Americans and the day after, who knows it may be the Russians. Acharya Ram Chandra Shukl felt that the west brainwashed the Indian critical consciousness and warned the critics from falling prey to it. He said "These days many a leaf of the tree of westernization are being heartily embraced by many of us here. Some still green leaves of this tree have been hastily plucked while some others that have dried up are nevertheless being presented by us as some esteemed certificate of merit. (Chintamani Part2)

Agreed upon is the statement of K Satchidanandan that traditional Indian Poetics is in a state of crisis. But does this mean that India falls short in texts of literary criticism? Have we thoroughly investigated our history for the texts in all languages? Are the literatures written in Sanskrit, or Hindi or for that matter in English are the true representatives of India's literary treasure? Only we have to find the answer to this.

In spite of the fact that it does not precisely fit under the genre of criticism, Kautilya's Arthashastra is an example of one of the first works that goes beyond the realm of simple literature to participate in meta-literary and theoretical debate. As a parallel to Plato's Republic, this book may be understood in a nuanced fashion; yet, this interpretation is possible. In contrast, Bharatha's Natyashastra, which focusses on drama and, more specifically, on the art of acting—similar to Aristotle's Poetics, though again in a subtle way—is the more accessible work that has profoundly influenced literature in India as a foundational text that is meta- or prescriptive, thereby establishing its significance as a theoretical framework. This is because Bharatha's Natyashastra is a foundational text that functions as a prescriptive or meta-textual text. There is no other idea in Western literary criticism that maintains a position of prominence comparable to that of rasa in Indian poetry. Vinay Lal's analysis of the book "Indian Poetics and Western Literary Criticism" written by M.S. Kushwaha and Edward C. Dimock. In a manner comparable to Aristotle's Poetics, which goes beyond just analysing poetry to provide direction to aspiring authors, Bharatmuni's Natyashastra serves as both an investigation into the art of Natya and a practical guide for the production of plays. Shivarudrappa, Sri G. S. In his analysis, V. K. Chari discovers a number of noteworthy connections between the idea of rasa and the observations made by Kames, a Scottish critic who distinguishes between discordant and concordant emotions, as well as Coleridge's concept of unity of impact. In addition to this, he claims that rasa theory "offers a more comprehensive and convincing explanation of poetic semantics as well as a coherent overarching theory of poetry." In spite of the fact that we hold the Greek principles of rhetoric in the highest respect, we fail to take into account our very own Alankarashastra, which may be translated as the science of figures of speech. The complexity and varied character of the topic have been clearly explained in Bharata's Natyashastra, Bhamaha's Kavyalankara,

Daṇḍin's Kavyadarsa, Udbhata's Kavyalankara-sangraha, Rudrata's Kavyalankara, Anandavardhana's Dhvanyaloka, and Mammata's Kavya-prakasa. Panini, Bhartihari, and Kuntaka are only a few of the notable people who have contributed to the development of modern Indian language. Kuntaka was a Kashmiri Sanskrit poet and literary theorist who is most known for his work, Vakroktijivitam. In this work, he articulates the Vakrokti Siddhanta, often known as the theory of Oblique Expression. Kuntaka considers this theory to be the distinguishing quality of all creative writing. He lived somewhere between the years 950 and 1050, which is roughly equivalent to the time period between Anandavardhana of the ninth century and Abhinavagupta of the tenth century. He was not only a contemporary of Dhananjaya and Rajasekhara, but he also lived throughout it. In his discussion of Kuntaka, who is referred to as "the greatest exponent of the theory of Vakrokti," R. S. Pathak says that Kuntaka's viewpoints exhibit significant similarities with modern Western analytic critique. In his article titled "Indian Poetics and New Criticism," P. S. Shastri makes the argument that Vakrokti is comparable to the contradiction that Cleanth Brooks has found and the ambiguity that Empson has found.

Iyenger observes that the contemporary Indian critic has "no lack of indigenous theorists or practitioners of criticism to show him the way". He rightly gives the credit of establishing the tradition of Indian English literary aesthetics to Tagore, Aurobindo and Coomarswamy. C.D. Narasimhaiah regards Aurobindo as "inaugurator of Modern Indian Criticism". Sri Aurobindo with his *The Future Poetry*, revives the idea of poetry as sound, the mantra, chant, invocation. The Future of Poetry (1917-1920) is an important and unique document in literary history and critical theory. K.D. Verma, in his paper "Sri Aurobindo as a Critic" makes a brilliant study of Aurobindo's literary output, and tries to study "The Future Poetry" in the light of modern critical schools. He comes to the conclusion that "Aurobindo's literary criticism comes close, in many ways, if not entirely, to the School of Myth and Archetype, with which the names of Freud, Jung, Frazer, Mann and Frye are commonly associated" (2004: 20-21). Aurobindo's criticism is deftly grounded in philosophy. It must be admitted that Aurobindo's critical and poetic theories and his philosophical writings are an attempt at the "widest globalization" of the English language.

Indian poetics is frequently associated with Sanskrit poetics; however, there exists a rich parallel tradition in Tamil and Urdu, which is influenced by the Persian tradition. Additionally, one must consider individual texts such as Kavirajamarga in Kannada, as well as the poetics inherent in our oral literary practices. Critics such as the late Krishna Rayan approached Sanskrit poetics through the lens of contemporary Western theories, resulting in nuanced and adaptable interpretations of fundamental concepts such as dhvani (suggestion), rasa (basic emotion), vakrokti (indirect speech), and anumana (theory of reception), as well as their associated peripheral ideas. He also contemplated the binary oppositions such as emotive/referential meaning (I.A. Richards), oblique/direct (E.M.W. Tillyard), local texture/logical structure (J.C. Ransom), and intensive/extensive meaning (Allen Tate) as mere rearticulations of the suggestion/statement distinction evident in both Eastern and Western poetics. In *Sahitya*, a Theory, Rayan crafted a diverse theoretical framework for Indian critical practice by synthesising Sanskrit, Tamil, and Western concepts, enriched with numerous examples and quotations.

Critical theory flourished much earlier in Indian English writing. The Indian mind has a flair for theoretical speculation, as is evident in the Sanskrit literary heritage, but this remained dormant and inactive on account of a variety of reasons in the centuries that immediately preceded the establishment of colonial power. The Indian Renaissance and the anti-colonial movement gave a new fillip to the revival of classicism and activated once again the propensity for speculation and polemic in the Indian critical mind. Thus Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Hiriyanna and a few others, through their brilliant works, established a sound beginning for Indian critical theory in English. Rabindranath Tagore, who expounded his views on art and poetry in “The Religion of An Artist”, “Creative Unity”, “Lectures and Addresses”, “Nationalism”, asserted that art is the response of man’s creative soul to the call of the real. This response is communicated through language which should be rhythmical because rhythm creates an incantatory or Mantric quality which immediately appeals to the soul.

Anand Coomaraswamy, the eminent scholar and aesthete, has emphasized the spiritual significance of art and literature in his numerous essays entitled “Figures of Speech or Figures of Thought”, “Literary Symbolism”, “Sanvaga-Aesthetic Shock”, “Hindu View of Art”, “The Dance of Shiva” etc. According to him, words have unique significance to elevate the soul from mundane existence into the realm of the sublime. Sabda (words) in Sanskrit stands for both words and sound- Sabda Brahma (word is God) and Nada Brahma (sound is God). When word, surcharged with power is uttered two things happen - there is a realization of ideal beauty and an upsurge of the consciousness. Coomaraswamy’s views on art and aesthetics came under the sway of ancient Indian aesthetic.

Based on a reorientation of classical aesthetic values in the light of modern knowledge and representing the true critical genius of India, the classical style of Indian literary criticism was developed to maturity. Critics like Y. V. Kantak, S. Nagarajan, Saros Cowasji, P.K. Rajan, Paul C. Verghese, Mulk Raj Anand, P. Lai, Shiv K. Kumar, Ayyappa Paniker, Vasant A. Shahane, Meena Alexander, Meenakshi Mukherjee, and a host of others made laudable contribution in the field to make us proud of and to free Indian criticism from the clutches of the western.

The line, which has existed so far between Western criticism and Indian poetics, (EastWest synthesis) will have to be effaced. Instead of comparing the two traditions to establish that we are better, we shall have to use our critical tradition in Sanskrit and regional languages in international critical debates. In the new millennium, we need to change our attitude. We shall have to strike a balance between what is regional and national and what is international. As Said has said repeatedly and emphatically, both the West and the East will have to give up their unnecessary and fruitless attempts to establish their superiority or hegemony. The tug-of-war between the East and the West must end on culture as well as criticism for a better understanding of literature and for a better world for us to live in.

We now do have significant thinkers coming up as world view holders like Vandana Shiva, Kancha Ilaiah, Chandra Bhan Prasad and the names mentioned previously who have prompted (though it should not matter) critics like V. S. Pinto, William Walsh, Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons, to name a few, who have highly praised Indian literary criticism. Critics like John Oliver

Perry suggest that European standard cannot apply to Indian writings. As Perry says “The essential values of that European-based culture with respect to poetry are not particularly suited to the actual Indian readership of Indian English, much less to the poets.” That is why his plea “for a more indigenous, if appropriately mixed, critical approach”. Allardyce Nicoll refers several times to the unpublished doctoral dissertation of U.C. Nagchaudhari *A History of Early Nineteenth Century Drama : 1800-1850* (1930). G. Wilson Knight recommends C. Narayana Menon’s work on Shakespeare as one that impressed him by keenness to its insight, and Allen J. Greenberger writing in 1969 thinks that “Bhupal Singh’s discussion is only one to attempt a survey of the whole range of such literature.” Similarly, Gay Wilson Allen regards T.R. Rajasekharain’s *Roots of Whiteman’s Grass* as “so definitive a source of study” and says of V. K. Chari’s work : “This study has taught me more than all previous writers on the subject.”

To conclude, no one will deny the fact that Indian literary criticism in English is not rich or copious. No one will look down upon Indian creative writing in English, but it would not be wrong if the similar is said about Indian literary criticism in English which has been growing healthily. Indian criticism in English is full of feverish activity today. The need of the hour is what G N Devy states when he says that “it is necessary for Indian literary criticism to get out of its present cultural amnesia and to speak about the native traditions with a greater self-confidence and self-respect.” I end with a quote from Makarand Paranjape “Thus, let us not be squeamish about using what is ours. Unfortunately, our secular intelligentsia feels great shame in mentioning anything to do with ancient, yes, I will use the word Hindu Tradition—as if the very utterance of the word Hindu will contaminate them...” And I endorse it and say that Hindu not in the sense taken today but Hindu as anything belonging to Hindustan, our country.

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