

*Research Article*

## Indian Response to Select British Literary Masterpieces through the Lens of Text Dynamics of World Literature

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**Abstract:** The paper attempts to present the Indian response to select masterpieces of English literature in the light of the perspectives on the dynamics of world literature. These include selections from the literary genres of drama, poetry, novel, and prose, such as select plays by William Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw; select poems by A.L. Tennyson, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats; well-known novels by E.M. Forster and George Orwell; and the essays by Francis Bacon and Bertrand Russel. According to David Damrosch, "world literature" refers to literary works that are accepted outside their culture of origin, making meaning through translation and becoming a dynamic exchange between the source and receiving cultures, essentially "refracting" national literatures through a process of reinterpretation and engagement with different cultural perspectives. Following the features of world literature, it aims at examining the major components of the above-mentioned literary authors, like universality, cultural exchange, comparative analysis, translation, elliptical refraction, transnational themes, diverse perspectives, and the ability to transcend national boundaries, essentially allowing the study of literary works from different cultures to engage with shared human experiences across diverse contexts. The plays of both Shakespeare and Shaw bear witness to a philosophy of life, seen from both tragic and comic perspectives. Like Kalidasa, they have befittingly portrayed the higher forms of rasa, morality, and truth with greater dramatic craft. The poetry of Tennyson, Eliot, and Yeats is no doubt inspiring. It explores the potential of human beings, with some intertextual echoes of Indian Upanishadic wisdom. In contrast, the novels of both Forster and Orwell speak to social realities that align with the understandings of contemporary Indian socio-political contexts in contemporary Indian fiction. In addition, the essays of Bacon and Russel have universal pragmatic and practical approaches at par with the Indian classics such as Chanakya and S. Radhakrishnan.

**Keywords:** British masterpieces; Indian response; text dynamics; universality; morality

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## **Interpreting Features of World Literature**

World literature is usually understood as the masterpieces that bear eternal literary and moral value, transcending spatio-temporal boundaries. Categories of writings in such works of art today could be molded into local interpretation. In this context, David Damrosch states, "A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin". (Damrosch, 2014). He outlines that concepts associated with world literature include: universality, cultural exchange, translation, comparative analysis, transnational themes, global interconnectedness, diverse perspectives, human experience, colonialism, postcolonialism, identity, power dynamics, and the ability to transcend national boundaries; essentially, the study of literary works from different cultures, allowing readers to engage with shared human experiences across diverse contexts. Some of the key points about Damrosch's concept of world literature are that:

- A work becomes "world literature" when it gains significance through translation, allowing it to be interpreted and recontextualized in different cultures.
- Creates an "ellipse" between the source culture and the receiving culture, where the work is not fully contained within either but interacts with both.
- Not a fixed canon, but rather a dynamic process of reading and interpreting works across cultural boundaries.
- Involves actively engaging with different cultural perspectives and considering the impact of translation on meaning. (Damrosch, 2024)

Such writings seem to go beyond the spatio-temporal boundary, as they incorporate text dynamics that consider how texts, as communicative events, are influenced by the socio-cultural contexts in which they are produced, mediated, and consumed. Although literary texts are universal, their universality also makes them increasingly interdisciplinary.

## **Features of Indian Response**

The discussion includes a much-valued quote from Tagore's "Song Offering" that heralds the Indian response to the notions of universality and the dynamism of thought.

*"Where the mind is without fear, and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth;" (Lines 1-5, Tagore, "Song Offering")*

Thus, when we talk about Indian response, it is grossly characterized by classic notions of art and literature, which are a tapestry of contexts of high esteem relating to life, time, society, and human relationships. The flavor of classical texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, and Puranas characterizes Indian responses. What's more,

we have a host of classical literary authors in Sanskrit like Adi Shankara's *Vivekachudamani*, *Aparokshanubhuti*, *Atma Shatakam*, *Manisha Panchakam*; Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka*; Bharata Muni's *Natya Shastra*; Bhartṛhari's *Vākyapadīya*, and *Śatakatrāya*; Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracarita*, and *Kavyadarsha*; and Vishnu Sharma's *The Panchatantra*, to name a few. Diverse literary, philosophical, and deeper aesthetic values always characterize the Indian response. The writings of R.N. Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, and a host of literary authors across the ages and cultures call for a valuable consideration of spirituality, truth, eternal beauty, and universal social realities. Not only this, but it also accepts multilingual and multicultural dynamics. Most Indian classical writings reflect the realities of contemporary individuals and social issues.

### Universality of the Themes of Select British Authors and Indian Response

William Shakespeare's works are considered universal because they are relevant to people across cultures and time. In India, such a textual extract is often quoted because it aligns with the Indian philosophy of the stages of human life on this earth, such as *shaisaba*, *brahmacharya*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha*, *sannyasa*, and *finally bardhakya*. One such popular example can be given here.

*"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women are merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts are seven ages." (Act II, Scene VII, Lines 139-43, As You Like It)*

His plays are known for their rich language, complex characters, and profound insights into the human condition. Shakespeare's writings remain socially relevant today because they explore timeless themes like love, power, ambition, betrayal, and the human condition, providing a lens to examine complex social issues and human relationships, even though they were written centuries ago, allowing audiences to readily relate to his characters and situations across different cultures and time periods; his works also often reflect the social hierarchies and class struggles, offering valuable insights into past societal structures and their impact on individuals. In Indian moral beliefs, this world, that is, *samsara*, is interpreted as "*samyak saara*," which is hardly of any value. His popular lines from *Macbeth* still echo in us.

*"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then it is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing." (Act 5, scene 5, Lines 16-20, Macbeth)*

Shakespeare's plays grapple with fundamental human experiences like love, loss, revenge, and ambition, which remain relatable to audiences across different cultures and time periods. His characters are not simply good or evil, but multifaceted individuals with flaws and motivations, allowing audiences to engage deeply with their struggles. His mastery of language, including poetic imagery and rich vocabulary,

continues to inspire and influence writers today. Shakespeare's plays can be readily adapted to reflect contemporary social issues, making them relevant to modern audiences. His plays, such as *King Lear*, explore the struggles over power and family dynamics within a hierarchical society. *Twelfth Night* examines the complexities of gender identity and societal expectations. *Julius Caesar* explores the dangers of ambition and the potential for political turmoil. *Hamlet* delves into the psychological impact of personal dilemmas and the struggle to make moral choices.

Similarly, Bernard Shaw excels in his themes of extreme social relevance. His unparalleled observation about life can be summed up thus: "Life is not about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself." (*Pygmalion* 43). His writings are socially relevant because they actively critique and discuss prevalent societal issues like class inequality, gender roles, capitalism, and the exploitation of the working class, using wit and irony to expose flaws in society while entertaining audiences, essentially making his plays a platform for intellectual debate about social problems of his time. Shaw says: "Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine, and at last you create what you will." (*Pygmalion* 87).

His plays often tackled controversial topics such as poverty, war, religion, and the role of women, using his characters to represent diverse perspectives on these issues. His "problem plays" significantly influenced the development of modern theater by establishing the stage as a platform for discussing social concerns. *Pygmalion* explores class differences and the power dynamics between men and women through the story of a professor who transforms a flower girl. *Major Barbara* debates the role of religion and morality in addressing social issues through the character of a Salvation Army worker, and *Saint Joan* reexamines the historical figure of Joan of Arc, highlighting themes of female empowerment and religious persecution. *Man and Superman* explores marriage, gender roles, and the "life force" through philosophical dialogues among its characters.

### **British Poets**

While talking about the Indian response to the British poets, it becomes quite challenging. Indians have been with almost all the British poets for quite a few centuries now. John Donne's famous line from "Death Be Not Proud," "One short sleep past, we wake eternally," (Lines 13-14) coincides with the morale of *jaatasya dhruvmitryu*. Poets like John Keats are grossly adorable as the Indian philosophy of *satya shiva sundara* has been advocated as "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." (Lines 9-10, Stanza 5, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). P.B. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" conveys the idea of the wind as both destroyer and preserver; however, it resonates with the Indian concept of Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. A.L. Tennyson is only a sample, as his poems explore universal themes such as love, loss, and the passage of time. His work also reflects the Victorian era's preoccupation with mortality and the fleeting nature of life. His writings echo the Upanishadic saying, "*uttisthata jagrata prapya varanibodhata*", that is, "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." ("Ulysses").

Tennyson's poems often explore themes of love and loss; his work combines narrative and lyric elements to create poems that resonate emotionally with readers. It often explores themes of the passage of time; his works reflect the Victorian era's preoccupation with mortality and the fleeting nature of life; and his note on optimism about life and society says:

*"Ring out the old, ring in the new,  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true."* (2<sup>nd</sup> Stanza, *In Memoriam*, [Ring Out Wild Bells])

The themes of perseverance and optimism, extol the virtues of optimism and discuss the importance of struggling on with life; explore themes of isolation, longing, and the inevitability of death; and explore themes of tradition, the passing of time, and the tension between old and new are superbly delineated in his poems. This aligns with Indian belief: *Satyameva Jayate Na Anrita*, meaning that truth alone triumphs, not falsehood.

T.S. Eliot was influenced by Indian philosophy, which is reflected in his work, particularly in *The Waste Land*. Eliot studied Indian scripture and philosophy while at Harvard, where he enrolled in courses on Indic subjects. He also read some Indian poetry. Eliot's themes include time, death and rebirth, love, and the quest motif. He used symbolism such as the wasteland, garden, water, city, and stairs to explore these themes.

*"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
We will arrive where we started  
Moreover, know the place for the first time."* (Lines 26-29, Section 5, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*)

His poetry explores themes of isolation, alienation, and the struggle to find meaning in a modern world. It also captures the experience of modernity and the consequences of the loss of religion. In his poem *The Waste Land*, Eliot used the Sanskrit word *Shantih* to mean "The Peace which passeth understanding". The word *Shantih* translates to "peace", "rest", "calmness", "tranquility", or "bliss". Eliot's work captures the complexity of modern life, including fragmentation, half-heard memories, and desire. He saw the consequences of the loss of religion in the Western world, believed that human nature is constant, with the same vices and virtues across time, and explored the human predicament of man's desire for salvation. His essays, like "Tradition and the Individual Talent", have influenced literary theory. His innovative use of language and form has inspired many poets and novelists. Eliot's essays have provided insights into the nature of poetry and the role of the critic. Notable works like *The Waste Land* (1922) express the disillusionment of the period after World War I; *Prufrock and Other Observations* portrays the hesitancy and indecision of modern man; and *Four Quartets* explores the way to the Rose Garden that endures beyond time. The popular line "In my end is my beginning" aligns with the Indian belief in the cycle of birth and death.

William Butler Yeats's poetry explores universal themes such as the nature of the spirit, Irish nationalism, and the role of art. His work is considered a precursor to Modernism. His intense poetic philosophy is evident in the following extracts from "The Second Coming."

*"Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;" (Lines 1-3, "The Second Coming")*

Universal themes in Yeats's poetry include his search for a theory of the essence of spirit and a way to recognize and nurture universal spiritual elements in Irish culture. His poetry often represented Irish nationalism, and he used Irish myth and legends to depict the country's cultural history; he often explored the social validity of art and poetry.

Many Indian poets, critics, and scholars have found that W.B. Yeats's poetry is a strong response to India and Indian philosophy. Some Indian responses to Yeats's poetry, like Harivanshrai Bachchan wrote "W.B. Yeats and the Occult"; Shankar Ravindran wrote W.B. Yeats and the Indian Tradition; and Naresh Guha wrote W.B. Yeats: An Indian. Yeats's use of Eastern concepts shows a deeper understanding of Indian philosophy; Yeats's "beggar poems" and poetic play, *The Shadowy Waters* show the influence of Tagore's *Gitanjali and Indian ideas*; Yeats's use of Indian philosophical concepts and themes in *The Herne's Egg* is evident in the plot, characterization, and structure of the play; Yeats's exoticizing language when discussing Chatterjee has been criticized as indicating a colonial relationship; Yeats's writings have been described as orientalist, anti-colonialist, nationalist, revivalist, and even traditionalist. His poem "Meru" strengthens this notion by appreciating the spiritual exaltation of Indian hermits.

### **British Novelists**

Like poetry and drama, the British novelists have received wider and better academic and readerly responses in India for centuries. To take a few samples like E.M. Forster's brilliant writings, which are universal as they explore human relationships, social divides, and the need for tolerance. His works also critique English society and challenge readers to consider multiple perspectives. Themes in Forster's work include love, sympathy, and tolerance between people from different cultures and social classes; explores social divides, such as the gulf between colonizers and colonized in *A Passage to India*; points out the tension between tradition and modernity; and critiques colonialism, as in *A Passage to India*. Forster's work had a wide influence during a time when the theory and criticism of fiction were not as sophisticated. The Indian response to E.M. Forster's writings, particularly his novel "A Passage to India," is complex, with many appreciating his nuanced portrayal of the colonial experience in India while also criticizing certain aspects as overly simplistic or potentially stereotypical, particularly regarding the depiction of Indian culture and characters; some see it as a powerful critique of British colonialism, while others find it problematic in its portrayal of Indian society and its emphasis on the "clash of cultures."

Some Indians have responded to George Orwell's writings by recalling his encouragement of critical thinking about politics and by criticizing the Indian government's actions. Others have noted Orwell's anti-imperialism and his disapproval of the British Empire's expansion. His much-quoted line: "Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else." (p. 87, 1984) can be of great value in this regard. Some have noted that Orwell encouraged critical thinking, which is necessary for social progress. Others have admired Orwell for his honesty and for resisting political and commercial pressures to change his ideas. Some have criticized the Indian government for actions that they say are contrary to Orwell's ideas. Some have noted Orwell's anti-imperialism and his disapproval of the British Empire's expansion. Some others have considered Orwell's relationship with India, including his acquaintance with Indian intellectuals in London during World War II.

### **British Essayists**

Francis Bacon's writings are considered more universal and valid even now because of profound reflections on the components of knowledge. He promoted the idea of a universal written language to communicate scientific truth. He also argued that scientific knowledge is based on observation and inductive reasoning. He says, "Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider." ("Of Studies")

Bacon believed that a universal written language would help people think clearly and arrive at the truth. He was less concerned with which language was originally perfect, and more concerned with creating a non-ambiguous language. He believed that scientific knowledge is based on observation and inductive reasoning. His writing style was characterized by clarity, brevity, and a logical structure. He often used aphorisms and maxims to convey complex ideas. Bacon's essays explored themes of human nature, knowledge, and morality. He emphasized the importance of education, experience, and observation. Bacon is considered a major figure in the development of scientific methodology and natural philosophy during the English Renaissance. The spirit of Chanakya is echoed in Bacon's essays through empiricism, scientific methods, the advancement of knowledge, and social order.

Bertrand Russell's writings often explore the universality of ideas, such as truth, justice, and love. He believed that all truths involve universals and that knowledge of truths requires understanding universals. He says, "Fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom." (p. 89, *The Value of Philosophy*). Russell defined universals as characteristics that are shared by many particulars. For example, "redness" and "roundness" are universals. He believed that contemplation of truth can lead to a universal love that can be given to all people; believed that impartiality in contemplation leads to justice in action; believed that citizenship of the universe, achieved through contemplation, is the true freedom of humans; believed that the fear of death can be overcome by making interests wider and more impersonal. He adds to his argument, saying, "It has been said that man is a rational animal. All my life, I have been searching for evidence that could support this." Indians have responded to Bertrand Russell's writings in a variety of

ways, including appreciation, disagreement, and a desire to learn more. In the words of Uma Rani Sharma, both Radhakrishnan and Russell,

“...agree on the point that society is composed mainly of four or five components, namely political, economic, social, and cultural. They also believe that a society can remain stable only when its various components are in harmony with one another. If these elements fall into discord, the social order disintegrates.” (Sharma, 140).

Some appreciate Russell's intellect and his writings on religion and science. Some have noted the mutual respect between Russell and Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian poet and Nobel laureate. Russell is often compared with S. Radhakrishnan for propagating knowledge of universal human values.

### **Conclusion**

Indian responses to British classics are always multifaceted. The host of playwrights, poets, novelists, and essayists across the centuries has influenced the Indian mind, and Indian viewpoints have also shaped them. Given the features of world literature, British writings have been accepted only because they have literary and social flavors that appeal to the Indian readership. In addition, such writings bear witness to universal, adorable moral and intuitive messages. Shakespeare is often compared with Kalidasa, whereas Bernard Shaw was strongly influenced by Gandhian philosophy. The Upanishadic ideology of life and morality informs the creative processes of Tennyson, T.S. Eliot, and W.B. Yeats. The novels of E.M. Forster and George Orwell align with the social and political ideology of Indian society and inspire many Indian writers to propagate the same message. Baconian philosophy often aligns with the principles of Chanakya, whereas Bertrand Russell is often cited alongside S. Radhakrishnan in academic and modern philosophical domains. Literatures and readers of both countries have been adapting to each other during the colonial and postcolonial eras, only because such writings carry configurations of subject matter and messages that are accepted worldwide as the best. They embody elliptical refraction, transnational themes, diverse perspectives, and the ability to transcend national boundaries.

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