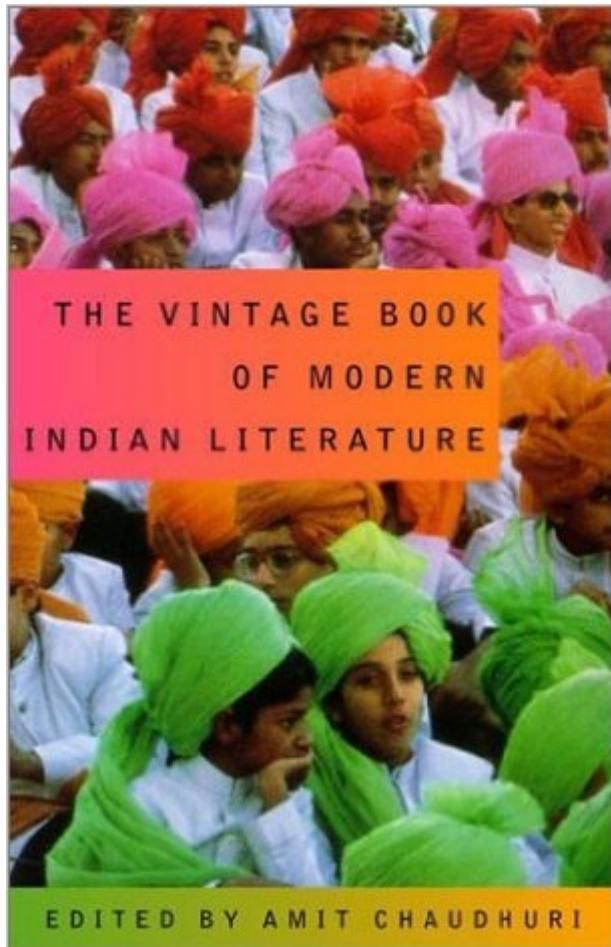


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The Vintage Book Of Modern Indian Literature



Synopsis

In recent years American readers have been thrilling to the work of such Indian writers as Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth. Now this extravagant and wonderfully discerning anthology unfurls the full diversity of Indian literature from the 1850s to the present, presenting today's brightest talents in the company of their distinguished forbearers and likely heirs. The thirty-eight authors collected by novelist Amit Chaudhuri write not only in English but also in Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu. They include Rabindranath Tagore, arguably the first international literary celebrity, chronicling the wistful relationship between a village postal inspector and a servant girl, and Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee, represented by an excerpt from his classic novel about an impoverished Bengali childhood, *Pather Panchali*. Here, too, are selections from Nirad C. Chaudhuri's Autobiography of an Unknown Indian, R. K. Narayan's *The English Teacher*, and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* alongside a high-spirited nonsense tale, a drily funny account of a pre-Partition Muslim girlhood, and a Bombay policier as gripping as anything by Ed McBain. Never before has so much of the subcontinent's writing been made available in a single volume.

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Customer Reviews

A brilliant collection of literary pieces, spanning a ~150 year period, written by "Indian" authors in English or one of several languages of the subcontinent. The pieces have been organized by Chaudhuri, an Indian author who writes mostly in English but is fluent in at least two Indian languages. As Chaudhuri explains, the range of style, theme, and literary traditions practised by

authors in the Indian subcontinent is at least as prolific, and ancient, as that in the West. This anthology gives an English-speaking reader a cross-section of that range. The chosen pieces sparkle with brilliance and radiate rare charm. Adorned with Chaudhuri's erudite prose and intimate knowledge (for example, we are informed that Tagore's experiments with the European short-story form slightly predated its introduction to the English language) the book is a feast.

This book, published in 2004, was the U.S. version of the Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature, published in the U.K. in 2001. Both books contained the same 55 works by 39 writers. There were 18 short stories, 13 excerpts from novels, 7 letters, 6 essays, 4 excerpts from essays, 3 excerpts from autobiographies, 3 autobiographical short stories and 1 excerpt from a nonfiction novel. About half of the works were written originally in English. Another quarter was translated from Bengali. What space remained was given to pieces translated from Urdu (4), Hindi (3), Malayalam (2), and Kannada, Tamil and Oriya (one each). The works ranged from the 1850s to the 1990s. Those from the 19th century were either from English or Bengali. The author emphasized particularly the 19th century Bengali Renaissance and included from that period a few pieces by Michael Dutt (1824-94), a very brief extract from an early novel by Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838-94) and some writing by Tagore (1861-1941). For the 20th century as a whole, the great majority of the works in the book were from the 1940s to 90s, especially the latter two decades. There was nothing from the 1930s or 70s. For the 20th century, just over half the works in the book were written originally in English. For the rest, the pieces from Bengali included extracts from the classic 1920s novel *Panther Panchali* by Bibhuti Banerjee (1894-1950) and a novel by Buddhadev Bose (1908-74), some short works by the humorists Parashuram (1880-1960) and Sukumar Ray (1887-1923), and a short story by Mahasweta Devi (1926-). There were only a few pieces in Bengali from after the time of partition. On the other hand, for the selections from the other vernacular languages, most were written after partition. The other writers born in the 19th century or around the turn of the 20th included Fakir Mohan Senapati, Premchand, Nirad Chaudhuri, R. K. Narayan, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, Raja Rao, Saadat Hasan Manto and Aubrey Menen. Those born in the 1920s through the mid-40s included Krishna Sobti, Mahashweta Devi, Qurratulain Hyder, A. K. Ramanujan, Nirmal Verma, O. V. Vijayan, U. R. Anantha Murthy, Ruskin Bond, Naiyer Masud, Dom Moraes, Adil Jussawalla and Ambai. Those born from the late 1940s to the 60s included Salman Rushdie, Arvind Mehrotra, Vikram Seth, Aamer Hussein, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Vikram Chandra, Amit Chaudhuri, Rohit Manchanda, Ashok Bunker, Sunetra Gupta and Pankaj Mishra, the youngest. Everyone in this group, incidentally, wrote in English; one wonders where the major writers in the

vernacular languages were from this generation. With this book, it seemed the editor was trying to accomplish several things. First, to highlight Bengali as the first modern Indian literature, the result of "one of the most profound and creative cross-fertilizations between two different cultures [English and Bengali] in the modern age." The impact led to the creation of a Bengali bourgeoisie and an intelligentsia that refined traditions in radical ways, creating a "secular space" that was beyond the previously all-encompassing religious codes, but where tradition remained integral to identity. The secular literature that resulted expressed the ambivalent rejection and redefinition of tradition as a creative element, a pattern the editor claimed was a key to understanding the nation's literature and culture. One of the clearest representatives of this development and ambivalence, highlighted near the start of the book, was the cosmopolitan, multilingual 19th century Bengali writer Michael Dutt, who rejected Hinduism as a religion but remained fascinated by Indian mythology. Other Bengali writers included in the collection ran from Chatterjee and Tagore, to Bannerjee, Parashuram and Bose, to Devi. For me, among the most interesting of the works was a humorous short story by Parashuram in the style of Conan Doyle, with local adaptations. In it, Sherlock Holmes, accompanied by Dr. Watson, visited Calcutta, met his Bengali equivalent and involved himself in a local drama. The editor's second aim was to highlight types of Indian prose other than the "huge baggy monsters" of flamboyant magic realism associated with Rushdie and a stream of Indian writing in English since the 1980s. He pointed to other types of writing -- nuanced, delicate and urbane -- available in vernacular languages like Bengali and Urdu, as well as to comparable writers in English like Aamer Hussein and Rohit Manchanda. The excerpt from a 1940s novel by Narayan, which depicted the routines of happily married life, could also be placed in this category, in my opinion. As could a 1980s story by Ruskin Bond in which a young man grew infatuated with a poor woman met briefly at a train station. And an autobiographical short story from 1990s by the poet Adil Jussawalla that described intimate memories from childhood of going to the cinema every week in Bombay with his family. Third, in contemporary selections from the vernacular languages, the editor seemed to be trying to show their varied scope and achievement, as creative in their way as their counterparts written in English. Some of the most enjoyable works here were Nirmal Verma's story from Hindi, which slowly revealed its setting in atmospheric Prague and involved an Indian's man relationship with an unstable European woman. O. V. Vijayan's story from Malayalam from the 1960s that entered the realm of Tarkovsky and science fiction. Ambai's story from Tamil about an urbanized woman visiting traditional women to get a sense of their lives, showing her feelings of both attraction and repulsion. And an excerpt from Senapati's early 20th century memoir from Oriya, described as the first autobiography in that language. In addition to these, there was the "social

documentary" style from the 1980s of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, which the editor called a break from the highly cultured writing of the earlier Bengali authors. And a 1990s story from Urdu by Naiyer Masud that was written in a realistic manner but seemed to take place in a world of dreams. Fourth, for the writing in English, the editor gave space in the book to not only a well-known earlier writer like Narayan and well-known contemporary authors like Rushdie, Seth, Ghosh and Chandra, but also types of writing like a piece of travel journalism from the early 1980s by Dom Moraes, which was called a highlight of that genre. An excerpt from an early 1990s novel by Ashok Banker that showed Bombay in the early stage of economic liberalization and the drive for success by ordinary office workers. And a very funny excerpt from a novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee in which an urbanized, Westernized young man suffered culture shock after taking up a civil service post in a provincial backwater. One of the genres the editor emphasized was autobiography -- especially in English -- because he thought very important, creative work in modern Indian writing had been done in it. In particular, he called Nirad Chaudhuri's 1951 memoir "probably the greatest autobiography written in the English language in the 20th century." In this genre, most enjoyable were the Anglo-Indian Aubrey Menen's ironic description from the 1950s of being sent back from England to get his high-caste grandmother's blessing, while his foreign mother was kept isolated in a far part of the compound to avoid ritual contamination, and his comparison of the racial pride and prejudicial assumptions of both sides of the family. And Pankaj Mishra's 1998 "Edmund Wilson in Benares," which movingly depicted a provincial student's discovery of high culture among writers from older generations: "The small, unnoticed tragedies of thwarted hopes and ideals Flaubert wrote about in *Sentimental Education* were all around us . . . The world we knew in Benares was many years away from those of the French novelist and the American critic. Yet -- and this was a measure of their greatness -- they seemed to have had an accurate, if bitter, knowledge of its peculiar human ordeals and futility." As to whether the editor fulfilled the aims described, I have no idea whether Bengali was the first modern Indian literature, but enjoyed the chance to read pieces translated from Bengali and get some idea of the literary development of at least one vernacular language. And I think the editor succeeded in showing many examples of nuanced, delicate writing, some good examples of writing from the vernacular languages, and the range of genres in English. The editor's comments too on various subjects, scattered throughout his commentaries and an essay or two, were often worth thinking about. For example, "[N]o one speaks of the Indian novel in Bengali, or Urdu, or Kannada. There is an implication here that only in the English language do Indian writers have the vantage point, or at least feel the obligation, to articulate that post-colonial totality called 'India' (on the other hand, it sometimes seems that the post-colonial totality called 'India' only exists in the works of the

Indian English novelists, or in the commentaries they engender."). Or "Lacking a clearly defined tradition to fall back on, the Indian writer in English, working in isolation, has laid claim, like Borges' Argentinean writer, to all of Western and European tradition, besides his own, in a way that perhaps no European can." There were a number of other interesting formulations and claims, though sometimes how accurately they captured reality or summed up such a varied group of writers seemed open to question. My criticisms of this anthology would be that it gave little explanatory background or space to any vernacular literature other than Bengali, so that the discussion and presentation of works in the vernacular languages was very uneven. And nothing at all was included from languages from the north and west like Punjabi, Gujarati and Marathi, or the most widely spoken language from the south, Telugu. I couldn't help wondering what great writers in the vernacular languages other than Bengali were missing from the collection, and the editor supplied no hints. In addition, several dry essays by various authors, including one by the editor, appeared to have been pulled into the anthology from something like a grad-level textbook on literature and theory. These were highly specialized though unsystematic, provided little background or context on Indian writing as a whole, and for me were virtually unreadable. I would've gladly traded the space they took up in this book for more pages of fiction or for a more systematic and clear overview of literary development. I also wondered why Tagore was represented mainly by items like several letters and an essay on nursery rhymes, but only one short story. And whether there were more substantial works available by the writer Manto than the two included for him here. Amitav Ghosh could've been represented by something more substantial than the two vignettes selected for him. And it could be argued that the number of female authors in the collection was low, at just five of the 39 writers. Among the criticisms made by Indians of this book was that it appeared to assume Bengali was the only vernacular meriting real attention, neglecting, for example, Hindi or Urdu. That if the book meant seriously to focus on 19th century origins of modern Indian writing, it should've ventured beyond Bengal and included something from other regions and languages from that period, such as what's been called the first novel in Urdu: *Umrao Jan Ada* (The Courtesan of Lucknow) (1899), by Mirza Hadi Ruswa (1857-1912). That in the case of autobiographies, other landmarks could also have been excerpted, such as what's been called the first Indian autobiography, *The Half Story* (ca. 1641), in an early dialect of Hindi by the Jain trader Banarasidas. Or *My Reminiscences* (1912) in Bengali by Tagore. Or the memoir *I Follow After* by Lakshmibai Tilak, written in Marathi and published 1934-37, and which has been called a vivid picture of life in early 20th century India. Another literary trend neglected by the collection, it's been claimed, was the appearance in Marathi during the last half-century of autobiographies by the Dalits (former

untouchables), for the first time in Indian writing. As well as Dalit fiction by Devanur Mahadeva, among others, in Kannada. To sum it up, this was the best, most comprehensive anthology in English of modern Indian writing that I've seen so far, with many interesting selections that add to an understanding of that nation's literature. But as good as it was, it could've been better balanced, more inclusive of writers in the various languages, and covered the main trends of development in a more systematic and understandable way.

It is the perfect companion to the Storywallah collection edited by Shyam Selvadurai. The selection is also bigger and includes authors whose works were translated from other languages, and each story/excerpt/essay/poem is truly thought-provoking and simply a pleasure to read because you learn so much about the nuances of specific cultures in all parts of India. The other reviewer summarized how awesome it is (especially if you're an Indophile like me!!) and I can't add enough good things about it so just take both our word for it. Not only that, the cover is so beautiful that I'm ordering another copy - one to read and one to leave on the shelf so it doesn't get damaged in any way. THIS is what a fulfilling, informative and sensational anthology should be! I'm SO glad I have it.

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