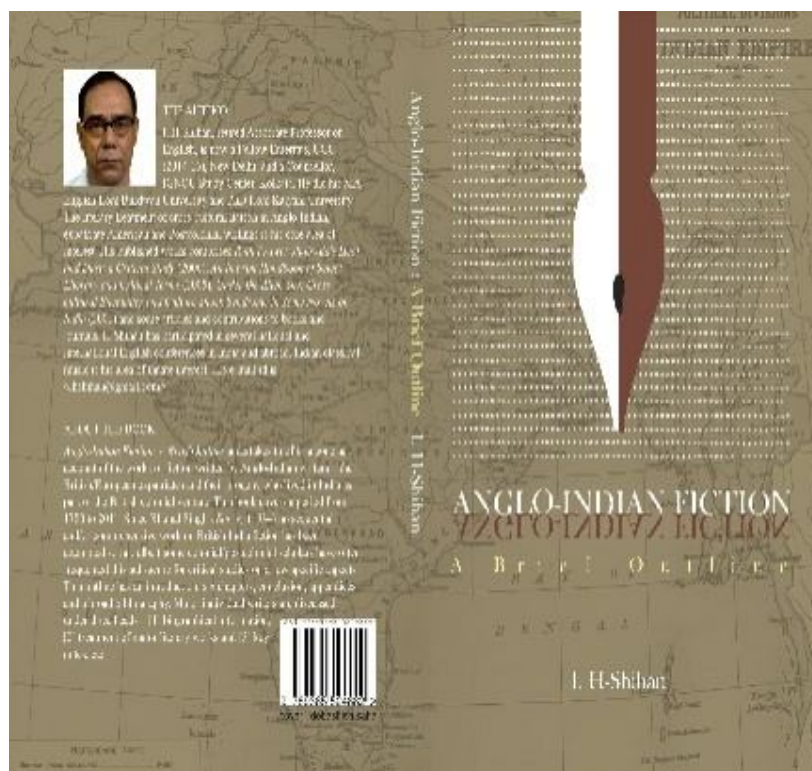


Book Review

Looking Back in Nostalgia: Review of I. H-Shihan's *Anglo-Indian Fiction: A Brief Outline*

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I.H-Shihan, *Anglo-Indian Fiction: A Brief Outline*. Power Publishers, Kolkata, 2016. Pages: 363. Paperback Price: 555 INR.



Dr Imam Hosen's [pen name I. H-Shihan] *Anglo-Indian Fiction: A Brief Outline* is a book that has been much awaited. With the growth of interest in Anglo-Indian Literature since the 1980s, the need for an introductory text book of this kind was strongly felt. It is true that scholarly works focusing on different aspects of Anglo-Indian novels or prose-fictions have been abundant: but no other contemporary work except H-Shihan's has considered Anglo-Indian prose fiction in its entirety. H-Shihan's book is not a scholarly exposition that addresses the informed reader. Primarily, it is meant for beginners. If not for anything else, the book earns its laurels for the large quantity of information it provides. With this book in hand, students are sure to find a ready reference to Anglo-Indian novelists and their works as and when required.

In his book, I. H-Shihan 'chronologically documents' all the major Anglo-Indian novelists starting from its origin in the late eighteenth century. The word 'Anglo-Indian', as H-Shihan uses it, needs to be understood in its old sense to mean British expatriates in India. It has no relations whatsoever with Eurasians or contemporary Anglo-Indian community. Anglo-Indian fiction, or 'British India fiction', was the product of British Empire in India. It was primarily meant for the consumption of Anglo-Indians themselves and for the readers 'at home' in England. For this reason, Anglo-Indian literature might be considered as a minor branch of English literature. H-Shihan, however, feels that Anglo-Indians formed a diasporic group, and that Anglo-Indian fiction was 'the first and the largest body of diasporic writing' produced in the world from a single country. (13) Hence, he argues that Anglo-Indian literature needs to be considered as a distinct and separate body of writing that exists in its own right. H-Shihan's argument appears sound. But it is also to be kept in mind that many important writers he mentions had slender, or no connections at all, with India. H-Shihan considers writers like G. A. Henty (1832 – 1902) whose connections with India were restricted to short visits. There are also writers like Charles E Pearce (1843 – 1924) and I. A. R. Wylie (1885 – 1959) who never visited India. It would be contentious to consider these writers as 'Anglo-Indians'. It is evident that H-Shihan uses the term 'Anglo-Indian' in its widest sense to mean all British or American writers writing on India. But despite writing on India, such writers who did not live in India cannot be considered as diasporic in any sense. H-Shihan's argument therefore must be accepted with qualifications.

Anglo-Indian Fiction consists of six chapters besides the Introduction and Conclusion. There is also a useful bibliography and two Appendices. The bibliography is as thorough and up-to-date as possible. In Appendix I H-Shihan chronologically lists the major Anglo-Indian novels. In Appendix II he mentions some scholarly theses on the subject. These details are likely to prove useful to researchers looking for information. Each chapter contains a brief biography of the authors, followed by a description of their major works. H-Shihan's own views are also expressed as "Key Notes". These short sketches could have hardly been better. To a novice, H-Shihan's notes introduce the Anglo-Indian novelists. To the researchers, they suggest new points for consideration and new areas of study. Credit goes to H-Shihan for bringing back many authors into light who had earlier passed into oblivion. Most important is his discovery of the forgotten author Henry Frederick Thompson whose *The Intrigues of a Nabob* (1780) can be considered as the first Anglo-Indian novel. For a long time, this place had been assigned to *The Disinterested Nabob* (1787) - a novel written by an anonymous author. By identifying Thompson's forgotten novel as a contender for the position of the first Anglo-Indian novel, H-Shihan has done a commendable task that merit due recognition from scholars.

I.H-Shihan's book is unique in several ways. First, he is the only author to provide a truly complete account of Anglo-Indian fiction. Before him several writers like Edward Farley Oaten, Bhupal Singh, and Allen G. Greenberger wrote on the subject. Their accounts, however, were inadequate. Published as it was in 1908, Edward Farley Oaten's *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature* could not include later writers within its ambit. Same is the case with Bhupal Singh's book *A Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction* (1934). On the other hand, Greenberger's *The British Image of India* (1969) does not consider pre-Kipling authors. H-Shihan, however, has given due importance to authors who predate Kipling like William Browne Hockley (1792 – 1860), Philip Meadows Taylor (1808 – 1876), William Delafield Arnold (1828 -1859), Alexander Allardyce (1846 – 1896), John William Kaye (1814 – 1876), and Iltudus T. Prichard (1826 – 1874). He has also taken into consideration less recognized authors like Mary Martha Sherwood (1775 – 1851), Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) (ca 1776 – 1859), John Lang (1816 – 1864) and others. On the other hand, twentieth century writers like John Masters (1914 – 1983) and Philip Mason (1906 – 1999) have been

traditionally considered as the last of the Anglo-Indian novelists. The genre as a whole is supposed to have died its natural death with the closing of the twentieth century. H-Shihan challenges this perception. He says that there is yet to be 'the final full stop' in Anglo-Indian fiction writing. (307-308) He includes contemporary British authors like Paul Hyland (1947-) and Hugh and Colleen Gantzer in his list of Anglo-Indian authors. This, however, is questionable; as Anglo-Indian literature was a product of British imperialism and as such reflected colonial race relations. After the independence of India, the circumstances which gave rise to Anglo-Indian Literature became extinct. It is true that British expatriates will continue to write on India. But these writings cannot be called Anglo-Indian in the proper sense of the term. Recognizing this H-Shihan himself admits in the end that John Masters (1914 - 1983), Paul Scott (1920 - 1978) and Rumer Godden (1907 - 1998) were actually the last major Anglo-Indian authors. (309)

The uniqueness of H-Shihan's book also lies in the fact that it does not confine itself to erudite discussions. Written for ordinary readers, its language is lucid and simple. H-Shihan avoids jargons as much as possible. Another positive fact about the book is that it provides the publication details of the recently republished novels. This no doubt makes it easier for both common readers and veteran scholars to locate and access these books.

It is undesirable that a well-researched book like H-Shihan's should contain any blemish. But there are certainly some defects in the book that cannot be overlooked. The book contains a few typos which careful editing would have prevented. For example, in the bibliography David Finkelstein's doctoral dissertation on Taylor is given as "The Study of the World of Philip Meadows Taylor" (315); the actual title of the work is "The Study of the Works of Philip Meadows Taylor" (1990). Again, William Delafield Arnold's penname is "Punjabee", which is misspelt in the book as "Pujabee". (71) Such small mistakes unhappily recur through the text. One cannot help wishing that such mistakes were corrected before publication.

To conclude, I. H-Shihan's book once again raises the very basic question whether Anglo-Indian literature is at all worth studying in this present age or not. It has been complained that as works of art the productions of Anglo-Indian novelists have been generally of poor quality. Oaten says that theirs was a course between 'the Scylla of didactic dullness and the Charybdis of unintelligibility'. He explains that Anglo-Indian novelists wrote either too much or too little. As a result, their works failed to attract the common readers. H-Shihan however feels that it would be unfair to judge 'territorial' English literature with tools provided by mainstream literary criticism. (11) He is partly right. But it is also to be kept in mind that the Anglo-Indians did not look upon themselves as belonging to a separate diasporic group. They were Britons in mind and body. Even H-Shihan admits that they did not accept their peculiar position as 'Anglo-Indian', and tried to write like mainstream English authors. (12) From H-Shihan's own admission it becomes apparent that the critics are not to be blamed for ignoring Anglo-Indian literature. As for the common readers of today, they live in a society completely different from British India. Hence, Anglo-Indian literature cannot convey anything meaningful to them. At best, this branch of literature can find its readers only among historians and post-colonial critics who study it from a purely professional motive. And it is ultimately readers like these who can judge most competently the true worth of I. H-Shihan's book.

Works Cited

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