

Empowerment of English Literature and Contributions of Famous Authors

Kumari Manorama

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Gopinath Singh Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Garhwa, Jharkhand

Literature is a collection of written works specifically considered as an art form, especially novels, plays, and poems, etc.

Literature is a method of recording, preserving, and transmitting knowledge and entertainment. The term 'English literature' is often described as the body of works penned by those living in the British Isles — beginning during the 7th century and extending to the present day. The transition from Middle English to Early Modern English was marked by two literary masters who were clearly ahead of their time: Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare. English literature is literature written in the English language from the English-speaking world. The English language has developed over more than 1,400 years. The earliest forms of English, a set of Anglo-Frisian dialects brought to Great Britain by Anglo-Saxon settlers in the fifth century, are called Old English.

The major periods of English literature typically include the following:-

Old English (Anglo-Saxon) Period (450-1066) - Characterized by works written in Old English, such as 'Beowulf.' Focused on heroism, religious themes, and the moral struggles of the time.

Middle English Period (1066-1500) - Marked by the influence of Norman rule and the use of French in literature. Notable works: Geoffrey Chaucer's 'The Canterbury Tales' and various religious texts.

Renaissance (1500-1660) - A time of flourishing arts and literature, inspired by a revival of classical learning. Key figures include William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and John Milton (notable for 'Paradise Lost').

Enlightenment (1660-1798) - An emphasis on reason, science, and skepticism of tradition. Prominent writers: Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson.

Romantic Period (1798-1832) - Focused on emotion, nature, and individualism, as a reaction against the Enlightenment. Key authors include William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Victorian Era (1832-1901) - Reflects the complexities of industrialization, social issues, and moral questions. Notable authors: Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and the Brontë sisters.

Modernist Period (1901-1945) - Characterized by a break from traditional forms and experimental techniques. Key figures include Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, & T.S. Eliot.

Postmodern Period (1945-present) - Often defined by irony, playfulness, and questioning of narrative authority. Influential writers include Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, and Don DeLillo.

Each of these periods reflects the cultural, social, and historical contexts of its time, influencing the themes and styles of the literature produced. If you want to explore any period or author in detail, let me know!

Famous Personalities - English literature boasts a rich tapestry of major influential authors, each contributing uniquely to the literary landscape. Here are some notable figures from Indian, Europeans and American authors as follows:

Rabindranath Tagore - He was a polymath, poet, philosopher, musician, playwright, and painter.

Born on May 7, 1861, in Calcutta (now Kolkata), India, Tagore is celebrated as one of the greatest luminaries in the history of Indian literature and cultural renaissance. He became the first non-European Nobel laureate when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 for his collection of poems, 'Gitanjali.' Tagore's life, achievements, contributions, and teachings continue to inspire and resonate with people around the world. Tagore's literary career blossomed with the publication of his first collection of poems, 'Kabi Kahini' (The Tale of the Poet), in 1878. His subsequent works, such as 'Sonar Tari' (The Golden Boat) and 'Kalpana' (Imagination), solidified his reputation as a gifted poet. Tagore's writing showcased his deep love for nature, exploration of human emotions, and spiritual yearning. Rabindranath Tagore's life, achievements, contributions, and teachings have left an indelible mark on the world. As a poet, philosopher, educator, and social reformer, he used his creative genius to promote love, peace, and harmony among individuals and nations. Tagore's poetry and writings continue to inspire people, transcending barriers of time, culture, and language.

Mahatma Gandhi - Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi made significant contributions to English literature primarily through his writings, speeches, and letters, which are characterized by themes of non-violence, truth, and social justice. His experiences and education in England, where he studied English literature, influenced his literary style and content. Gandhi's works, such as 'Hind Swaraj' and countless letters and essays, advocate for self-reliance and ethical governance, impacting not just readers in India but also influencing global movements for civil rights and freedom. His ideas and teachings have inspired many Indian writers, and his influence can be seen in the themes and style of many works. Gandhi's influence is still felt in contemporary Indian literature, where writers continue to explore issues of identity, communal harmony, and individual empowerment. After spending 1908 in London as a member of the

Indian Delegation, he authored the book *Hind Swaraj* (1909) in Gujarati while he was travelling back to South Africa on the ship. In the Gujarati version of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi used *swaraj* to denote both self-rule and self-government. *Swaraj* was an ideal for the individual and for the nation. To be a devotee of Satyagraha, Gandhi said, an individual had to be capable of self-rule: 'Swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself.' Originally written in Gujarati as a dialogue between a reader and an editor, the 140-page-long book is seen as critical in the evolution of Gandhi's ideas on society, self-rule, colonialism and tradition. After the Gujarati edition of *Hind Swaraj* was banned by the British, Gandhi translated and published it in English. Over time, the text drew considerable attention from scholars and commentators, many of whom have directed sharp criticisms towards it. *Hind Swaraj* remains at the center of vigorous debates about Gandhian ideas on society, development, economic imperialism and the role of the individual.

Geoffrey Chaucer - Often referred to as the father of English literature, Geoffrey Chaucer is best known as the creative force behind *The Canterbury Tales*. That said, he penned many other poems and was also a philosopher, an astronomer and a civil servant. Chaucer's works were as eclectic as his numerous interests and professional pursuits. Philosophical quandaries were integrated into many of his poems, along with plenty of humor.

William Shakespeare - No discussion of famous English authors would be complete without a deep dive into the fascinating life of William Shakespeare. Arguably history's most famous poet and playwright, Shakespeare deserves credit for creating some of the most iconic characters not only in Elizabethan era literature, but of all time. Many of his concepts and even his phrases remain relevant to this day. Highly prolific, Shakespeare is believed to have penned 38 plays. These include many noteworthy works that remain popular on the stage, in high school classrooms, on the silver screen and beyond: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Midsummer*

Night's Dream, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, etc.

Oliver Goldsmith - He was an Anglo-Irish writer who contributed to English literature through his novels, plays, poems, and essays. His work is considered to be among the most important of the 18th century. One of his notable works is 'She Stoops to Conquer' (1773) - A play that depicts 'low' characters and situations that border on the farcical. The Vicar of Wakefield: (1766) A novel about humorous events in a country village. The Deserted Village: (1770) A poem that contrasts the innocence of rural life with the evils of commercialism. The Citizen of the World: (1762) A collection of essays written from the perspective of an immigrant from China. The Traveller; or, A Prospect of Society: (1764) A major poem. An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog: (1766) A poem.

William Butler (W.B) Yeats - He was a poet and playwright who made significant contributions to English literature in the 20th century. His work bridged the gap between 19th and 20th century styles, and helped usher in the modernist era. He was a driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival, and along with Lady Gregory founded the Abbey Theatre, serving as its chief during its early years. He was awarded the 1923 Nobel Prize in Literature, and later served two terms as a Senator of the Irish Free State.

A Protestant of Anglo-Irish descent, Yeats was born in Sandymount, Ireland. His father practiced law and was a successful portrait painter. He was educated in Dublin and London and spent his childhood holidays in County Sligo. He studied poetry from an early age, when he became fascinated by Irish legends and the occult. While in London he became part of the Irish literary revival. His early poetry was influenced by John Keats, William Wordsworth, William Blake and many more. These topics feature in the first phase of his work, lasting roughly from his student days at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin until the turn of the century. His major works include The Land of Heart's Desire (1894), Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902), Deirdre (1907), The Wild Swans at Coole (1919), The Tower (1928) and

Last Poems and Plays (1940).

T.S. Eliot - He was a major poet and literary critic in the 20th century. His work influenced Modernist poetry and literary criticism, and helped establish the modern English department. He made significant contributions to English literature as a leading figure in Modernist poetry. His innovative experiments in diction, style, and versification revitalized poetry, introducing new techniques that reflected the complexities of modern life. His seminal works, such as 'The Waste Land' and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' showcased a unique use of language and a fragmented structure, which challenged conventional forms. Eliot was also an influential literary critic, dramatist, and editor, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948. Eliot is thus unique in the history of English literature to have been in the top rank of poets and the top rank of critics during his time. Eliot was very much the supervisor of literary modernism. As poetry editor at Faber & Faber, and as one of the movement's leading practitioners, he was able to literary world liked the Cocktail Party, which we could say was his best play, Murder in the Cathedral is very much a school play, and often performed as such, whereas the Elder Statesman has little to recommend it above the staple of BBC Radio 4's A play for today, beyond the fact that it was written by TS Eliot. His lighthearted verse spawned one highly successful West End musical, and one lamentable Hollywood film of the same name. shepherd other poets. He was more social (in some ways) than some other poets, and gladly and willingly expressed his gratitude to Ezra Pound for his work on The Waste Land. He was both the most significant atheist poet, and the most significant Christian poet, of the 20th century, though not both at the same time. His journey is vividly recounted through poems such as The Hollow Men, Ash Wednesday, and Journey of the Magi. His attempts to Christianise drama were less successful. High church Anglicanism was less interested in evangelism than Eliot was, but he was not culturally comfortable with Low Church

Anglicanism (or British evangelicalism generally), and never played a role in the developments at Riding Lights or Saltmine. Although the

Jane Austen - Featuring compelling heroines who seek both romance and self-actualization, Jane Austen's novels are rife with social commentary. She is, perhaps, best known for the relatable novel *Pride & Prejudice*. This is one of the world's most consistently popular novels and is believed to have sold over 200 million copies. *Pride and Prejudice* themes like social class and reputation blend with a page-turning plot to achieve almost universal appeal. Other novels are *Sense & Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*.

Charles Dickens - He had a knack for creating memorable characters who left a deep impression on readers. Also, like Austen, Dickens incorporated social commentary into his work, although he was more likely to discuss issues such as poverty & inequality. His most noteworthy works include- *Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, etc.

Virginia Woolf - A key modernist writer, Woolf's innovative narrative techniques in works like 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'To the Lighthouse' have influenced countless writers and addressed themes of gender and identity.

George Orwell - Renowned for his poignant critiques of society and totalitarianism, Orwell's '1984' and 'Animal Farm' continue to resonate widely in political discourse.

J.K. Rowling - Author of the immensely popular 'Harry Potter' series, Rowling's work has not only captivated millions but also revitalized interest in children's literature.

Chinua Achebe - A Nigerian novelist whose work, particularly 'Things Fall Apart' is pivotal in post-colonial literature, addressing complex themes of identity and cultural clash.

Romanticism and Gothic Literature - The 18th and 19th centuries were dominated by two closely aligned literary movements, Romanticism and

Gothic literature. The former represented a clear rejection of order and harmony, instead bringing imaginative and spontaneous attitudes to the forefront.

The Modernists - Spanning a period beset with huge social and economic changes (between 1890 and World War II), the Modernist era fostered experimental writing styles while integrating then cutting-edge philosophical and psychological concepts. Feelings such as disillusionment pervaded many of these works, although there was also frequently an undercurrent of optimism.

Post-War British Literature - It is impossible to overstate the influence of World War II on British literature. This was used as a backdrop for many powerful novels and the conceptual framework for both dystopian sagas and historic fiction. There was a distinct bleakness to this period's most acclaimed works, which decades later, continue to feel hauntingly relevant.

A true visionary and the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Doris Lessing was an outspoken novelist who discussed everything from environmentalism to race relations. She was inspired by her childhood in Africa, with several of her early works set in what was then known as Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

While she penned a variety of poems, essays and short stories, Lessing's most acclaimed work is easily the novel *The Golden Notebook*, which told the story of the divorced writer Anna Wulf and her mental breakdown. Featuring a fragmented style meant to reflect the similar fragmentation of society, this saga aimed to reveal how 'any kind of single-mindedness, narrowness, obsession, was bound to lead to mental disorder, if not madness.'

Contemporary Voices - During the last few decades, contemporary writers have demonstrated a clear desire to explore social themes such as inequality and racial tension. There is an ongoing effort to push boundaries while playing with unreliable narrators, non-linear timelines and self-conscious formats such as

metafiction.

Zadie Smith and the Multicultural Novel - Zadie Smith took the literary scene by storm when she released her much-anticipated debut novel *White Teeth* in 2000. An ambitious multicultural work and an immediate bestseller, this satirical family story played heavily with themes that would continue to prove popular in the decades to come. This includes the often-significant gaps between expectations and reality.

A tale of an accidental friendship between a Bengali Muslim and an Englishman, *White Teeth* is chock full of sass and beautiful storytelling. Smith has since published several other novels and short stories, along with the play *The Wife of Willesden*. Many of these works continue to feature culturally diverse characters and reflections on concepts such as identity and authenticity.

Ian McEwan and the Psychological Novel - Initially devoted to Gothic stories, Ian McEwan quickly scored the nickname 'Ian Macabre' with his bleak writing style. His efforts to shock were found both in his early novels and in the infamous suspension of his play *Solid Geometry*. He earned critical acclaim with thought-provoking works such as *Amsterdam* and especially *Atonement*, which was later adapted into an award-winning film.

While he often addresses broad themes by examining the impact of social events on private lives, McEwan's work involves an intimate glimpse at the human psyche, bringing the interior worlds of his detailed characters to life. He has described one of his central goals in vivid terms, to 'incite a naked hunger in readers.'

The Key themes in English literature reflect the social, cultural, and philosophical concerns of various time periods.

Here are some prominent themes -

Love and Relationships - Explored in various forms, from romantic love to familial bonds and friendships, as seen in works by Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and the Brontë sisters.

Identity and Self-Discovery - Examined through characters' journeys, often highlighting struggles with personal or societal identity. This theme appears in novels like 'Jane Eyre' and Virginia Woolf's works.

Society and Class - Many authors critique social structures and class distinctions, notably in the works of Charles Dickens and George Orwell.

Nature and the Environment - The relationship between humans and nature often reflects internal states, as seen in Romantic poetry and later in modern literature.

Conflict and War - Literature often addresses the impact of war on individuals and society, evident in works like Wilfred Owen's poetry and novels like 'A Farewell to Arms' by Ernest Hemingway.

Good vs Evil - This timeless conflict explores moral dilemmas and human nature, featured prominently in epic tales and dramas, such as 'Macbeth' and 'Paradise Lost.'

Alienation and Isolation - Characters may wrestle with feelings of separateness, which is a recurring theme in modernist literature, such as in T.S. Eliot's poetry.

The Supernatural - Magical and supernatural elements often explore human fears and desires, notably in Gothic literature, like Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein.'

Existentialism - Examining the meaning of life and individual freedom, this theme is prominent in 20th-century literature, found in works by Samuel Beckett and Albert Camus.

These themes intertwine throughout the various genres and periods of English literature, offering deep insights into the human experience.

References :-

- The Oxford Companion to English Literature – A comprehensive resource for students, teachers, and scholars.
- The Norton Anthology of English Literature – Widely used in academic settings, providing

extensive coverage of English literature.

- A Literary History of England by Albert C. Baugh – Offers a detailed overview of English literary history.
- The Oxford History of English Literature – A multi-volume work that thoroughly explores different periods and movements in English literature.
- Online books / Websites.