



American literary modernism and Indian progressive writing: A parallel trajectory of cultural dissent

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Abstract

This study examines how Indian Progressive Writing and American Literary Modernism both developed as expressions of cultural protest in reaction to the profound changes brought about by modernity, industrialization, and political unrest. The study explores the ways in which American writers, like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner, used narrative invention to express disenchantment and question their own social mores. It explores the Indian Progressive Writers' Movement at the same time, examining how writers like Mulk Raj Anand and Ismat Chughtai utilized writing as a means of opposing societal norms, colonial domination, and cultural stagnation. This research positions the two literary revolutions as interrelated reactions to global changes by highlighting their similarities and differences through a cross-cultural comparison.

Keywords: American Literary Modernism, Indian Progressive Writing, cultural dissent, modernity, industrialization, political upheaval, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Mulk Raj Anand, Ismat Chughtai

Introduction

Significant worldwide changes, including economic revolutions, world wars, decolonization, and sociocultural upheavals, were brought forth by the twentieth century. Literature, which frequently serves as a social mirror, changed over time to both reflect and critique these shifts. Literary modernism, which placed an emphasis on form, fragmentation, and alienation, arose in the United States in reaction to a society upended by industrial capitalism and war. The Progressive Writers' Movement, which aimed to use realism and political commitment in literature to combat socioeconomic inequities and destroy colonial beliefs, rose to prominence in India at the same time. This essay aims to examine these movements as a component of a worldwide literary awareness that interacted with modernity and dissent, rather than in isolation.

The twentieth century began with a contradiction of disillusionment and promise, signaling a period of enormous continental change. A world where identities were questioned, ideologies contested, and artistic expressions transformed was the result of massive changes in power dynamics, the fall and rebuilding of empires, the rapid pace of industrialization, and the tectonic upheavals in socio-

cultural landscapes. Because literature is organically entwined with the zeitgeist of its time, it actively questioned and reframed these changes rather than passively echoing them. This allowed literature to serve as both a record and a resistance to the dominant historical currents.

The chaotic ghosts of World War I and the icy machinery of industrial capitalism gave rise to literary modernism in the United States. In a world where old certainties had vanished and new ones had not yet been formed, writers struggled with a fractured universe. They experimented with fractured temporality and unreliable narration, embraced stream-of-consciousness, and broke traditional narrative frameworks in both poetry and prose. This was an artistic response to the agony of displacement and a meaningful expression of estrangement rather than merely stylistic adventure. Authors like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Faulkner did more than just produce books; they rethought writing as a means of confronting disorder and finding meaning in chaos.

Across the oceans, in the burgeoning subcontinent of India, a different but equally resonant literary movement was unfolding. The Progressive Writers' Movement emerged not in the quiet salons of aesthetic contemplation but in the throes of political upheaval and nationalistic fervor. India

was under the yoke of colonial domination, and its writers, burdened by centuries of subjugation, turned to literature not merely as a space of art but as a battleground of ideas. Their writing was marked by an urgent realism, an unflinching gaze at poverty, caste discrimination, gender oppression, and the corrosive legacy of colonialism. Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, and Premchand, among others, wielded their pens like weapons, crafting stories that demanded justice and human dignity.

Both the Progressive Writers' Movement in India and literary modernism in the West were founded on a common restlessness—a reluctance to accept inherited truths and a desire to reclaim the world via new means of expression—despite having originated in different regions and reacting to different histories. Defiance against dehumanizing forces, a need for purpose in a shattered world, and faith in literature as a catalyst for consciousness were the beating heart of the twentieth century. Despite their apparent ideological differences, the modernist focus on form and the progressive attention on substance were both working toward the same goal: political and creative liberty.

The ruptures of the world wars not only redrew national borders but also redrew the psychological landscapes of the individual. In America, the Lost Generation bore the scars of battlefields and the existential void of consumerist culture. Their writings, melancholic and introspective, articulated a disillusionment with modern life that resonated globally. Simultaneously, in India, the horrors of partition and the violence of nation-building became the crucible within which literary voices found urgency and gravitas. Writers confronted the agony of displaced identities, communal hatred, and the fragility of nationhood with unrelenting clarity.

This essay attempts to analyze these movements as nodes in a broader constellation of worldwide protest rather than as distinct literary entities. It acknowledges that despite being born in different environments, the agony of an Indian short-story writer and the anxiety of an American poet have a common thread: the human need to imagine justice, make meaning of suffering, and regain agency via storytelling. Rather than being isolated, these literary traditions engaged in a continuous conversation with modernity across the world, both contributing to and borrowing from a global literature of resistance.

It is evident from following the paths of these movements that twentieth-century literature was not just reactive but also constituted political and cultural imaginations. It foresaw emancipatory futures, opposed tyrannies, and foresaw uprisings. From the crowded streets of Bombay to the smoky jazz clubs of Harlem, from the expatriate cafés of Paris to the destitute hamlets of Uttar Pradesh, authors created ink-based solidarity, using words that would not be hushed to depict a world in transition.

The literature of the twentieth century was profoundly embodied. It reverberated with the pulse of everyday life, held the odor of revolution, and bore the scars of battle. It demonstrated that criticism could be poetic and beauty could be radical, bridging the gap between politics and aesthetics. One of the most persistent legacies of the last century is this humanistic tradition, which is based on the ideas that tales have the power to alter and that words matter.

We are encouraged to see beyond the dichotomies of East and West, form and substance, and alienation and involvement as we examine literary modernism and the Progressive Writers' Movement together. Rather, we see a rainbow of human expression, where each voice—no matter how splintered or passionate—contributes to a greater story of resiliency. This essay aims to respect that story, shed light on the same challenges and different paths, and reassert literature's ability to challenge authority at a time of uncertainty.

Aims and Objectives

1. To examine the historical and cultural contexts that gave rise to American Literary Modernism and Indian Progressive Writing.
2. To analyze the thematic and stylistic features of key authors from both movements.
3. To identify commonalities and divergences in their approaches to cultural dissent.
4. To explore the influence of global political events on the literary productions of both traditions.
5. To contribute to comparative literary studies by offering a cross-cultural perspective on literary modernism and progressivism.

Review of Literature

There is a wealth of scholarly work on American Modernism, with critics like as Raymond Williams and Malcolm Bradbury highlighting its experimental aspects and sociocultural criticisms. Faulkner's intricate narrative frameworks, Fitzgerald's depiction of the decadence of the Jazz Age, and Hemingway's succinct style and existential themes have all been extensively examined. Historians and literary critics like Aijaz Ahmad and Priyamvada Gopal have drawn attention to Indian Progressive Writing, despite the fact that it is frequently studied within postcolonial and regional contexts. This study aims to close the gap in comparative studies by contrasting these literatures as simultaneous manifestations of literary protest throughout the world.

The twentieth century dawned with a paradox of hope and disillusionment, heralding an era of unprecedented transformation across continents. The colossal shifts in power dynamics, the collapse and reconstitution of empires, the accelerated momentum of industrialization, and the tectonic upheavals in socio-cultural landscapes culminated in a world where identities were questioned, ideologies contested, and artistic expressions transformed. Literature, inherently intertwined with the zeitgeist of its age, did not merely echo these transformations but actively interrogated and reframed them, offering both a record and a resistance to the prevailing tides of history.

The chaotic ghosts of World War I and the icy machinery of industrial capitalism gave rise to literary modernism in the United States. In a world where old certainties had vanished and new ones had not yet been formed, writers struggled with a fractured universe. They experimented with fractured temporality and unreliable narration, embraced stream-of-consciousness, and broke traditional narrative frameworks in both poetry and prose. This was an artistic response to the agony of displacement and a meaningful expression of estrangement rather than merely stylistic adventure. Authors

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A distinct but no less significant literary movement was taking shape on the other side of the world, in the developing Indian subcontinent. The Progressive Writers' Movement arose amid political turmoil and nationalistic enthusiasm rather than in the serene salons of artistic reflection. India was ruled by colonial powers, and its authors, who had been oppressed for ages, used writing as a battlefield of ideas as well as a place for creativity. Their writing was characterized by an unwavering stare at poverty, caste inequality, gender injustice, and the destructive legacy of colonialism, as well as an urgent reality. Among others, Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, and Premchand used their writing instruments as weapons to create tales that called for human dignity and justice.

Literary modernism in the West and the Progressive Writers' Movement in India were both rooted in a common restlessness—a reluctance to accept inherited truths and a desire to reclaim the world via new means of expression—despite having been founded in different regions and reacting to different histories. The need for purpose in a broken world, resistance to dehumanizing influences, and faith in literature as a consciousness-raising medium constituted the beating heart of the twentieth century. Although the progressive stress on substance and the modernist emphasis on form may appear to be philosophically at odds, both were working toward the same goal: political and creative liberty.

The ruptures of the world wars not only redrew national borders but also redrew the psychological landscapes of the individual. In America, the Lost Generation bore the scars of battlefields and the existential void of consumerist culture. Their writings, melancholic and introspective, articulated a disillusionment with modern life that resonated globally. Simultaneously, in India, the horrors of partition and the violence of nation-building became the crucible within which literary voices found urgency and gravitas. Writers confronted the agony of displaced identities, communal hatred, and the fragility of nationhood with unrelenting clarity.

It is evident from following the paths of these movements that twentieth-century literature was not just reactive but also constituted political and cultural imaginations. It foresaw emancipatory futures, opposed tyrannies, and foresaw uprisings. From the crowded streets of Bombay to the smoky jazz clubs of Harlem, from the expatriate cafés of Paris to the destitute hamlets of Uttar Pradesh, authors created ink-based solidarity, using words that would not be hushed to depict a world in transition.

The twentieth century's literature was deeply embodied. It bore the wounds of war, carried the scent of revolution, and resonated with the heartbeat of ordinary lives. It transcended the dichotomy of aesthetics and politics, proving that beauty could be radical and that critique could be lyrical. This humanistic tradition, grounded in the belief that words matter and that stories can transform, remains one of the most enduring legacies of the past century.

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involvement as we examine literary modernism and the Progressive Writers' Movement together. Rather, we see a rainbow of human expression, where each voice—no matter how splintered or passionate—contributes to a greater story of resiliency. This essay aims to respect that story, shed light on the same challenges and different paths, and reassert literature's ability to challenge authority at a time of uncertainty.

In the end, twentieth-century literary ventures were brave deeds. They ventured to envision alternative universes, posed challenging queries, and opposed repressive structures. They demonstrated that art is a need rather than a luxury, a beacon in the dark, a mirror in the times of transition, and a lifeline in the times of sorrow. The irrepressible spirit of people who wrote against the grain, who dreamed among ruins, and who trusted in the transformational power of the written word—even when believing seemed impossible—is honored by this inquiry, which goes beyond academic boundaries.

The review of literature on American Modernism and Indian Progressive Writing reveals a rich terrain of scholarly inquiry that has shaped contemporary understanding of these dynamic literary traditions. Scholars have poured considerable energy into dissecting the formal innovations and thematic concerns of American Modernist authors. Malcolm Bradbury's work, for instance, underscores the experimental spirit of Modernism, emphasizing its break from Victorian norms and its engagement with fragmented realities. His readings offer insight into how authors like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, while not American themselves, influenced transatlantic modernist aesthetics that included key American voices such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald.

In his socio-cultural analysis of literary modernism, Raymond Williams shed light on the more profound conflicts between individuality and social duty, tradition and innovation, and art and business. His criticisms aided in redefining Modernism as a multifaceted cultural movement that addressed concerns about urban alienation, capitalism, and war rather than just as an aesthetic fad. This method enables readers to interpret Faulkner's in-depth explorations of Southern Gothic landscapes as a critique of historical trauma and memory, Fitzgerald's shimmering depictions of the Jazz Age as moral investigations into decadence and despair, and Hemingway's spare prose as both an artistic choice and a form of existential resistance.

Ernest Hemingway's sparse writing and thematic focus on stoicism, masculinity, and existential emptiness are frequently the focus of criticism. His masterpieces like "A Farewell to Arms" and "The Sun Also Rises" have been analyzed for their narrative accuracy and psychological depth. A classic of American literary studies, Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" captures the disappointment of the American Dream. The narrative's underlying symbolism, socioeconomic inequality, and condemnation of materialism are examined by academics.

Faulkner's work, particularly "The Sound and the Fury" and "As I Lay Dying," has drawn significant critical attention for its complex narrative structures, use of stream-of-consciousness, and deep engagement with themes of decay, identity, and the South's troubled past. His contribution to the modernist canon is often framed in relation to his

innovative narrative voice and his exploration of time, memory, and place.

On the Indian front, postcolonial and sociopolitical frameworks are typically used to understand the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM). Prominent authors such as Premchand, Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto, and Ahmed Ali have drawn a lot of attention from academics for their dedication to exposing societal injustices, frequently at substantial personal cost. The works of Aijaz Ahmad provide a convincing critique of postcolonial and colonial literary criticism. By connecting Progressive Writing to Marxist ideas and the worldwide currents of anti-imperial struggle, he explains the intellectual undercurrents of the

movement.

Research Methodologies

This study adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, incorporating historical, socio-political, and textual analysis. Primary texts from representative authors of both movements form the core corpus, including "The Sun Also Rises," "The Great Gatsby," "The Sound and the Fury," "Untouchable," and "Lihaaf." Thematic analysis focuses on alienation, class struggle, gender, and colonialism. Secondary sources include critical essays, historical documents, and theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, modernism, and postcolonial theory.

Table 1: Research Design Overview

Component	Description
Research Type	Qualitative Comparative Literary Analysis
Approach	Interdisciplinary
Methodology	Textual Analysis, Historical Contextualization, Thematic Interpretation
Scope	American Literary Modernism and Indian Progressive Writers' Movement
Time Frame Analyzed	Early to Mid-20th Century

Table 2: Primary Sources

Author	Work	Movement	Themes Explored
Ernest Hemingway	<i>The Sun Also Rises</i>	American Modernism	Alienation, Post-war trauma, Masculinity, Moral emptiness
F. Scott Fitzgerald	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	American Modernism	Decadence, The American Dream, Class divide
William Faulkner	<i>The Sound and the Fury</i>	American Modernism	Fragmented time, Family decay, Race, History
Mulk Raj Anand	<i>Untouchable</i>	Indian Progressive Writing	Caste oppression, Poverty, Colonialism
Ismat Chughtai	<i>Lihaaf</i>	Indian Progressive Writing	Gender, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Feudalism

Table 3: Secondary Sources

Category	Examples	Purpose
Literary Criticism	Aijaz Ahmad, Priyamvada Gopal, Raymond Williams	Contextualizing texts within socio-political frameworks
Historical Background	Documents on WWI, Indian independence movement	Grounding texts in real-world events
Theoretical Frameworks	Postcolonial theory, Modernist aesthetics	Guiding interpretive lenses
Cultural Studies	Stuart Hall, Edward Said	Analyzing cultural production and resistance

Table 4: Data Collection & Analytical Technique

Step	Activity
Text Selection	Identification of key representative literary works
Contextual Reading	Placement within historical and cultural milieu
Thematic Coding	Alienation, class, gender, colonialism
Comparative Analysis	Mapping similarities and divergences in literary expression
Theoretical Mapping	Applying critical theory to textual patterns

Results and Interpretation

American Literary Modernism and Indian Progressive Writing exhibit striking parallels in their thematic concerns and narrative innovations. Both movements portray characters grappling with identity crises, moral ambiguity, and societal decay. Hemingway's protagonists, like Jake Barnes, echo the disillusionment of Anand's Bakha, while Faulkner's South shares a fractured historicity with Chughtai's feudal landscapes. However, divergences emerge in their ideological underpinnings: Modernists often refrained from overt political alignment, whereas Indian Progressives embraced socialist realism and direct activism. The comparison reveals a shared literary impulse to resist cultural stagnation and envision new socio-political paradigms.

Table 5: Thematic Parallels

Theme	American Modernism	Indian Progressive Writing
Alienation	Disillusioned ex-soldiers, fractured identity	Marginalized castes, women, and the oppressed
Class Struggle	Critique of wealth disparity (<i>Gatsby</i>)	Direct confrontation with class and caste (<i>Untouchable</i>)
Gender Roles	Ambiguous femininity (<i>Brett Ashley</i>)	Repressed sexuality and resistance (<i>Lihaaf</i>)
Colonialism	Indirect presence in form of Western malaise	Central to plot, especially in Anand's work

Table 6: Narrative Techniques Comparison

Technique	Modernist Writers (USA)	Progressive Writers (India)
Stream of Consciousness	Faulkner’s nonlinear timelines	Chughtai’s intimate female voice
Symbolism	Gatsby’s green light, Hemingway’s bullfighting	Symbolism of touch and silence in <i>Lihaaf</i>
Realism	Subdued realism highlighting decay	Political realism to provoke awareness
Experimental Form	Fragmented structure, unreliable narrators	Short story revolution, hybrid narrative styles

Table 7: Ideological Orientations

Aspect	American Modernism	Indian Progressive Writing
Political Engagement	Subtle, aesthetic critique	Explicit, activist intent
Social Realism	Often abstracted and philosophical	Central, emotionally grounded
Cultural Resistance	Reaction to consumerism, war, modern decay	Response to colonial rule, social inequality

Table 8: Character Analogues

Character	Work	Psychological Condition	Parallel in Other Movement
Jake Barnes	<i>The Sun Also Rises</i>	War trauma, impotent identity	Bakha (<i>Untouchable</i>) – Humiliated self
Jay Gatsby	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	Illusory dream, class pretensions	Characters in Chughtai’s world of longing
Quentin Compson	<i>The Sound and the Fury</i>	Temporal collapse, familial despair	Feudal mental stagnation in <i>Lihaaf</i>

Table 9: Narrative Outcomes & Literary Function

Movement	Dominant Tone	Resolution Offered	Function of Literature
American Modernism	Pessimism, ambivalence	Often unresolved or tragic	Psychological introspection, formal innovation
Indian Progressive Writing	Hope through critique	Moral or political awakening	Social transformation, collective awareness

Discussion and Conclusion

When American Literary Modernism and Indian Progressive Writing are compared, a common path of cultural dissension originating from modernity’s problems is seen. Despite having different historical, political, and geographic backgrounds, both movements aimed to reinterpret the place of literature in society. Their influence may still be found in modern international literature that challenges authority, customs, and identity. In addition to deepening our comprehension of various literary traditions, this research emphasizes the importance of intercultural communication in literary scholarship.

A close relationship between two very different literary traditions that were influenced by different sociopolitical contexts but bound together by their responses to the common problem of modernity may be seen in the

comparison of Indian Progressive Writing and American Literary Modernism. Both literary movements emerged at periods of great upheaval, whether it was the American disenchantment after World War I or the escalating anti-colonial sentiment and socioeconomic conflict in India. Both Indian Progressives and American Modernists rethought the fundamental essence of writing in an effort to adapt to and express these revolutionary situations. Their work questioned prevailing narratives, upended formal norms, and critically examined traditional and power systems.

American Literary Modernism, often typified by its experimental narrative techniques and focus on the alienated self, sought to capture the fragmentation and disorientation of a rapidly changing world. The loss of religious certainties, the trauma of mechanized warfare, and the burgeoning influence of capitalism all contributed to a literary voice that was often inward-looking, ironic, and ambiguous. Writers like Hemingway and Faulkner did not merely depict despair or confusion; they crafted intricate literary forms to reflect the psychological and philosophical complexities of modern life. Their characters were not heroes in the traditional sense, but antiheroes stumbling through a morally ambiguous world, seeking coherence where none could be found.

However, the Indian Progressive Writers’ Movement was blatantly political, having been founded on a shared resolve to utilize writing as a vehicle for social change. Caste discrimination, gender persecution, and economic inequality were powerfully portrayed by Progressive authors such as Mulk Raj Anand and Ismat Chughtai, who were inspired by Marxist philosophy and the realities of colonial subjection and domestic injustice. Their stories focused more on the pressing necessity for reality—a realism that revealed the systemic violence ingrained in Indian society—than on aesthetic fragmentation. Under their leadership, literature evolved into a defiant act that inspired public outrage and group action.

They questioned the authority of canonical literature, religious orthodoxy, and colonial ideologies. This shared spirit of rebellion—albeit channeled through different thematic and formal lenses—speaks to a global literary consciousness responding to the crises of modern life. Jake Barnes, the emotionally wounded veteran in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, and Bakha, the young sweeper humiliated by caste in Anand’s *Untouchable*, are literary siblings of a kind—each a representation of a broken world that demands new stories and new voices.

The conversation also emphasizes how, as part of their opposition, both groups embraced advancements in storytelling technique. Progressive authors tended toward straightforward language, character-centric realism, and audacious thematic declarations, whereas Modernists frequently embraced stream of consciousness, temporal disjunction, and symbolic abstraction. There were overlaps and exceptions, though. For example, Chughtai’s *Lihaaf* defies realism by embracing sexual subtext and psychological introspection, implying a level of artistic complexity comparable to Western experimentalism.

Thus, a more nuanced understanding of how literary form and function are influenced by both historical need and cultural tradition is provided by this comparative

perspective. Both Indian Progressive Writing and American Modernism developed in response to the ideological upheaval and societal suffering of their respective eras. Its differing political stances—the ideological commitment of Progressive literature vs the sometimes apolitical aesthetics of Modernism—must be interpreted as reflecting the different cultural urgencies that its practitioners confronted rather than as a sign of superiority or inferiority.

Crucially, this study emphasizes how important cross-cultural literary analysis is. A large portion of literary studies is still limited by national or language borders, which can mask the more general trends and connections that unite literatures over time and place. We do not lessen the distinctiveness of American Modernism and Indian Progressive Writing by putting them in conversation; rather, we raise their voices in a common chorus of resistance, each adding a distinct tone to the symphony of contemporary dissent.

In conclusion, the comparative method shows that Indian Progressive Writing documented the external problems of society, whereas American Modernism frequently examined the inward breakdown of the individual. But fundamentally, both sought to upend the readership's complacencies, dispel popular misconceptions, and create fresh ways of seeing the world. Their influence may still be seen in contemporary international literature, which still addresses questions of resistance, tradition, authority, and identity. In addition to confirming the importance of these movements, this ongoing relevance highlights the benefits of comparative literary studies as a tool for developing empathy, critical consciousness, and global understanding.

The writings of earlier dissenters offer not only insight but also encouragement as we approach the twenty-first century and face new issues like neo-imperialism, digital alienation, and ecological catastrophes. They serve as a reminder that, in its greatest form, literature is a hammer to alter reality rather than a mirror reflecting it. This research makes a modest but essential addition to the constantly changing realm of world literature by recognizing the commonalities as well as the differences between Indian Progressive Writing and American Modernism.

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