**Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)**
*A Peer Reviewed (Refereed) International Journal*
Impact Factor 6.8992 (ICI) http://www.rjelal.com;
Email:editorrjelal@gmail.com; ISSN:2395-2636 (P); 2321-3108(O)

**Vol.14.Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March)**

RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INDIA
2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

# Bengali Anglophone Literature: The Significance of Cultural Identity in Global Literary Production

**Sujata Bisoi[1]*, Aahana Bisoi[2]**
[1]Academic Mentor (M.A. English – American Literature), Muscat, Oman
*Email: sibasisbisoi@gmail.com
[2] Indian School Al Ghubra (International), Muscat, Oman

DOI: 10.33329/rjelal.14.1.52


**Article info**
Article Received: 22/12/2025
Article Accepted: 21/01/2026
Published online: 29/01/2026

**Abstract**

Bengali Anglophone literature has evolved through an ongoing dialogue between Bengali cultural heritage and English as a global language. From Rabindranath Tagore's self-translations to the modern works of Amitav Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri, Bengali authors have approached English not just as a neutral tool, but as a dynamic space where cultural identity can be questioned, reshaped, and negotiated. This article outlines several important phases in this evolution: the rise of the genre in the early twentieth century with Tagore's purposeful cultural translation; the mid-century's personal explorations in Nirad C. Chaudhuri's autobiographical writings; and the late twentieth century's broader forays into historical fiction, domestic realism, diaspora narratives, and innovative genres. The article argues, first, that Bengali Anglophone writing complicates diaspora-focused interpretations by illustrating the coexistence of local roots and global outlooks; and second, that its formal innovations—from Ghosh's non-linear narratives to Lahiri's subtle, pared-down style—have played a major role in shaping what "world literature" means today. By examining central texts, the article shows how these writers convert distinct local experiences into forms that are understandable to global audiences, all while preserving their unique cultural identities.

**Keywords:** Bengali Anglophone literature, Tagore, diaspora, cultural translation, World Englishes, postcolonial studies, world literature.

## Introduction

"Bengali Anglophone literature" is an imperfect label, but that imperfection tells us something. It refers to at least three overlapping practices: Bengali writers composing in English, Bengali writers translating themselves into English, and Bengali literary worlds being remade in English through translation, migration, and publishing networks. Bengali Anglophone literature isn't just one set way of

writing. Instead, it's made up of different ways writers express their culture as times change. What always remains the same is that these writers choose to show Bengali identity—its history, character, and complexities—through the English language.

In postcolonial literature, English is often seen as both a gift and a burden—a language tied to power, education, dreams, and even feelings of not belonging. However, Bengali writers who use English show that the language can be more than just something handed down or forced upon them. For these writers, using English is a creative challenge. They don't just write in English—they shape it to fit Bengali rhythms, memories, and cultural styles. This isn't just about mixing two languages for the sake of it. Instead, it's about using the tools of literature—how sentences are built, how stories are told, and how voices sound—to express their unique culture.

This article explains how Bengali writers use English in creative ways to show their own culture and ideas. It makes two main points. First, Bengali Anglophone literature proves that writers can stay connected to their local roots while also having a global outlook—they don't just write about being far from home. Second, these writers have influenced world literature not only through their themes but also by inventing new ways of telling stories, especially when dealing with history, memory, and mixing languages. These methods matter because they demonstrate how "world literature" isn't merely a global shelf of books but a field structured by translation, prizes, markets, and the unequal mobility of texts (Casanova 12; Huggan 28).

**Tagore and the Foundational Problem of Cultural Translation**

Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* plays an important and complicated role in the history of Bengali writers using English. People often see it as the starting point—where a Bengali poet first becomes known worldwide, English acts as the connecting language, and winning the Nobel Prize introduces Bengali literature to a global audience. But what matters most isn't just that Tagore translated his poems. Instead, he carefully chose how to share the feelings and ideas from Bengali devotional poetry in English, making sure Western readers would understand without losing the heart of his culture.

Tagore's English version of *Gitanjali* isn't exactly like the Bengali original. The English poems are simpler and less decorative, focusing on universal spiritual ideas. Some people say this makes them too plain or loses their cultural depth, but it's also a thoughtful choice. Tagore wanted his devotional poems to be understood by readers everywhere, not just seen as exotic or foreign. He carefully decided what parts should stay true to Bengali culture and what could speak to people around the world. Translation scholars argue that translation is never neutral transfer but interpretive act shaped by ideology and market (Venuti 20). Tagore's case makes this visible early.

Tagore's nonfiction adds to our understanding of him. In *Nationalism*, he talks about modern life, countries, and political violence. He is careful not to simply agree with colonial rule or blindly support all forms of nationalism. Instead, he questions both with a thoughtful and critical voice. What's important in Bengali Anglophone literature is that English isn't just accepted as it is—it's used as a tool to question and challenge, shaped by Bengali ways of thinking. Instead of simply fitting in, these writers use English to argue, to stand out, and to share their own ideas with the world.

This leads to two main results. First, Tagore shows that translating your own work and sharing it with the world is a valuable and meaningful effort, not a loss. Second, he highlights a lasting challenge: making your writing easy for people everywhere to understand can sometimes mean losing the rich details of your culture. Bengali writers using English keep facing this issue—they might

welcome it, push back against it, or try to do both at the same time.

**Nirad C. Chaudhuri and the Autobiographical Negotiation of English**

If Tagore represents early spiritual and philosophical mediation of Bengali culture, Nirad C. Chaudhuri represents mid-century, intensely argumentative negotiation of colonial inheritance. *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is famous for its provocative tone and complex relationship to British culture. But its deeper significance lies in how it performs identity through style. Chaudhuri's English is deliberately Victorian-inflected—dense, ornate, learned. It's not "native-like" English in the contemporary sense but cultivated English announcing education and authority while staging ambivalence (Chakrabarty 178).

Chaudhuri doesn't just tell his life story—he uses his memories to help explain bigger changes. Nostalgia isn't just a feeling for him; it's a way to think about politics, culture, and how people change over time. His autobiography turns into something like a personal study of his own world. As he writes, he's living inside Bengali life but also describing it from a distance, in a language shaped by colonial history (Mishra 92).

This is where postcolonial questions get clearer. In postcolonial studies, English is seen as a mix—not just colonial or local. Homi Bhabha calls this the "third space": it's the middle ground where copying, negotiating, and changing things makes something new (Bhabha 37). Chaudhuri's writing lives in that third space, but not in a happy way. His writing mixes praise and criticism, showing that living with colonial influences isn't simple or straightforward.

Chaudhuri's influence in Bengali Anglophone literature isn't just about what he writes about—it's also about how he writes and argues. He shows that English can be used powerfully, to show intelligence and authority, but it also reveals the struggles of holding onto cultural roots (Das 234). Newer writers don't copy his style, but the challenge he faced remains: how do you use English, but make sure it doesn't take over who you are?

**Historical Consciousness and Narrative Form: Amitav Ghosh**

Amitav Ghosh's writing is a big change from earlier writers. He doesn't just talk about personal feelings or philosophy—he tells complicated stories about history, where the way the story is told is part of the message. In *The Shadow Lines*, history isn't just something in the background—it's the way people see and experience the world. The story jumps around in time and place, connecting Calcutta, Dhaka, and London through memories and violence. This isn't just a writing trick—it's a political idea: borders are both real and strange, and they cause pain that spreads across time and place (Khair 156).

Ghosh wants readers to feel that history happens all at once, not just in the past or in other places. Violence isn't stuck in "then" or "there." The story shows how people's private lives are touched by big political events, and how those events stay alive in family memories (Boehmer 89). This is Ghosh's special contribution to postcolonial fiction: he shows that we understand history through stories, pieces, and memories we get from others—not just from official timelines.

The *Ibis Trilogy* takes this even further. Here, Ghosh uses history to bring back lost languages and ways of speaking. The books are set in the nineteenth century on ships, where all kinds of people and languages mix together—sailors' talk, government English, and Indian languages create a rich mix. English in these books isn't normal or plain—it's full of slang and history (Desai 201). This is important because it shows a new way to use English—not as a simple tool everyone shares, but as something shaped by time and place. The language itself is part of history.

In world literature, Ghosh's books are a good example of how a story can feel local and also matter to the world. Ghosh isn't just adding India to English books—he's changing what English stories can do by making them carry many languages and histories. This creates a kind of "counter-cosmopolitanism": the global world isn't just about easy travel or smooth mixing, but about a system shaped by power, trade, migration, and struggle (Casanova 45).

**Domestic Ethnography and the Aesthetics of Silence: Jhumpa Lahiri**

People often say Jhumpa Lahiri's work is the opposite of Ghosh's: it's personal instead of wide-ranging, about home life instead of big history, simple instead of full of many languages. But Lahiri matters because her simple style isn't just her ignoring history—it's her way of showing how history quietly lives on in daily life.

In *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri is great at leaving things unsaid: the most important parts are often what characters don't say to each other. Changes in culture show up not in big fights, but in missed connections, awkward habits, family traditions, and the small sadness of trying to fit in (Alfonso and Sahoo 112). The home becomes a place where culture is worked out—what people eat, what they name their kids, how they marry, and family get-togethers all become ways to test and shape who they are.

*The Namesake* goes even further with the idea that names matter—they hold family history, memories of moving to a new country, and what people miss. Lahiri doesn't turn the lives of people who move away from home into a big show. Her characters aren't there to teach readers about their culture; they're just regular people living with pressure from both sides, which makes her stories more real and respectful (Brada-Williams 67).

This is also how Bengali Anglophone writing changes for readers around the world. Lahiri's writing is easy to read, but she doesn't try to make Bengali culture totally familiar. Instead, she shows difference in a quiet, steady way: someone does a ritual, cooks a special food, or passes on a family sadness, and readers feel the meaning without being told everything. This matches an idea in translation: sometimes, it's good to let things stay partly mysterious (Apter 45). Lahiri doesn't explain every detail. She trusts the story to show what matters.

**The Calcutta Ordinary: Amit Chaudhuri and Anti-Epic Form**

If Lahiri works with a simple style about diaspora, Amit Chaudhuri does something different: he writes in an anti-epic way. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the drama stays small on purpose. The story spends time on everyday things in Calcutta—heat, family talks, slow afternoons, tiny details—showing that ordinary life can be important in art. This matters because it pushes back against the usual idea that postcolonial stories need to be loud, political, or dramatic to be taken seriously (Boehmer 234).

Chaudhuri's style shows that cultural identity isn't just about big events or crises—it's also shaped by daily routines. The "Bengali-ness" of his writing isn't there to show off; it's in the way the story moves, repeats, and focuses on home life. This is smart cultural writing because it doesn't turn culture into something for others to look at or buy (Chaudhuri, "The Construction" 18).

On the world stage, Chaudhuri's books change ideas about what makes a story valuable. Big publishers often want stories about migration, politics, or dramatic history. Chaudhuri's choice is both about style and about fighting the market's rules, which can make postcolonial writing seem "exotic" (Huggan 13). He shows that Bengali Anglophone literature can matter globally by making the ordinary seem deep and meaningful, not just local.

**Genre, Myth, and Cultural Synthesis: Divakaruni and Saad Z. Hossain**

A striking contemporary development is Bengali Anglophone writing's expansion into genre and mythic revision. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* re-narrates the *Mahabharata* through feminist perspective centered on Draupadi. The achievement isn't simply "retelling a myth in English" but reallocating narrative authority: the epic's meaning changes when told from a woman's interiority (Nayar 89). English becomes the medium through which a canonical South Asian story gets re-argued for global readership.

Divakaruni's work also shows how stories based on well-known myths are popular around the world—they use familiar plots but add fresh political and emotional ideas. There's a risk that these myths could get oversimplified or feel like just "exotic" stories. Divakaruni avoids this by focusing on the character's voice and inner struggles, making her retelling deeper and more thoughtful.

Saad Z. Hossain's fantasy stories are another example: he uses "genre" to mix and experiment with culture. Books like *Djinn City* bring together South Asian mythical creatures, city life, and fantasy elements, breaking away from strict Western ideas of genre (Lal 156). This matters because it shows English isn't just for realistic stories about identity—it can also carry mythic and fantasy stories that come from local traditions (Roy 178).

In both cases, it's not just about "adding Bengali culture" to English stories—it's about changing how these genres work by bringing in new ways of thinking, different values, and special symbols. Bengali Anglophone writing keeps up Tagore's old tradition—using translation on purpose—but now does it in new ways, mixing styles and reaching wider audiences.

**Thematic and Formal Continuities**

Even though these writers use different styles, there are some clear patterns that make Bengali Anglophone literature feel like its own tradition.

**Linguistic Texture and the Politics of Untranslatability**

Bengali Anglophone writers often use Bengali words, special cultural phrases, and ways of writing that sound like Bengali thinking. This isn't just for decoration—it's a choice. Some ideas only make sense in their own culture and can't be fully explained in English. Instead of seeing this as a problem, many writers make this "not fully clear" feeling part of the art (Apter 89; Venuti 20). For example, when Ghosh leaves words like *nautch*, *gomusta*, or *duffadar* in their original form in *Sea of Poppies*, he is saying something about what should—and shouldn't—be translated (Sengupta 123).

**Memory as Indirect Transmission**

In this tradition, history isn't always told directly. Lahiri shows it through family routines and names. Ghosh shows it with stories that jump around and by rebuilding the past from bits and pieces. Chaudhuri does it with thoughtful memories (Brah 234). The ways are different, but the idea is the same: culture isn't just what's said out loud, but also what's passed down, practiced, or sometimes avoided. For example, a character might not remember their father's voice but can remember exactly how their mother cooked *ilish mach*. The memory of food stands in for things that can't be spoken (Mannur 67).

**The Cosmopolitan-Provincial Synthesis**

Maybe the most unique thing is how these writers create characters who feel at home in many places at once. The stories don't just split "local" and "global" into old and new. Instead, Bengali ways of seeing the world help make sense of modern life. Being "cosmopolitan" doesn't mean losing your roots—in fact, it's often built on them (Cheah 89). Ghosh's characters are smart, have traveled a lot, and know how to live in different cultures,

but they're still deeply shaped by Bengali neighborhoods, families, and habits. They aren't stuck between two worlds—they live in many at the same time.

**Conclusion**

Bengali Anglophone literature is best understood not as a minor branch of "Indian writing in English," but as a dynamic tradition shaped by translation, migration, narrative experimentation, and the realities of unequal global literary systems. Its writers consistently reimagine English to carry Bengali cultural consciousness—sometimes through spiritual mediation (Tagore), sometimes through argumentative autobiography (Nirad Chaudhuri), sometimes through historical form (Ghosh), sometimes through domestic minimalism (Lahiri), and at other times through the anti-epic portrayal of ordinary life or through genre hybridity (Amit Chaudhuri, Divakaruni, Hossain).

What makes this tradition significant is not only the number of celebrated authors it has produced, but also the aesthetic solutions it offers to a central modern problem: how to speak from cultural specificity in a global literary marketplace without becoming either assimilated or exotically packaged. Bengali Anglophone writing demonstrates that identity negotiation is not merely a theme but a formal practice. That formal practice, developed across a century, has helped expand what English literature can contain—while keeping Bengali cultural memory stubbornly and creatively present.

The tradition's lasting significance may lie in demonstrating that literary innovation often occurs at linguistic and cultural intersections, and that the most locally rooted narratives can achieve the broadest global resonance when mediated through skilled literary translation—whether between languages or within the expanded possibilities of a globalized English (Damrosch 145). As the tradition continues evolving—with emerging trajectories in digital narratives, climate fiction given Bangladesh's vulnerability, queer narratives within Bengali contexts, and expanded dialogue with other world literatures—it offers compelling evidence for literature's capacity to bridge cultural divides while preserving distinctive voices and perspectives (Trivedi 234).

Whether that bridging fully succeeds, whether something essential gets lost in translation, or whether the global circulation of these texts reinforces or challenges existing power structures—these questions remain open, requiring continued critical attention as the tradition develops. Yet what seems clear is that Bengali writers have made English speak with a Bengali accent in the deepest sense. They have shown that writing in a global language does not require smoothing away cultural particularity. In fact, it is often through the specific—the taste of *ilish mach* , the rhythm of Calcutta's afternoons, the weight of a family name—that the universal becomes most palpable. Their century of experimentation offers not only great literature but a masterclass in how to tell stories that are firmly rooted in one soil yet able to speak to countless others.

**References**

[1]. Alfonso, R., & Sahoo, J. (2010). Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*: A study of the diasporic Indian experience. *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies, 2*(4), 106–120.
[2]. Apter, E. (2013). *Against world literature: On the politics of untranslatability*. Verso.
[3]. Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
[4]. Bhattacharya, S. (2011). *Rabindranath Tagore: An interpretation*. Penguin India.
[5]. Boehmer, E. (2005). *Colonial and postcolonial literature: Migrant metaphors* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
[6]. Brada-Williams, N. (2004). Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* as a short story cycle. *MELUS, 29*(3–4), 451–464.
[7]. Brah, A. (1996). *Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities*. Routledge.

[8]. Casanova, P. (2004). *The world republic of letters* (M. B. DeBevoise, Trans.). Harvard University Press.

[9]. Chakrabarty, D. (1977). The colonial context of the Bengal Renaissance: A note on early railway thinking in Bengal. *Indian Economic & Social History Review, 14*(1), 92–111.

[10]. Chaudhuri, A. (1991). *A strange and sublime address*. Vintage.

[11]. Chaudhuri, A. (2008). The construction of the Indian novel in English. In *Clearing a space: Reflections on India, literature and culture* (pp. 13–28). Peter Lang.

[12]. Chaudhuri, N. C. (1951). *The autobiography of an unknown Indian*. Macmillan.

[13]. Cheah, P. (2016). *What is a world? On postcolonial literature as world literature*. Duke University Press.

[14]. Damrosch, D. (2003). *What is world literature?* Princeton University Press.

[15]. Das, S. K. (1995). *A history of Indian literature, 1911–1956: Struggle for freedom – Triumph and tragedy*. Sahitya Akademi.

[16]. Desai, G. (2013). *Commerce with the universe: Africa, India, and the Afrasian imagination*. Columbia University Press.

[17]. Divakaruni, C. B. (2008). *The palace of illusions*. Doubleday.

[18]. Dutta, K., & Robinson, A. (1996). *Rabindranath Tagore: The myriad-minded man*. St. Martin's Press.

[19]. Ghosh, A. (2008). *Sea of poppies*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

[20]. Ghosh, A. (1988). *The shadow lines*. Ravi Dayal Publisher.

[21]. Hossain, S. Z. (2017). *Djinn city*. Unnamed Press.

[22]. Huggan, G. (2001). *The postcolonial exotic: Marketing the margins*. Routledge.

[23]. Khair, T. (2001). *Babu fictions: Alienation in contemporary Indian English novels*. Oxford University Press.

[24]. Lahiri, J. (1999). *Interpreter of maladies*. Houghton Mifflin.

[25]. Lahiri, J. (2003). *The namesake*. Houghton Mifflin.

[26]. Lal, V. (1999). The politics of history on the Internet: Cyber-diasporic Hinduism and the North American Hindu diaspora. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies, 8*(2), 137–172.

[27]. Mannur, A. (2010). Culinary fictions: Immigrant food and the politics of taste. In *Culinary fictions: Food in South Asian diasporic culture* (pp. 19–46). Temple University Press.

[28]. Mishra, V. (2007). *The literature of the Indian diaspora: Theorizing the diasporic imaginary*. Routledge.

[29]. Nayar, P. K. (2015). *The postcolonial studies dictionary*. Wiley-Blackwell.

[30]. Roy, A. (1996). Postcoloniality and the politics of identity in the diaspora: Figuring "home," locating histories. In R. Werbner & T. Ranger (Eds.), *Postcolonial identities in Africa* (pp. 101–115). Zed Books.

[31]. Sengupta, M. (1990). Translation, colonialism and poetics: Rabindranath Tagore in two worlds. In S. Bassnett & A. Lefevere (Eds.), *Translation, history and culture* (pp. 56–63). Pinter Publishers.

[32]. Tagore, R. (1912). *Gitanjali*. Macmillan.

[33]. Tagore, R. (1917). *Nationalism*. Macmillan.

[34]. Trivedi, H. (2007). Translating culture vs. cultural translation. In P. St-Pierre & P. C. Kar (Eds.), *Translation – Reflections, refractions, transformations* (pp. 277–287). John Benjamins.

[35]. Venuti, L. (1995). *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge.

## Author Biographies

**Aahana Bisoi** is student at Indian School Al Ghubra (International), Muscat, Oman, with a strong interest in English and French literature. Having lived in the Middle East for over ten years, she brings a bicultural perspective to her literary analysis and writing. She has completed the B1 level in French and has received several school-level awards for academic and literary excellence. Her research interests include Anglophone writing in the Arab Gulf, cultural identity negotiation, and the relationship between language and heritage in postcolonial contexts.

**Sujata Bisoi** holds an M.A. in English Literature (American Literature) and has been mentoring students in literary studies since 2011. Based in Muscat, Oman, she is a PhD applicant researching Anglophone writing, with a focus on identity, language, and cultural negotiation in postcolonial contexts. Her work also extends to Odia and Bengali literary studies. As an academic mentor, she guides students in literary research and cross-cultural analysis, particularly in postcolonial and Gulf literature, and co-authored this paper as part of her commitment to nurturing young researchers in the Gulf region.