

The Language Question in the Indian English Novel

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Abstract

The discourse of nation, nationalism and its derivatives has become inseparable from literature and language. In order to define and give expression to one's self, one needs a language, a medium. Since the colonial process itself begins in language, language being the colonizer's gift to the colonised, it remains a fundamental site of debate and struggle for the nationalistic writers. In India, English as a medium of expression of the self has found its place in novels, poetry, songs etc. Initially, the use of English by the Indians remained confined to writing or drafting pamphlets, speeches and articles on the burning issues and problems of the time. It is called the imitative stage. Very soon the natives became deft in using the language as an expression of their literary sensibilities too. Professor Iyengar's large and detailed book on Indian Writing in English, published in 1962, was a pioneering effort which succeeded in establishing Indian writing in English as a distinct genre. In the African context, Ngugi wa Thiong'o says that "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world." In fact, post-colonial writers who write in English have used it as a "cultural vehicle" through which they introduce "world audience" to culturally diverse societies.

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Introduction

The discourse of nation, nationalism and its derivatives has become inseparable from Indian English literature and language now. It is supported by the Japanese scholar, Ejiro Nido's remark: "First of all there is the language. On an Indian Currency note, money is indicated in 14 different regional languages such as Bengali, Tamil, Urdu, in addition to the official languages, viz. Hindi and English. There are 33 languages which are used by groups of more than a million people each. Since so many languages, ethnic groups and religions co-exist, India can be regarded as a country which makes a world of its own." (Sen, *Argumentative Indian* 71) However, C.L. Innes believes that the literature produced as part of a cultural nationalistic project is a literature produced "in opposition to the narratives and representations which deny dignity and autonomy to those who have been colonized" (120). Innes further says that this opposition is addressed to the colonizing power as well as to the people of the emerging nation, engaging them in their own "self-definition" (Innes 120). In order to define and give expression to one's self, one needs a language, a medium. Since the colonial process itself begins in language, language being the colonizer's gift to the colonised, it remains a fundamental site of debate and struggle for the nationalistic writers. In fact, post-colonial

writers who write in English have used it as a “cultural vehicle” through which they introduce “world audience” to culturally diverse societies (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 277). In the African context, Ngugi wa Thiong’o says that “Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (267).

The dilemma behind the choice of English as a medium of expression in Literature

In India, English as a medium of expression of the self has found its place in novels, poetry, songs etc. In fact, the Indian government that had come to power after Independence in 1947 was remarkable for its literary talent. President Radhakrishnan, Prime Minister Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, C.J. Rajagopalachari have produced works in English still revered for their exemplary quality. India’s three significant novelists, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan also contributed to providing a new perspective to India as a nation through an ‘alien’ language. Chinua Achebe asks: “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else’s? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling.” (qtd. Thiong’o 263). Achebe and others may be aptly answered in Mahatma Gandhi’s words: “The purpose of writing is to communicate, isn’t it? If so, say your say in any language that comes to hand” (qtd. Mehrotra 13). Balachandra Rajan has also argued that for a writer, the necessity is to render his “individual vision without compromise into a public language” and “If that language happens to be English the creative choice must be respected and one should judge by results rather than by dismal prophesies of what the result must fail to be.” (qtd. in Mukherjee, *Twice Born Fiction* 66) The Indian novelist and philosopher, Raja Rao attempts to make us aware that “We cannot write like the English. We should not” (276). However, he has associated the English language with power. He feels that the act of “nativizing it and acculturating it” is an age-old power trick. In this context he also says:

Truth can use any language and the more universal, the better it is ... And as long as the English language is universal it will always remain Indian ... It would then be correct to say as long as we are Indian ... we shall have the English language with us and amongst us, and not as a guest or friend, but as one of our own, of our caste, our creed, our sect and our tradition. (qtd. Kachru 274)

The Indian linguist Braj B. Kachru argues that English has been accepted as a *lingua franca* in India because “it has acquired a *neutrality* in a linguistic context where native language, dialects, and styles sometimes have acquired undesirable connotations” (272) (original emphasis). Raja Rao is of the opinion that “...English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up...” (276). In India, since the colonized intellectuals had had their education in the coloniser’s language, they became heirs to a culture in which Indian and British elements were intermingled. It influenced not only their minds but the mind of the whole generation. Homi Bhabha sees such disjuncture and displacement as a productive condition.

Meenakshi Mukherjee asserts: “The question of whether there is or should be an Indian English is not really relevant to a critical discussion of contemporary Indian English novels. As for the question of should Indians write novels in English, this cannot have a bearing on the novels which have already been written.” (214) Cronin sees “*all* Indian novels in English” (emphasis mine 214) as exploring the relation between the East and West. This cannot be supported as Cronin seems to discount all novels which describe India, its culture, traditions and the distinctively Indian experience. It is true that many Indian writers, like Nirad Chaudhuri, Sara Suleri, Amitav Ghosh and Amit Chaudhury *et al* have taken as their theme, a journey to the West. But Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, to name only a few, explore India and its people. Traditional culture has proved to be a source of pride for such writers.

Establishment of English Novel as a distinctive Artistic Genre

Most colonial and early independence fiction is written within the conventions of realism and social comedy. The novel, which is “clearly a device for the presentation of simultaneity in ‘homogeneous empty time’” (Anderson 25), acquired a distinct identity during the colonial period. The flexibility of the form and the freedom of the genre was the main reason which made it very popular among the intellectuals. Meenakshi Mukherjee evaluates the early Indian novel thus: “In spite of the various limitations and incompatibilities, the novel in India which began under the

British tutelage soon acquired its own distinctive character.” (Mukherjee *Realism and Reality* 6) Professor Iyengar’s large and detailed book on Indian Writing in English, published in 1962, was a pioneering effort which succeeded in establishing Indian writing in English as a distinct genre. The literary group *Writer’s Workshop in Calcutta* also played “a creative role in literature...” (qtd. in Mukherjee *The Twice Born Fiction* 10) and reached out to the reading public in India and abroad through its journal *Writers Workshop Miscellany* and a number of volumes published under it.

As an interesting historical fact, Charles Grant, one of the directors of the East India Company, had laid a strong claim and appeal for adopting the English language as early as in 1792. However, it was only in 1835, that English was adopted as a medium of instruction at all levels. Lord William Bentinck was in favour of imparting knowledge of English literature and Science to the natives through the medium of English and he had made an announcement to this effect in 1835, following a brief resolution of the Governor-General in Council. The gateway to western knowledge was thus, opened for the Indians. Raja Rammohun Roy heartily welcomed the initiative. In a letter to Lord Amherst on 11th December in 1823, he had advocated the need for sponsoring English education in India. During the same period, Anglicism, a movement that gained ascendancy in the 1830s during the governor-generalship of Lord Warren Hastings, expressed discontent with the policy of promoting the Oriental languages and literatures in native education. It made predictions of disastrous consequences, “the most serious being the alienation of the natives from British rule.” (Viswanathan 29-30) Hastings’ wholehearted enthusiasm for Oriental studies was, however, in large part a response to the “volatile and uncertain political position of Britain in India.” (Viswanathan 33) His successor, Lord Cornwallis had no particular interest in either promoting or discouraging the study of Oriental languages and its associated literatures, as long as Englishmen were not attracted to it or compelled to read it.

Gauri Viswanathan asserts: “From the beginnings of British involvement in Indian education, the effort was toward pruning Oriental literatures of their undesirable elements, with a view to reviving the indigenous learning in its practical, useful aspects.” (34) This customized education was made available for all classes of the native population, and it led to the deferment of the introduction of Western Science and English as a medium of instruction, the reason cited being that the people were not yet ready for it. But with the strengthening of England’s rule over India, questions regarding the maintenance of the British administrative structure and governance of so vast a colony were raised. This necessitated a convergence of “political philosophy with cultural policy” (Viswanathan 34) in order to sustain the Western-style government in India. The imperial rulers, now settling down to the prospect of a long-term rule in India, realized the need to bring Indian subjects more directly into the “conceptual management of the country” (Viswanathan 35) than it was in the times of Hastings and Cornwallis. The “Indian character” immediately gained tremendous importance and the need of the hour for the British was to mold it to “suit British administrative needs” (Viswanathan 35). With William Bentinck’s English Education Act of 1835, which followed the tenets of Macaulay’s famous minutes in the same year, “the teaching of English was taken out of the Sanskrit College and the Madrasa and confined to institutions devoted to studies entirely conducted in English. The ground for doing so was the charge that the young men learned nothing in the native seminaries and failed to speak English fluently because they had to divide their time between the three languages.” (Viswanathan 41) The British masters decided that “a sum of not less than one lac of rupees shall be annually applied to the revival and improvement of literature, and the encouragement of the learned natives of India.” (qtd. in Viswanathan 38) This decision of disbursement of government funds for the exclusive study of English was eagerly welcomed by upper-caste Bengalis. It is evident from the establishment of the Hindu College in 1816, as a result of the demands of a group of citizens of Calcutta who were eager to learn English language and literature in addition to the native languages and sciences. One of the motives behind it was surely lucrative employment but one must not forget that by this time the study of English had come to be taken as an indispensable part of “polite education.” (Viswanathan 43) Gauri Viswanathan points out, however, that initially, the movement for English education, spearheaded by Raja Rammohun Roy and David Hare was “sparked by a need for translations of English literature into the vernaculars and not for a wholesale transfusion of western thought.” (43)

Publication details of the contemporary Period

As a matter of fact, English had chanced upon the advantage of coming to India at a crucial time when Sanskrit and Persian had already taken a backseat as a language of instruction and communication. English, on the contrary, had become rather accessible to the masses as a result of books in English language being easily available in the libraries, and also native individuals coming in contact with the English language in one way or the other, due to the presence of the British in the country since a long time. As the number of those having an English education increased, the number of 'private' Englishmen in India too went up. It is obvious by the number of English books sold during this period. Approximately, 32,500 books in English were sold in India in the 1830s while only 13,000 books in Hindi, Hindustani and Bengali, and 1,500 in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. Not only that, the demand for English books was comparatively more from the educated Indian than the Englishmen.

Initially, the use of English by the Indians remained confined to writing or drafting pamphlets, speeches and articles on the burning issues and problems of the time. It is called the imitative stage. Very soon the natives became deft in using the language as an expression of their literary sensibilities too. The first English writers were those of verse and prose, namely, the Cavally brothers, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Kashiprosad Ghose, Hasan Ali, P. Rajagopaul, Mohan Lal *et al.* Swami Vivekananda's speeches, Toru Dutt's poetry, Manmohan Ghose's poetic plays, Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical writings, Rabindra Nath Tagore's poems, prose writings, plays and novels enriched literature in English in India. More and more writers and intellectuals felt comfortable in articulating their social concerns or literary outflow of emotions in the English language. Long lists of works written in English have been obtained from various prominent as well as small publishing houses all over India, like Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Allahabad, Bangalore, Bhagalpur, Calicut, Dinapur, Midnapur, Surat, Vellore, Bezwada and so on. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife*, which is considered by many as the first novel in English written by an Indian, made its appearance as early as in 1864.

Undoubtedly, Macaulay's "Minute on Education" followed by the 1835 English Education Act of William Bentinck, irrevocably altered the direction of Indian education. The pattern of studies in rhetoric and logic, as taught in England, was convenient enough to be adapted for India as English grammar was also not taught separately but alongside the memorizing and reciting of the text. The instruction of Indian classical languages consisted of a similar mode of teaching and learning. Initially, English was taught along with Sanskrit and the vernaculars, though later, English superseded the Oriental studies. Moreover, the entry of missionaries in India gave an impetus to English literary study. Now it was asserted that study of literature must be supplemented and strengthened by moral and ethical education.

According to Uma Parameswaran, colonial literature is born out of the interaction between Britain and a British colony. As all literary production is rooted in its respective indigenous culture, R. K. Narayan once interestingly pointed out that Western society is based on a "totally different conception of man-woman relationship from ours," (qtd. in Mukherjee *Twice Born Fiction* 28) and it can be safely declared that marital bliss is a more frequent subject in Indian novels than romantic love. Without the specific flavour of the respective cultural milieu, the writing of the novel remains merely a literary exercise, a plant without sap.

Conclusion

Thus, we see that the literary history of the Indian writing in English is rather a linear and continuous discourse through the course of its evolution till date. However, for a long time, Indian writing in English has suffered the unjust destiny of being insignificant or somewhat less important amongst post-colonial literatures. Perhaps it is because of its perplexing diversity, its distinct languages and its preoccupation with the miscellaneous problems plaguing the Indian society. However, the greatest advantage of writing in English is that the "English language cuts across diverse ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, and although theoretically this gives the novelist a wider audience in India" (Mukherjee *Twice Born Fiction* 25) Also, the language English ruled out "any possibility of a regional identity, and any assertion of a broadly *Indian* identity was undertaken generally to emphasize otherness and exoticism rather than to make a political statement." (Mukherjee *Perishable Empire* 16) Rushdie is of the opinion that

it is unnecessary to always bear grudge against English just because it was the coloniser's language. He is of the view that: "...those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it – assisted by the English language's enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers." (Rushdie 64) Although the debate regarding the selection of the national language and the appropriateness of using English in post-independent India has been raging since 1947, but it has lost its importance to the current generation. "The children of independent India do not seem to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand." (Rushdie 64)

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