

Indian English Writings: An Established Niche

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Abstract

Indian English writings of recent times have been successful in portraying an indigenous sensibility by reflecting the cultural nuances and modes of perception. New writers draw upon their cultural resources to express their alterity and not to exhibit it as exotic. While the earlier writers of twentieth century emphasized their experience of alienation and distrusted the language, it is imperative for the new writers in Indian English to create a meaningful identity in a new way. Newer themes, ideas and innovative techniques of writing took shape with the emergence of new talents in the field of prose, fiction, poetry and drama. This paper examines the debates surrounding Indian English writings of the nineties on one hand and regional writings on the other. It will also examine the space occupied by writings in Indian English and translated works.

Keywords: indigenous, innovative techniques, regional, translation,

Indian English literature as the very name implies brings in an amalgamation of two cultures- the Indian and English. The Anglican element in the term obviously denotes the use of the English language as the medium of expression. Indian English writings have come a long way and today English is no longer an alien language. It has been nativised and is considered as one of the Indian languages like Marathi, Punjabi or Tamil. In its long journey undertaken just as is with the case of regional writings and translated works, Indian English writings have evolved through various phases. It has worked its way in portraying an indigenous sensibility by reflecting the cultural nuances and modes of perception. Today, Indian writings in English have gained worldwide recognition and acceptance. Newer themes, ideas and innovative forms of writing took shape with the emergence of new talents in the field of prose, fiction, poetry and drama. This paper examines the debates surrounding Indian English writings of the nineties on one hand and regional writings on the other. It will also examine the space occupied by writings in Indian English and translated works.

The paper will first analyse the position of Indian English writings vis-a vis the regional writings. The popularity of the Indian English writing since the nineties has once more reopened the debate of the superiority/inferiority of Indian Writing in English as opposed to the literary production in the various languages of India. Prior to this period, the major issue of the debate was linguistic (the English language conveying an alien culture) and literary (creativity in using English) as expressed way back in Raja Rao's classic foreword. Since the nineties, the distrust of English in India is not based on account of it being a foreign language, but being the language of the elite and the privileged groups. It has been based on the anxiety that the wide popularity of the novels in Indian English might lead to the projection of a homogenous entity and mask the issues related to the lives of the ordinary people living in the varied regions of the country. One of the key issues raised in this context is about how far the writer has been successful in effectively representing the cultural, social and political reality experienced by the masses. The views of Rushdie and Amit Chaudhuri expressed through their books *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* and *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature* respectively exemplify this battle. Rushdie's statement in his introduction to the book that India's best writing since independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists created a lot of resentment among many writers, including writers in English. He observes that Indian English writers have been criticized for lacking a 'true' understanding of the soul of India: "Its practitioners are denigrated for being too upper-middle class; for lacking diversity in their choice of themes and techniques, for being less popular in India than outside India. . . ." (xiii). Rushdie agrees that most of the writers come from the educated classes of India but the novelist vouches for genuine attempts being made by these writers to encompass Indian realities. Questioning Rushdie's claim, Amit Chaudhuri writes:

Can it be true that Indian writing, that endlessly rich, complex and problematic entity, is to be represented by a handful of writers who write in English, who live in England or America and whom one might have met at a party, most of whom have published no more than two novels, some of them only one?" ("Introduction: Modernity and the Vernacular" xvii)

Chaudhuri feels that after Rushdie, Indian writing in English started employing magical realism, bagginess, non-linear narrative and hybrid language to sustain themes seen as microcosms of India and supposedly reflecting Indian conditions. He contrasts this with the works of earlier writers such as R.K. Narayan where the use of English is pure, but the deciphering of meaning needs cultural familiarity. 'Indianness', according to Chaudhuri, is a theme constructed only in Indian Writing in English and does not articulate itself in the vernacular literatures:

It is worth remembering that those who write in the languages of India, whether that happens to be English or one of the modern 'vernaculars', do not necessarily write about 'India' or a national narrative [. . .], but about cultures and localities that are

both situated in, and disperse the idea of, the nation. ("Introduction: The Construction xxiv)

Earlier Indian English writers claimed superiority on the grounds that they dealt with a pan-Indian sensibility in their novels unlike the *bhasha* novelist. It is at the level of sensibility that *bhasha* literatures do not encompass the whole of the nation. To possess a purely Hindi or Malayalam or Marathi sensibility is what they claimed makes regional writing subordinate or inferior. Likewise in the nineties, the *bhasha* novelists showed a distrust for Indian English novel on account of their over-projection and misrepresentation of India as a homogenous entity. The most vociferous attack has come from the Nativist school of criticism whose main proponent, Bhalchandra Nemade, considers Indian writing in English to lack roots in India. He further asserts that it's time we realized the fact that our literary endeavours beyond our own language group smacks of mediocrity (253). This debate has been further exemplified through a series of interviews with *bhasha* writers in an article entitled "Midnight Orphans" by Sheela Reddy in the *Outlook* magazine (25 Feb. 2002). The noted Kannada writer, U.R. Ananthamurthy's grouse is the failure of regional writers to gain international recognition as they do not write in the global language of America (54). Overlooking the fact of Indian writing in English being "export-oriented", he concedes that the best works do manage to convey the ambience of the provincial language and ethos. Citing the case of Arundhati Roy, Ananthamurthy applauds her English "whose energy comes from Malayali culture and ambience" (57). Jeyamohan, a Tamil writer feels that "the experiments happening in Tamil and Malayalam fiction are far bolder than anything happening in Indian English" (62). Similarly, the Hindi novelist, Nirmal Verma feels that "Indian writers in English find themselves in a strange place; the emotional content is missing, as is the real core of the Indian experience." He concludes that the best writers in regional languages come from the middle and lower classes of society and their writing "encompasses the entire epic flow of their life" (62). The underlying criterion of these discussions is the alleged charge levelled at Indian English fictional writing as lacking a sense of rootedness. The Indian English or the *bhasha* writers' claims to superiority can be evaluated solely on the basis of how true he is to his roots and how far he is successful in addressing the "earthy, native traditions which are specific to place and time" (Nemade 239). Such novels raise hopes for gradually overcoming the conspicuous dichotomy of the English and the regional novel in India.

Despite the fact that English is no longer an alien language, critics believe that it is still impossible to do creative writing in Indian English whose cultural and verbal associations are inaccessible to Indians. This basic problem of writing in English was mentioned by Raja Rao in the foreword to his first novel, *Kanthapura* (1938), wherein he underscores the otherness of the language used as well as the culture depicted:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One had to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word alien, yet English is not an alien language to us. It is

the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before-but not of our emotional make-up. (vii)

K. Satchidanandan argues that “Indian English writers bring into their very fabric of their writing a lot of what they have learnt from the Indian languages they know-rhythms, syntax, concepts, even words” (185). Meenakshi Mukerjee speaks of this “double complication” and says that the task confronting the Indian English writer is dealing with non-English speaking contexts and to convey through the English language “the vast range of expressions and observations whose natural vehicle is an Indian language” (173). This raises another pertinent question: Can writings in Indian English be equated with translations works? Both translations in English and Indian English writings have the transmission of elements from one culture to another as their central concern. It is, however, quite evident that no culture can be represented completely in any text nor can a translation fully represent its source text. What amount of cultural material needs to be explained explicitly is based upon the kind of audience it is intended for. If a text is for an audience that shares a same culture of the text, then the history myth, allusions or other cultural material can be implicit as the audience can recognize and identify it. In addition, transposing the literary genre, proverbs and metaphors of the source culture is equally problematic to both translators and Indian English writers. Meenakshi Mukherjee opines that as regards the choice of the language, the choice the writer of Indian English has to make is akin to that of a translator wherein the “literal translation is not always the answer because he has to make sure that the translated idioms or images do not go against the grain of the English language (173-4).

The argument this paper puts forward is that these writers do not write in English as a mere translation nor to get focused in a cosmopolitan centre. They write because they are at ease with the language. The vision and sight is independent of the language. When a writer writes about Kodagu or Goa or Kerala it is definitely for an Indian audience. Today we have a vast global readership formed by an affluent middle class of Indian English writings. For instance, a Malayalam writer like M.T. Vasudevan Nair has a kind of centrality that Rushdie can never dream of. This is a travesty. To preserve the culture of Kerala or any other region of India a writer doesn't have to write in English. On the other hand, the only pan Indian language is English and it aids in helping us to get to know about the diversity of our country. The two writers apprehend the region in different ways. Indian English has not been developed as a dialect in the sense of Black English and Indian English is not created through construction. For instance, constructions like I teach English, and I am teaching English have changed into Indianisms. Another example can be cited from Nissim Ezekiel's poem “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.”: “our dear sister/ is departing for foreign/... You are all knowing, friends,/ What sweetness is in Miss Pushpa”(190).

Indian English is created through translation of proverbs, metaphors, words etc. Every Indian has his own native language and his usage of English- they both form two different parts of his experience. To think of them as mere translation would be a simplified approach.

The task then for the Indian English writer is to convey the “the spirit that is one’s own “(Rao vii). G.J.V. Prasad points out that these writers write “in an English intended to approximate the thought-structures and speech patterns of their characters and not to betray the Indian text and context by an easy assimilation into the linguistic and cultural matrices of British English” (43). This rewriting of English into a new one by incorporating the dialogue of the Indian regional languages is achieved by bringing “different languages into comic collision, testing the limits of communication between them celebrating India’s linguistic diversity, and taking over the English language to meet the requirements of an Indian context (Mee320).

Indian English has firmly staked its claim into being considered as one of India’s literatures. The gradual expanse of the reading public among the middle classes and the transformations in the publishing industry has had sweeping implications for fictional writings in English. New writers draw upon their cultural resources to express their alterity and not to exhibit it as exotic. While the earlier writers of twentieth century emphasized their experience of alienation and distrusted the language, it is imperative for the new writers in Indian English to create a meaningful identity in a new way.

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