

“Indian English Fiction II: Establishment Of An Autonomous Idiom”

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Abstract:

When English came to India as foreign language, little did people know that this language that this language of colonisers and exploiters would one day become the most commonly used medium for creative expression by natives. The beginnings of this language-transplant were quite humble, and the acceptance or appreciation of this western language held no charm for the culturally and linguistically rich country like India. But the language established itself in such a way that it became more Indian than any native language. One of the main factors responsible for the establishment of English as an autonomous idiom, was the choice of this language by our novelists writing in it, along with other factors like the education policies, the growing demand of information technology, mass media and world-wide-web.

Indian English fiction served as the appropriate platform for experimentation, innovations, nativisation, Indianization, chutneyfication, and most importantly for establishing a unique unfettered identity in the postcolonial world. With a history of more than hundred years, the strongly emerging Indian English fiction has found its identity as well as recognition, both national and international. For a wider reading audience inside and outside India, Indian English fiction has facilitated access to a body of modern and contemporary Indian literature. Impressed by its originality and scope, the Indian English fiction has become more and more familiar in the world, especially in the west that has always been baffled and intrigued, even fascinated by its ‘Indianness’. The present paper aims at exploring the journey of Indian English fiction in the postcolonial world with a focus on the contributions made by Indian English novelists to Indian literature in particular and the world literature in general.

Keywords: Nativisation, Indianization, Indian English Fiction, Postcolonialism, Chutneyfication

Introduction

“We are all, willy-nilly, confined within the prison walls of our everyday vocabulary. With the skill in our choice of words, we may stretch accepted meanings to cover

slightly new feelings and thoughts, but when a state of mind is utterly distinct, wholly novel, then all the old words fail.”

- R. Gordon Wasson

The method of adapting English language to one's purpose is one that is common to all writers; not only to Indian writers in English but to writers in English from other erstwhile colonies. All such writers had taken upon themselves the task of de-colonising their respective nations from the cultural imperialism or cultural hegemony¹ of the former colonizers by writing back to the 'centre'. Chinua Achebe, for instance, achieved this in *Things Fall Apart* by drawing his images from his surroundings and from traditional African sources instead of lifting them from British literary tradition, showing how well English can be adapted to reflect his native life. Just like Achebe, Indian English novelists too have shown that whatever merits the Indian languages claim to have for expressing the life of the Indian people and the distinctiveness of the values of Indian life is possessed by English too. The fact that it is a world language makes it in a sense a better medium of expression. Chutneyfied English is then just a variety of English whose characteristics stem from the life and culture of the people it's written about i.e. India.

The Indian social, cultural and linguistic set-up has been affecting the features of the English language ever since the two came into contact. When we cast a glance at the growth of English language, we see manoeuvring of the language at different stages till it came to acquire its present status as a world language. The changes that have

come over these centuries in the English language have been mostly due to the various cultural and social encounters that took place in English speaking world, and the case of language varieties in various third-world countries like that of Indian English is one such instance of language change and language spread. As Bailey and Gollach mention in the preface to *English as a World Language*:

“Since English began to spread around the world in the great age of exploration five hundred years ago, all its varieties have taken on an independent history, some of them much influenced by local circumstances, others responding to changes in the prestige of Great Britain, and all of them affected by the inexorable trends in language change that affect every community from one generation to the next.”

With a history of more than hundred years, the strongly emerging Indian English fiction has found its identity as well as recognition, both national and international. For a wider reading audience inside and outside India, Indian English fiction has facilitated access to a body of modern and contemporary Indian literature. Impressed by its originality and scope, the Indian English fiction has become more and more familiar in the world, especially in the west that has always been baffled and intrigued, even fascinated by its 'Indianness'. A wide and impressive spectrum of Indian novelists in English has

gained national and international reputation; works of some have even been translated into other Indian and World languages. By 1930s, Indian English fiction was almost a century old; yet the output had not been much towards nativisation and acculturation. There had been some publications like Cornelia Sorabji's *Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1901), S.B.Banerjee's *Tales of Bengal* (1910), K.S.Venkataramani's *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) and *Kandan the Patriot* (1932). The publication of *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936) and *Kanthapura* (1938) infused a new vigour in literary production. Since then people began to display increasing ease and confidence in handling the English language, and consequently, it became the leading medium of artistic self-expression.

Anand's *Untouchable*, displayed excellence of experimental technique, as a psychological journey summed up in just one day much like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. His style became characteristic by bold importation of Indianisms into his work as M.K.Naik rightly says that "Anand's English shows its Indian origin in its 'oriental opulence, its passion for adjectives, its tendency to use more words than are absolutely necessary and its fast galloping tempo'." ². He is considered first Indian novelist who consciously strove to adapt English to suit his purpose. An examination of his works at once reveals the possibility of this adaptability, as we notice certain attempts at creating an Indian idiom of

English. He adopts, in his writings, an Indian style of writing English which is evident from his practice of translating verbatim "all the dialogue in his novels from his mother tongue and thinking out the narrative mostly the same way". He translates into English, Punjabi vernacular swearwords and phrases such as 'illegally begotten', 'sons of a pig', 'brother-in-law', 'ashamed of showing your teeth', 'eat my head', 'thrust eyeballs at' etc., that form part of the conversation of ordinary villagers. Another way he devises to create a native English idiom is his translation of Indian proverbs and similes. Anand's use of vulgarisation of English words too has been an experimental technique towards the Indianization of English like 'engine' into 'injan', 'hospital' into 'haspatal', 'doctor' into 'daktar', 'fashion' into 'fashun', 'motor car' into 'motucar' etc. Also the use of uncommon words like 'vagabonding' or coinages like 'gooder' or literal translations of vernacular idioms like 'eat a little fresh air' contribute to this initial development of a native Indian idiom.

Other novelists of this period also used more or less the same techniques in their own peculiar idiosyncratic ways. R.K.Narayan, for instance, employs his south-Indian background to shape his artistic works while writing 'an admirably clean English'. His style is direct and straightforward and characterised by an idiosyncratic expression and vocabulary feasible to depict Indian sensibilities and themes. He does not employ

complex phrases, or compound sentences. Syntax and sentencing depicts the normal pattern of conversation amongst educated Indian. Lucidity, clarity, simplicity and conciseness become the characteristic feature of his novels. The closeness of his writings to the idiom of native speech enabled him to achieve casualness and realism as a storyteller. Narayan's idiom employs English in a manner designed to minimize the impact of cultural prescriptions. He eschews loaded or ambiguous terms which acquire added associations by being transmitted culturally and achieve commendable clarity in the process. Using a comparatively denotative vocabulary, he displays a preference for the concrete and sticks to the simple, grammatical structures aspiring to a core competence level shared by speakers of English internationally. His own observation about the choice of English as a medium of literary output runs like this: "It is often mentioned with some amount of contempt and patronage, but is a legitimate development and needs no apology". In this defence, he further adds:

"We have fostered the language for over a century and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own thought and idiom. Americans have adapted the English language to suit their native mood and speech without feeling apologetic, and have achieved directness and unambiguity in expression."³

Rao, too, for instance wrote in an unconventional language and successfully rendered Indian modes of thought and feeling into English in his literary works. He does so without lapsing into "babu-English⁴" at any place or grossly violating the syntax and grammar of the English language. He makes an earnest attempt to transfuse English language with the quality of natural Indian speech as culturally different both were, as William Walsh put it "His writing is closer to speech, and he is able to use the rhythms of speech...to indicate character, feeling..."⁵ While advocating his use of a foreign language for creative expression Rao says:

"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 has 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 really 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. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American."⁶

The trio's contribution to metamorphosing an alien language into an Indianized version and to the development of Indian English idiom stands out for "each used his own version of an English freed from the foggy taste of Britain..." and "...The three are distinguished not only for their own work but as the inaugurators of the form itself since it was they who defined the area in which the Indian novel in English was to operate, drew the first models of its characters and themes and elaborated its particular logic."⁷ Before these three writers came on the literary scene, the growth and development of Indian English fiction was underappreciated, and its literary merit and contribution as part of Indian literature highly doubted as was true of all literature in English -whether drama, poetry or prose. Before the trio came on the Indian literary scene, the Indian English novelists wrote for a readership largely Indian and unmistakably nationalist but since they began to write the readership spread overseas. They contributed a lot to the change in attitude toward Indian English as Iyenger writes:

"...Indian writing in English is but one of the voices in which India speaks. It is a new voice, no doubt, but it is as much Indian as the others."⁸

Once the foundations were firmly laid by the founding fathers in the 1930s, Indian English fiction slowly began to be acknowledged globally (globally+locally). Following

Anand, Narayan and Rao, the Indian English novelists in the mid 20th century, found increasing Indian and international readership, e.g., G.V.Desani, Nirad C. Choudhry, Anita Desai, Attia Hussain, Shashi Deshpande, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Balachandra Rajan, Arun Joshi, Manohar Malgonkar, K. Nagarajan, Kamala Markandya, Chaman Nahal, Khushwant Singh, Nayantara Sehgal, G.V.Desani, Bhabani Battacharya among others. These new generation novelists writing in the post-independence era, continued the process of enriching the Indian English idiom, alongside the novelists of the first phase⁹, for several decades alongside bringing international acclaim and acceptance to Indian English as well as Indian English fiction.

During these times, particularly preceding the emancipation period, the use of the language and medium was quite a self-conscious usage, as it was a foreign one. For them it was the language of the masters, but after 1947 the novelists, who continued to share their major concerns- thematic, cultural, linguistic, and stylistic- began a freer and more confident handling of the English language despite opposition and accepted bilingualism and biculturalism as an asset rather than a handicap. Indian English fiction was born when India was brought under British control and their language implemented in the Indian system. Its growth should have become stunted after they left,

but it did not. Instead it flourished more and more because the language was not looked on as a colonial legacy and a sign of slavery, rather it came to be recognised as an instrument of progress and prosperity. It not only coexisted with the regional languages but also grew with distinct tendencies. By this time, the language had struck such deep roots in the Indian system that even the law-makers of this country could not help but acknowledge its strong presence.

“The Constitution declared Hindi as the official language of India, however, it permitted the use of English for official purposes for a period of 15 years from the commencement of the Constitution. The Parliament was authorised to allow the use of English even beyond this period. In 1964, the Parliament passed the Official Language Act, which permitted the use of English as official language upto Jan. 26, 1971. Again through the Official Language (Amendment) Act, 1967, it was provided that the use of English would continue indefinitely.”

Indian creative writers using English as their medium of expression were the major contributors to the un-shakeable position that this language came to acquire in this ex-colony. In the mid-Twentieth century the Indian novelists made up quite a formidable number and one of their important contribution was the direct reportage and sketches of India as a country that was in the process of gradual transformation, leaving behind the colonial history. And this contribution came about in the suitability and adaptability of English as their medium of

writing and expression as Kamala Das says in one of her poems:

“...I am Indian, very brown, born
in
Malabar, I speak three languages,
write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in
English, they said,
English is not our mother-tongue.
Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting
cousins,
Everyone of you? Why not let me
speak in
Any language I like? The language
I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its
queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half
English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is
honest,
It is as human as I am human, don't
You see? It voices my joys, my
longings, my
Hopes, and it is useful to me as
cawing
Is to crows or roaring is to the lions,
it
Is human speech, the speech of the
mind that is
Here and not there, a mind that sees
and hears and

Is aware...”¹⁰

The novelists writing after the Indian Independence had begun to display increasing ease and confidence in handling the English language, and consequently, their literary output increased enormously despite criticism from some quarters of Indian society. These novelists, no doubt, had to defend themselves for writing in English, as “the language was then looked on as a bright and glamorous but illegitimate daughter of India, not acceptable to the literati, let alone the people at large,”¹¹ but despite that the nativisation of English was one of the rarest gifts the post-Independence India had ever witnessed. The English language no more remained an ‘alien’ language for the Indian novelists. “Indians have found a sense of peculiar intimacy with the English language, making it a second natural voice for the Indian mind and sensibility.”¹²

G.V.Desani, has remarked:

“And my entire linguistic creed...is simply to find a suitable medium. I find the English language is that kind of medium. It needs to be modified to serve my purpose.”

These words of Desani remind us of similar thoughts of the African writer Achebe:

“I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience.

But it will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.”¹³

Even Narayan presents the position on Indian English employed by the creative writers in the same vein as Desani and Achebe when he says:

“We are not attempting to write Anglo-Saxon English. The English language, through sheer resilience and mobility, is now undergoing a process of Indianization in the same manner as it adopted U.S. citizenship over a century ago, with the difference that it is the major language there but here one of the fifteen listed in the Indian Constitution.”¹⁴

The innumerable novels written after Independence are a valid proof of the fact that the English language has been successful in carrying the ‘weight’ of the Indian ‘experience’ which manifested itself in the continued Indianization of its form and functions. Whether it is Desani’s *All About H. Hatter* or the use of English slang in Markandya’s novels or the language of Bhattacharya’s novels or the use of the language of Anglo-Indian community in Malgonkar’s *Combat of Shadows* or the themes dealt in the novels of Anita Desai or any other idiosyncratic leaning of the post-

Independence novelists writing before Salman Rushdie, one thing clearly stands out that these later writers of the second generation had fulfilled the challenge of decolonising the language, making it native and establishing an Indian English indefinitely.

III

Describing the situation at the end of seventies, Meenakshi Mukherjee writes:

“Just before the upsurge of the eighties, there was a period of slump...the grandmasters of the Indian novel in English – R.K.Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand- who had started writing in the nineteen-thirties continued with unflagging regularity...but they had ceased to surprise. Most of those who emerged after them had already fallen by the wayside after sporadic creativity. No new name had caught the reader’s attention after Anita Desai and Arun Joshi. It was as if the burden of English was grinding to a halt...there was not much discursive space for the diminishing number of English writers.”¹⁵

But the history of Indian English fiction after such a non-productive minor phase received its most significant boom in the 1980’s with the advent of writers like Salman Rushdie, I. Allen Sally, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, and others who joined them later in the 90s like Mukul Kesavan, Rukun

Advani, Markand Paranjape, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga, and Vikram Chandra. Switching to this new generation of Indian English novelists, it is unanimously accepted that Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, ushered in a new phase of success for Indian English novels. With its international acclaim through the Booker McConnell Prize in 1981, and later the Whitbread Prize in 1988, the Booker of Bookers in 1993 as the best novel of the first 25 years of the prize’s history and France’s prestigious *Commandeur dans l’Ordre des Artes et des Lettres* in 1999, it was a book that unconditionally established an author of Indian origin as one of the best among contemporary fiction writers of the postcolonial world. The success of this novel made the position of Indian English fiction and Indian English writing as a whole insurmountable. Its worth and value could no longer be questioned, as it had been so far, heralding a new generation with remarkably fresh insights and abundant fertility and scope. The new generation novelists won an increasing recognition and respect worldwide and along with this recognition has come an easy access to publication in India as well as abroad- a factor that in the neo-liberal order proved quite important.¹⁶

One important development in the growth of an autonomous idiom of English in India has been the way this new generation handles the language and a lot was owed to Rushdie’s influence. Rushdie himself asserts:

“What seems to be happening is that those people who were 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 languages enormous flexibility and size, they are carrying out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.”¹⁷

The first as well as second generation novelists, had toiled towards Indianization of English derived primarily from introduction of regional tone, rhythm and structure¹⁸, from experimenting with all kinds of English spoken by various sections of Indian society¹⁹, from the use of English translation of phrases and expressions from the vernacular languages²⁰ and many such experiments. But a breakthrough was made by the new novelists who, along with Indianization, aimed at de-colonisation²¹ of the English language. Salman Rushdie, for instance, uses “Chutneyfied English” i.e., Indian English in which words, phrases, terms and some structures of Hindi and Urdu spoken in Mumbai are used.

Guided by a cosmopolitan outlook, the novelists of the post-Midnight’s Children revolution have evolved for themselves a distinct spoken language or dialect which has been branded as ‘Chutneyfied English’ or hybridised English became the prime source

of bringing repute to these writers as well as their country of origin, as Meenakshi Mukherjee acknowledges:

“There is now a lively interest in the novels Indians are writing in English- either at home or abroad- an interest which might have been triggered off by the unprecedented individual success of a few of our writers in the global market, but has continued unabated through the eighties and nineties because of the sheer abundance and innovativeness of the new crop, aided no doubt by the widespread visibility, financial success, and international awards received by some of the writers of the new generation.”²²

Succeeding Rushdie, the novelists in English came to be evaluated for their skill at experimenting with and fashioning the literary material of the English language and not particularly for their “Indianness”, which according to Iyenger “consists in the writer’s intense awareness of his entire culture.” The Indianized style was abundantly found in the works of the earlier generations of Indian English novelists but the Indianization of English, which has been a gradual process, was incomplete without the deliberate deviations, experimentations, innovations and manipulations which came through the new generation novelists. Marked by an

obsession with their own generation and contemporaneity, these new novelists use their diasporic identities to create a Fifth-world - a world of writers for whom neither physical boundaries exist nor do languages differentiate them. Most of these new novelists like Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Bharati Mukherjee, and others having hybrid identities, belong to the Indian Diaspora who are exploring the life in India from afar. Others who like Arundhati Roy have so far not left the Indian soil, are based in the metropolis, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, etc. Their metropolitanism, multiculturalism as well as diasporic nature relates them to that global culture where writing in English or otherwise is as irrelevant as the choice of themes, settings or characters. The rise of these new writers, who have often spoken the language from birth, tells about a generation that, instead of averting the question of their colonial past, has chose to do away with the colonial label by showing a mastery over the colonizers language. This was done by Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 by winning the Booker, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in 1997 and again when Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* won the Booker Prize in 2006 and Arvind Adiga's "*The White Tiger*". These novels are representative of those urban English medium educated elites, who despite different backgrounds and upbringings are not only Indian in blood and colour but their intellect in spite of having absorbed the best in English tastes, opinions and morals have remained quintessentially Indian. Instead of being colonised by the

language, they have decolonised the language using it to define their Indian identity and experience.

In conclusion, the growth of an autonomous Indian English idiom has been one continuous spectrum from 1864, when the first Indian English novel was written or rather from the time the first Indian (whosoever he was) attempted to write in English, to the present day. The fact that even the earliest novelists and writers had been, in greater or smaller degree, conscious experimenters indicates how this continuity through the hundred and fifty years of its history has domiciled English into one of the Indian languages, favoured by a number of extra-literary factors such as the popularity of the Indian English novels in the West, the tremendous increase within India in the size of English-educated reading public, the increasing circulation of the English magazines, weeklies, newspapers, etc., there has been a ever-growing spurt in the literary output of Indian English fiction. Today the intelligentsia and common people have come to acknowledge the existence of a phenomenon like Indian English writing, which was always marked by a certain degree of ambivalence. To a large extent, this has been the result of the efforts of creative writers like the Indian English novelists. However, there are still many who believe that Indians cannot and should not write in English and their attitude ranges from cultivated snobbery to honest contempt. But the fact remains that despite

such opposition and antagonism, Indians continue to use English as the medium of creative expression. In the end I would like to quote Mahatma Gandhi who had once told R.K.Narayan regarding the propriety of writing in English:

“The purpose of language is to communicate... so, say your say in any language that comes to hand.”

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