

Indian-English Literature— *Why and How in English?*

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I

Indian-English literature written by those Indians who claim that they think, feel and even dream in English has nowadays attracted a wide and deep attention both in India and abroad. On the other hand, it has been severely criticized especially since independence by writers and critics in the Indian languages, for example Hindi, Bengali and Marathi etc. Despite the fact that their criticism is reasonable in many points, today no survey of the contemporary Indian literary scene would be complete if it failed to take note of the writings in English.

The history of Indian writing in English began with the establishment of the British colonial system in India about a hundred and fifty years ago as a bi-cultural product. The gradual spread of English education among Indians brought forth a small body of young intelligentsia who were moulded after the manner of Western civilization and whole-heartedly took to the English language and things English, including literature. Therefore it is not surprising that young people of those days who were interested in literature chose English as a medium of creative writing. At that time the literature of modern Indian regional languages was still in its infancy. It was after more than half a century that secular and westernized literature both in prose and verse began to appear in some of these languages. Most young people inclined to poetic feeling devoted themselves to such English poets as Shakespeare, Milton, Byron and Shelly throughout the nineteenth century. In spite of the long history of Indian poetry especially in classical languages, very few educated Indians paid due attention to it. Under the yoke of foreign colonialism this tendency was, to some extent, inevitable.

To describe the whole history of Indian-English literature is, of course, beyond the scope of the present paper. But from what has been mentioned above, we

may be able to understand why Indian writers had produced a sizable body of literary works in English before independence even if we cannot sympathize with their indifference towards their own cultural tradition.

But strangely enough, things have not changed much since that time. About as many as forty years after independence Indian-English literature appears to be flourishing more successfully than it was in pre-independent India. This peculiar situation requires some explanation.

II

Why do they write in English after all? Obviously one important reason is, though few Indian-English writers are prepared to admit it, that by doing so they can gain access to a larger number of readers both at home and abroad. The audience of regional language literatures is, on the contrary, limited to its particular language area and seldom goes out beyond the boundaries of the country. This means that to write in English gives to writers a far better chance to be famous and successful financially. If one is fortunate and talented enough, he may be able to live by his pen.

P. Lal, the editor of *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, sent to more than a hundred poets a questionnaire the first item of which was "What are the circumstances that led to your using the English language for the purpose of writing poetry?" (Lal, P., 1971, p. 6) The editor received mainly two kinds of replies to this question. First, English is not an alien language but a mother-tongue for a lot of Indians who have been brought up in English-speaking families. Some poets allege that they think, feel and experience in English like people in English-speaking countries do. According to them, they need not be apologetic at all for using the English language as a medium of their creative expression.

Secondly, because of the then educational system, under which the teaching of regional languages was perfunctory and the medium of instruction was almost exclusively English, to express themselves in English has become a necessity for them. As a result, even when they have a knowledge of their mother-tongues and speak them fluently in spite of their school education, they find it much easier to write in English. As for the medium of higher education, things are not different today. All the subjects, with a few exceptions, are taught in English

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at the college or university level all over India. A poet replies that he did not choose English, but it chose him. English, another poet says, has become his mental make-up, and now it is impossible for him and many other poets like him to write in an Indian language.

Admitting that there is some measure of truth in what they say in defense of using a foreign language for creative writing, David McCutcheon, an English critic of contemporary Indian-English literature, raises an essential question summarizing a view of a Bengali writer :

How can a writer use a language creatively when all around him another language is being spoken and where the creative centers of the language are thousands of miles away ? How dare he innovate, from where can he receive the feel of the living, changing language ? His imagination must feed on secondary sources. (McCutcheon, D., 1969, pp. 26-27)

As for the writers who claim English as their mother-tongue, their works belong to English literature rather than to Indian literature, irrespective of their quality, because a lack of understanding and knowledge of their own society, which can be obtained only through a mother-tongue, makes it impossible for them to depict India. As for the writers who have learned English at school, their works, if the worst happens, may belong to neither English literature nor Indian literature.

III

It is a well-known fact that even uneducated shopkeepers can handle the English language with some fluency in India. But McCutcheon, cited above, points out that elementary mistakes and clumsiness of expression persist right up to the M. A. level. Srinivas Iyengar, a pioneer critic of this field, asked Englishmen not to condemn too hastily what was apparently strange, uncouth, extravagant or obscure. Although most of the Indian-English writers undoubtedly write English well, if not creatively, it is also a fact that they are sometimes not free from making errors. Unless they stop regarding English spoken by native speakers as the only English whose examples they should follow devotedly, they will have to ask foreigners to be generous towards them, and they will not be able to break off this relationship of master and servant.

In fact how do they write in English? What kind of English do they write? George Orwell, who was probably the first English writer that had paid attention to a new English dialect growing in Indian soil, quoted a passage from Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Sword and The Sickle* in order to illustrate it:

Conscious of his responsibility for the misadventures into which he had led them, Lalu bent down and strained to lever the dead bodies with trembling hands. A sharp odour of decomposing flesh shot up to his nostrils from Chandra's body, while his hands were smeared with blood from Nandu's neck. He sat up imagining the smell to be a whiff of the foul virulence of bacterial decay, ensuing from the vegetation of the forest through which they had come. (Orwell, G., 1968, pp. 217-218)

Although there are no grammatical mistakes here, Orwell, who possessed a fine sensibility to language as a writer, found out a vaguely *un-English* flavour about this. According to him, for instance, *shot up to his nostrils* is not quite an English idiom.

Leaving aside the problem of careless mistakes, a few Indian-English novelists are consciously trying to write in this Indian-English which is in many ways quite different from English-English. This new literary dialect of English has a strong exotic flavour of Indianness, which sometimes makes their novels more attractive. They use this language especially for writing dialogues even at the cost of intelligibility. Only by doing so do they think they can translate into English the racy idioms of the Indian languages, whose satisfactory English equivalents are often difficult to find.

I will give some examples of this language by quoting from two prominent Indian-English novelists, viz., Mulk Raj Anand and Bhavani Bhattacharya. One of the reasons why they use this Indianized English for writing novels in spite of the fact that both can speak and write English as well as a native-speaker if they want is that they are mainly concerned with the fate of Indian villagers and attempt to speak for them in their novels.

Some extracts from *Music for Mohini* by Bhattacharya:

- 1, "An ear-pull will do you good" p. 7, (When a child does some mischief in India, he is ordered by his parents or teachers to pull his ears as a punishment and to declare that he will never do such again.)
- 2, "Eat my head" p. 17, (=to go on bothering)
- 3,

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"Oh, *Didi jewel-faced one*" p. 24, (=my beautiful elder sister) 4, "*Lo! Monsoon bearers!*" p. 59, (Look! the rain-laden clouds) 5, "*The tail of a cow and the tongue of a rustic never cease wagging*" p. 70. 6, "*...merrily will you go to the crocodile pit in hell*" p. 104. 7, "They will duck him in a pond till he's forgotten his father's name!" p. 112, (=to suffer much) 8, "the food is sweetened by your blessing, how help eating three bellyfuls?" p. 158, (These phrases are all literary translations of Bengali idioms.) 9, *Let Saturn smite the village with the light of its Evil Eye.* p. 176.

From *Gauri* by Mulk Raj Anand:

1, "*Chal, Chal ohe!*" p. 9, (=Go, go) 2, "*acha, acha*" said Panchi. p. 9, (=Yes, yes) 3, "*Ao ji, ao, Mola Ramji*" p. 20, (=Come, Mr., come) 4, Gauri, who had sensed her husband's approach, 'sisked' audibly. p. 43. 5, And *sisking* became sobs, p. 44, (The novelist has coined a new English verb to sisk out of a Punjabi verb 'sisakna' which means to sob.) 6, "*Straighten a dog's tail for twelve years and still it will curl*" p. 62, (A Punjabi proverb.) 7, "*Even the rats in the judge's house become shrewd*" p. 85, (the same) 8, "My *rape-mother* fate seems to be against me!" p. 97, (One of the commonest abuses we can eat in India.) 9, "And he was right, Paro. '*They*' was wonderful!" p. 114, (=he, my husband) 10, "Come, one does not do such '*hat*'" p. 126, (=obstinacy)

Native speakers of English may be irritated by these expressions, even though they understand what they mean. Some critics, both Indians and Englishmen, criticize this language because of its load of swear-words and expressions literally translated from Indian idioms and proverbs. But if Indian-English writers cannot help writing in English for one reason or another, to use this Indian-English is one of the ways to Indianize Indian-English literature.

Reference

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