

English Language and Transnational Networks: A Study of Colonial Punjab

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Abstract: The journey of English language in India has been variously assessed through tropes of mimicry, agency, resistance, and linguistic hybridity. While these critical assessments are largely placed within local, provincial, and national frameworks, this essay argues for a transnational critical framework to understand the history of English in India. The development of transnational publics at the end of the nineteenth century was facilitated by travel, print networks, and cultural flows between the colonies and the metropole. While English embedded itself into local literary cultures, it was also deployed by colonial subjects in transnational imperial circuits, thus influencing political imaginaries and subjectivities. The essay analyses archival records from the colonial Province of Punjab to see how English was mobilized to project newer identities into transnational print publics and to build transnational networks of solidarity. The essay also examines how the claims made over English help to understand the agency of the gendered colonial subject.

Keywords: English education, transnational publics, colonial languages, women's subjectivity, linguistic hybridity.

Introduction

The trajectory of English language and literature in India has traversed a long way since its active contact with the region at least five centuries ago. Many critical formulations and theorisations, from both western and non-western academia, have attempted to deal with the political and cultural ramifications of the sustained power of "World Englishes" (Huddart). The initial impetus to the introduction of the English language and its literature in higher education in India was formally given by Charles Wood's Education Despatch of 1854 that sought to benignly offer "European knowledge" to lift the country out of darkness and "rouse them to emulate us in the development of the vast resources of the country" (Wood). Works such as Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* (1990) have discussed this English education and the institutionalisation of English Literature as important to British socio-political control over India. Postcolonial critical assessments of this project of "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson) and producing 'mimic men' through language have moved on to the crucial question of the 'agency' of the colonised subject.

The question of the 'authenticity' or 'mimicry' of colonial subjects has been an important one that studies on colonial subjectivity have dealt with. Many studies have assumed that indigenous cultures were so impacted by the hegemonic ideas of nationalism, liberalism, and the public sphere that any native response could only have been a

“derivative discourse”.¹ Commenting on the “empire of English”, Phillipson underscores the need to break out of a “centre-periphery framework” in studying World Englishes and suggests a “linguistic hybridization” as the locus of agency of the colonial subject (133). Homi Bhabha (1994) similarly argues that mimicry opens up multiple spaces for hybridity and subversion of the master discourse. While ‘mimicry’ has been a frequent trope through which subject-formation, especially that of the westernised elite has been studied, political agency has also been described through the vocabulary of “resistance”, “collaboration”, “cosmopolitanism”, “hybridity”, “sly civility”, and “camouflage” (Bhabha 162; Dharwadker 114).

While the colonial and postcolonial journey of English has been understood through these tropes of linguistic agency/mimicry largely in local or national contexts, this essay discusses the deployment of English by colonial subjects in their attempt to develop transnational publics across boundaries of provinces, regions, and nations. This is done through a study of the print archives of the colonial Province of Punjab, a region that was a site of bitter language contestations in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. A transnational framework helps to understand the history of English in India as related not only to local or national debates but also as part of a larger imperial circuitry.

Studies of the reception of the English language in India show that the language was not only a unidirectional imposition by the coloniser over the colonised, but also a terrain of contestation which different sets of people claimed and appropriated at different points of time. For example, claim over the English language by colonial authorities as well as the reform elite of nineteenth century Punjab became a mode of sharing patriarchal control over middle-class women. Thus, the reform patriarchies (the Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha) advocated women’s education through vernacular languages for fear of cultural invasion through English education. Conversely, the demand for an English education became one of the modes of articulation of self-fashioning for middle-class women in Punjab. Thus, “languages and ideologies are ‘multi-accentual’” (Loomba 28), and it is this complex cultural field of English that the essay seeks to unravel.

The first part of this essay examines how English, and the print sphere that the language generated, was localised, translated, and appropriated into scriptural and oral cultures of Punjab, and how it was mobilised to project newer identities into transnational print publics and build transnational networks of solidarity. The second part of the paper examines women’s enunciations of self-identities through English writing, and their demands for English education despite denial by both colonial authorities and reform patriarchies. The overarching argument of both parts is that the reception of English was tied to multiple axes, and it is in the claims made over it that the agency of the colonial subject can be located. The trajectory of English is, thus, interconnected with histories of print technology, transnational political networks, commerce, literary cultures, and gender constructions.

English as a Language of Transnational Publics

The development of transnational publics and critical methodologies to analyse them have been important fields of scholarly enquiry in Postcolonial Studies in the past few years. Transnational history of ideas is an important and expansive field that grounds identity formation in the processes of exchange, circulation, and reception of political ideas. Travel, commercial publishing, print networks, and cultural flows between the colonies and the imperial centre mutually influenced each other to produce related

histories so that the binaries of domestic and imperial histories are rendered inadequate. "Remaking the cultural geographies of empire has also involved mapping the larger networks, institutions, and exchanges that integrated the empire... cultural traffic that wove colonies together into imperial systems as well as linking colonies to the imperial center" (Ballantyne and Burton 417). Thus, a transnational perspective would be useful in understanding the trajectory of English in colonial India. "Connected histories" (Subrahmanyam 2) take into account circuits of movement of people, ideas, languages, commodities, networks and "cultural flows" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 10), rather than treat colonial histories as a unidirectional flow from the metropole to the colony. Thus, what would be interesting in the development of English in colonial India is not only how it met with local cultural, literary, and linguistic practices but also how it facilitated global networks and "imperial circuits" (Finkelstein 153). Moreover, English was also actively mobilised to project newer identities into transnational print publics, as stated above. The story of English in colonial Indian contexts is, therefore, a complex phenomenon and needs to take into account mutual influences, power relationships inherent in cross-cultural encounters, local practices, literary markets across borders, and specificities of location as well as transnational networks.

Commercial printing and literary tastes in nineteenth century Punjab evolved specifically in relation to local genres, and oral and performative practices and display specific regional complexities, yet it would be useful to see trans-local connections in the evolution of genres like the novel, travel writing, and periodicals in vernacular languages as well. English and vernacular languages were mutually implicated in the development of each other and the experimentation with modern genres as well. Sisir Kumar Das' compendium, *A History of Indian Literature*, published in two volumes in 1991 looks at the development of modern languages and genres that evolved "in response to a new set of intellectual, social and economic requirements" (Das 73) during the colonial period through three phases of "production of pedagogical materials, socio-religious debates and journalism" (Das 75).

Transnational perspectives also allow an examination of the evolution of genres in response to multiple inflections beyond the binaries of 'tradition' and 'influence'. For example, Waetjen and Vahed provide interesting examples of new genres, such as the "cutting" that evolved in response to transnational audiences in the Indian Ocean public sphere. Since a network of correspondents and wire services would be expensive, newspapers and journals would publish cuttings from other sources with acknowledgements. For example, an edition of *Indian Opinion*, a newspaper started by Gandhi in South Africa in 1903 would feature cuttings from the *Rangoon Times*, *The Zanzibar Chronicle*, the *Bombay Reporter* and the Madras-based *Indian Review*. The circuitry of ideas in such genres would mutually influence political imaginaries and ideas of political subjectivity in India and South Africa, and English became the mode of such imaginaries.

Readership patterns and vernacular publishing in Punjab were complicated by competitive politics between languages, the designation of Urdu as the official vernacular, and the identification of Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu as languages of Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims respectively by reform organisations. The reform organisations tried to solidify the one-language, one-community formula, especially in so far as prescribed languages for women were concerned. However, the multi-linguality of the print sphere and the translation activity, as far as reading material for women is concerned, tell another story.

While languages of print were used to mediate gender and religious identities and demarcate them from each other, these borders between languages and identities were crossed and appropriated by historical actors to suit their own needs and competencies.

The traffic between English printed materials in India and other locations in the world in the colonial period can be gleaned from recent research in transnational print cultures, as also from archival sources on Punjab. In the context of Punjab, oral histories and written accounts of travellers from Punjab to the West, sometimes published in England, records of Indian publications or publications about India sold in England, booklists of foreign publishers such as Macmillan with India-specific titles, autobiographical records and communication of foreign publishers with authors in India, records of social and print networks in locations in India and outside, missionary records, and records of 'inflammatory' material sent by international post intercepted and proscribed by the Punjab government, provide a huge array of materials that show a mutual rewriting of identities in colonial locations as well as imperial centres that was happening through English.

The print sphere in colonial India was "a battlefield where voices strain to be heard, economics and commerce conspire with the needs of self-expression" (Pollock 105). This tussle for economic and commercial viability in the colonial print sphere was played out not only between local actors but also in a field of increasing transnational presence. British publishers found tremendous potential in Indian markets and responded to the commercial challenges from local publishers through strategic marketing policies and introduction of special colonial or imperial library series (for example, the Macmillan Colonial Library Series of 1886). Publishing houses such as Longman, Macmillan, Allen and Unwin, Trubner, and Thacker and Spink had a history of trade links with India by the second half of the nineteenth century, selling text books for schools and books for English readership.² Stanley Unwin's autobiographical record describes his fascination with India and the growing readership here as he visited dominion countries in 1912. He describes India as "one of the best investments" he ever made (Unwin 112-13). The success of A.H. Wheeler's Indian Railway Library or 'one-rupee railway library' books, sold at bookstalls at railway stations yet again proves expanding Indian readership of English texts.³

Records show that special colonial imprints by foreign publishers also made available literary works written by women. Bell's Indian and Colonial Library of Standard Literature and Fiction brought out works by Mrs Oliphant, Mrs Russell Barrington, Mrs Alexander, Violet Hunt, Mrs Hungerford, May Edwood, etc. (mentioned in 1895 *Thacker's Indian Directory*). The evidence of these being read by women comes from the reviews and opinions on these books published in women's periodicals of the time.

Other books catered to women's literary embellishment as well. A book of etiquette titled, *A Guide for Indian Female from Infancy to Old Age: Comprising Manners, Customs, Rules, &c.*, published in English by Nand Lal Ghose (Lahore, 1897) sought to fulfil the need of educated middle class women. Books on the art of letter writing that were published in English and vernacular languages sought to identify linguistic communities with religion, and in the process, create them. Letter writers published in English were models for such books in vernacular languages, for example, *Tahrir un nisa* (Urdu, 1881), "letters illustrative of language and sayings of Muhammadan women of India", *Insha-i-Gurmukhi* (1886) and *Dulhan Patarka* (1895, Amar Press), a letter writer for females by Gyani Hazara Singh, published by the Wazir-i-Hind Press, Amritsar since 1912. Thus, English publications for women influenced vernacular reading material made available to them through translations/ transcreations.

Meanwhile, English publications in the metropole by Indian students and travellers kept up the interest in India. The *Journal of the National Indian Association* (published from 1871-1933 in London which took the title of the *Indian Magazine* in 1886) and the *Indian Mirror* frequently carried articles by writers located in India and Britain. Telegraphic news services ensured that the colonial and the British press fed upon each other. Publications such as *The Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, *the Imperial Gazetteers*, *Blackwood's Magazine*, and the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition and 1888 Glasgow Exhibition that were attended by five and a half million people, introduced a new vocabulary of the visual and the spectacle through which India came to be represented in Britain (Mukherjee 223).

Catalogues in *Trubner's American, European and Oriental Literary Records* published in London record the huge sale of language-teaching Primers in many Indian languages such as Persian, Hindi, Sanskrit, Bengali and Kaithi published in Roman script for Europeans as well as Indian students.⁴ Indian travellers and writers who had been published in England in the latter part of the nineteenth century, such as Toru Dutt, Manmohan Ghose, B.M. Malabari, T.B. Pandian, W.C. Bonnerjee, Dadabhai Naoroji and Sarojini Naidu influenced British literary and print culture through their fiction, poetry, and travel writing. Travel accounts from Punjab that allow glimpses into the West through Indian eyes include the writings of Olive Christian Malvery (1906), an Anglo-Indian woman from Lahore, Raja Jagatjit Singh (1895), the Maharani of Kapurthala (1953), and Jhinda Ram (1893).

The traffic of publications from England, America, and other countries on the continent into Punjab, also becomes evident from the records of 'inflammatory' material intercepted by the Punjab Government as Punjab became a volatile battleground in the early twentieth century. These included the Khalsa series of pamphlets, posted in London on 8 January 1909 for India Native Newspapers, copies of the journals *Justice* (from London), *Indian Sociologist* (Paris), *Gaelic American* (New York), *Circular of Freedom*, *Free Hindustan*, *Bande Mataram* (Paris) and Hyndman's pamphlet and other pamphlets and books.⁵

An officer commenting on a pamphlet received in the Guides Regiment asking men in the Indian Army not to serve in the British Government noted that it was printed on linen paper produced in England that was probably printed in America where old-fashioned type press might have been found, and was circulated in a Gujranwalla paper in India.⁶ The comment brilliantly records, even metaphorically, the hybrid nature of print activity and mobilization in colonial Punjab. Letters and pamphlets addressed to the students of Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College and Islamia College and the Mission School, Peshawar, lithographed and posted in North West London appealed to Sikhs and Muslims to unite and release their country from economic drain.⁷ Reports on literature proscribed under the Indian Press Act 1910 listed not only forfeited local literature but also literature from overseas – the "Gadr di Gunj", a pamphlet in Gurmukhi from San Francisco, the part-German part-English "Pro India", a journal published by the "International Committee Pro India" of Zurich, and "The Hindustanee", published in Vancouver, British Columbia.⁸ 'Seditious' Literature received from Paris and London, concealed in catalogues of big Paris firms included *The Gaelic American*, *Indian Sociologist*, *Liberator*, *Bande Mataram*, *Talwar*,⁹ *Herald of Revolt*¹⁰ and even proscribed photographs entitled "Aryamata" by R.L. Desai.¹¹ English print sphere thus became an important "contact zone" (Pratt's term for spaces where disparate cultures meet), both in the material and discursive senses, for transnational impulses and networks to coalesce.

English as a “Contact Zone” for Women

Meanwhile, increased cultural and social exchanges between British and native women became possible at different sites and ‘contact zones’– within both native and European homes in India, in public spaces, in the metropole, and in the discursive field of English print. Contact between British and native women was feared by religious reformers (of the Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha) as many references in vernacular periodicals for women indicate. The fear of conversion of women into Christianity and English education invading into the cultural space is shown by the titles of many vernacular tracts that ridiculed women’s adoption of the English language, education, clothes, and food.¹²

Women’s periodicals that abound in the vernacular languages in nineteenth century Punjab were mostly initiated by reformist organisations to disseminate ideas about modernity appropriate for women and to consolidate communities around languages. It is in some of these periodicals that women argue for space in the public arena and professions, intervene actively in discussions on the curricula, language, and pedagogy of the education they should get, wrest the initiative to speak on their own behalf, discuss women’s movements and universities across the globe, and imagine a sisterhood.

One of the most significant issues on which these periodicals influenced public discourse was women’s education. *Punjabi Bhain* (1907-18), a monthly in Punjabi published by the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Ferozepur, presented extensive discussions on higher education for women through the example of the Japanese University for Women, and in the process, it contemplated on various implications of curricula, education, and pedagogy used. In view of debates about the language of instruction for women and reform institutions advocating vernacular education for women, it is significant that women strongly demanded education in English in these periodicals. For example, in the June 1916 edition, Gurmukhi is suggested as the language of *dharmik sudhar* (religious improvement), whereas English is suggested as the language of *vyavharik sudhar* (behavioural improvement).

Most provincial governments also rejected the idea of English education for women when financial assistance and scholarships were sought from them. The Education Department files of 1915 report that the Indian Women’s Education Association in England that advised Indian women students in England requested for scholarships for Indian women to be trained as teachers in England. Most provincial governments rejected the idea saying that it was “better to train up girls in courses which include the vernaculars and in the environment in which they will afterwards work, but it is thought in several quarters that training in England will actually unfit the women for work in this country subsequently.” The Punjab government also feared that women who had been trained in England would demand better salaries.¹³ Thus, the denial of English education by both reform patriarchies as well as the colonial government was countered by the demands for English education made by middle-class women.

It was also conscious journalistic efforts at connecting middle-class women through journals and periodicals in English, contributions to each-others’ publications and sharing information that linked Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, Kamala Sattthianadhan, Kumudini Mitra (writer and editor of *Suprabhat*, 1907-14, and *Bangalakshmi*, 1925-27) and Madame Cama (associated with European revolutionary circles, the Indian Home Rule Society, and publisher of the English monthly *Bande Mataram* from Paris) in a pan-Indian effort to imagine gendered collectivities.¹⁴ The exclusivity and elitism of such print networks through English language print is evident in Sattthianadhan’s comment on her intended audience:

a considerable number of daughters of India are taking advantage of the opportunities afforded them of a liberal English education, some of them even succeeding in winning University honours. The future of the women of India rests largely with this educated class; and more especially with those belonging to it, who, without losing what is distinctly Indian, have come under the best influences of the West. (Editorial in *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, Vol. 1, July 1901- June 1902)

Another narrative by a woman from Punjab that explores the possibilities of establishing gendered solidarities across national and communitarian borders is a novel titled *Cosmopolitan Hinduani*, perhaps one of the first novels in English written by a woman in Punjab. Published in 1902, in the context of bitter print wars between religious reformers, the novel *Cosmopolitan Hinduani: Depicting Muhammadan and Hindu Life and Thought in Story Form* by Susila Tahl Ram declares its intent of rising beyond the 'narrow' provincial and communal anxieties and identity politics of much of the vernacular literature published at that time in its title by claiming a cosmopolitan outlook. While she claims a cosmopolitan identity, the word "Hinduani" in the title attaches this identity to gender and religion as well, which were important markers of identity at that time. In making a linguistic choice of English language, the author attempts to influence the formation of not only gendered 'vernacular publics' but transnational ones as well and reach beyond the fault lines of religion and caste, and indeed province and nation. That the intended audience is the English-educated within India and abroad, is evident in the care that is taken to translate and explain local words, and literary and folk practices into English.

The author of the novel, Susila Tahl Ram has since remained only as a trace in the notings of the colonial government and not much is known about her life, other than that she certainly wrote and translated school text-books through the Arya Samaj reformist press. Amar Singh, a Rajput nobleman and officer in the Indian army writes in his diary that Susila Tahl Ram was brought up in England but returned and married an Arya Samaj follower in India, a marriage that she soon wanted to escape (Rudolph, Rudolph, and Kanota 382). She wanted to be a writer, a profession that was a new cultural marker for middle-class women. Thus, carefully charting her way through middle-class marriage and respectability, Susila Tahl Ram worked her way to press and authorship.

The cosmopolitanism envisaged in the novel is a desire to script a new modernity for Punjabi women of the late-nineteenth-early-twentieth centuries through education, cultural experience of the west, mobility, renegotiated domesticity and marriage, and a transnational sisterhood. The choice of English language is, thus, instrumental to the conception of the 'cosmopolitan' outlined in the novel, which seeks to establish transnational networks and solidarities. Apart from seeking social networks and audiences, the use of English perhaps marks a claim to enter into the discursive space of power of English language and literature. The claim over English opens up subversive possibilities to imagine a transnational, affective 'sisterhood' based on empathy.

The discussion above establishes that English operated in various ways in the cultural fields of reading, writing, and consumption and was appropriated by colonial subjects to suit their own needs. Assessing the trajectory of English through a transnational framework helps in locating colonial subjectivity in larger imperial circuits rather than only in national and local confines.

Notes

- ¹The reference is to the title of Chatterjee (1986).
- ²For further reference see Joshi (2002: 94) and R. Chatterjee (2001).
- ³The railway library was a series of short stories published in cheap, pamphlet form to cater to railway travellers. The venture was started by Emile Moreau of A.H. Wheeler and Company in 1888 at Allahabad. The series began with stories written by Rudyard Kipling and illustrated by his father John Lockwood Kipling, Principal at the Mayo School of Art in Lahore (1875) and curator of the Lahore Central Museum. Towheed (2009) provides evidence to believe that most readers of this series were Indians.
- ⁴Trubner's *American, European and Oriental Literary Record*, Vol. 2, January to December 1882.
- ⁵Home Political (A), No. 204, February 1909 and Home Political (A), No. 9-13, May 1913.
- ⁶Home Political (A), No. 3-5, July 1907.
- ⁷Home Political (A), No. 22-5, May 1908.
- ⁸Home Political (B), No. 33-40, August 1914.
- ⁹Home Political Deposit, No. 7, April 1911 and "Statement of Publications Proscribed in Each Province under the Indian Press Act, 1910" in Home Political Deposit, No. 1, April 1912.
- ¹⁰Home Political (A), No. 1-6, November 1912.
- ¹¹Home Political Deposit, No.1, April 1912.
- ¹²Some of these titles are *Fashiondar Vahuti* ("Fashionable Bride"), *Fashiondar Ranaa* ("Fashionable Women"), *Alu Right te Varian Good* (Potatoes are Good and Vadis are Right"), *Fashionable Fancy Val* ("Fashionable Fancy Hair"), *Kanak te Fashion* ("Wheat and Fashion"), *Fashion da Syapa* ("Lamentations on Fashion") (printed books in Punjabi in the British Library Collection).
- ¹³Education, Education (A), No. 1-13, February 1915.
- ¹⁴Sarala Devi (1872-1945) was the daughter of Swarnakumari Debi (Rabindranath Tagore's sister) and editor of *Bharati*, a monthly journal, from 1895. Kamala Saththianadhan was a writer and editor of *The Indian Ladies Magazine*, published in Madras from 1901-1918 under her editorship, and later from 1927 to 1938.

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