

## A Prefatory Note

It would be just stating a fact that Indian Writing in English is now a phenomenon to reckon with and that it enjoys a global readership and a wide critical appreciation. We are happy to mention that there was a huge response to our call for papers and in our choice of papers we kept ourselves open for as much variety as possible so far as themes and issues are concerned. This Issue includes essays on individual writers like Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mulk Raj Anand, and so on. These have expectedly shed fresh light and added new insights by providing new perspectives on the authors. Besides, there are essays that focus on other comparatively new areas and themes, for example, the Kashmiri Anglo-phone Resistance literature, North-East Writing in English, Writings of the Muslim Women Novelists, Tribes in Transition, South Asian Diaspora Poetry, Woman and Anti-fascist Resistance, Secularism, Same-Sex Love, and so on. Dalit literature has already occupied a niche in contemporary Indian Writings. It is represented through some perceptive discussions of the works of Meena Kandasamy. All in all, the Issue tried to present in its limited space a spectrum of varied perspectives, issues, poetics and politics of academic interest on contemporary Indian Writing in English. As stated above, we received a huge number of papers on various areas and topics. Many of the papers were otherwise worth publishing but could not be accommodated due to lack of space. We sincerely regret our inability on that account. We thank all our contributors to this issue. We hope that the readers and scholars interested in the Journal and the subject it deals with would find the Issue intellectually enjoyable and valuable.

**Arunima Ray**

*Lady Shri Ram College for Women*

*University of Delhi*

## Introduction

ARUNIMA RAY

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*The Travels of Dean Mohammed* (1794) was perhaps the first book which was published and written in English. So the History of Indian Writing in English goes back more than 200 years. While that is a pretty long one for a colonized country for which this is a foreign language, the journey has been no less a contentious and a chequered one. The debates and discussions about the validity of writing in a language which is not one's own have come up time and again and supporters of Indian Writing in English have had to come to its defense over and over again through the decades. Nonetheless, the English language and literature have been a source of great attraction for our writers. No wonder, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya wrote his first novel in English and Michael Madhusudan Dutt's love for the English Language as well as his first foray into it is well known. Calcutta having been the capital of the British in India before Delhi, the colonial influence both in terms of administration and education had started there. The Hindu college, known later as the Presidency College and today as Presidency University is the oldest in South East Asia and was started by the British. Hence, the first books written in English and the formation of the first English educated middleclass intelligentsia have happened there. Yet, the anxiety and shame of writing in the language of the colonial master was always there. Along with the questions of class and privilege, the questions of inauthenticity and insincerity of writing in a foreign language by Indian English Writers had also cropped up. And of course, whenever the questions of nationalism and loyalty had come up in the country, the language question also invariably followed. In different ways and at different times, the language question had surfaced and resurfaced time and again - during the heady days of the national movement and again in the in the 60s and the 90s *vis-à-vis* the claims of Hindi and other regional languages - and it keeps coming up in varied other forms. And each time, Indian Writers in English and its other users would have to defend themselves. However, today, in spite of criticisms and a controversial status, Indian Writing in English has proved undoubtedly that it has come to stay and that too very prominently. With India churning out an unprecedented number of books by Indian English Writers, especially the novelists, and the Indian writers dominating the international award scenes, Indian Writing in English has not only made a mark for itself, but has also made a great contribution to literature in general. The other scenario that has come to be stable is that of English being accepted as one of our national official languages. This points to the postcolonial phenomenon of necessarily abrogating and appropriating part of what had happened to be our colonial legacies.

The debates on language came up in various ways. An important one is the debate on language in the Parliament when the Official Language Bill of 1963 was placed. Nehru was always a strong advocate of English and wanted to retain English as the official language along with Hindi. He thought that English is a dynamic language and that our languages would benefit greatly in contact with English. He fought tooth and nail for the

English language and strongly put forth these arguments in the Parliament. This reminds one of Tagore who also never really wanted an East-West divide and was always for cultural exchanges and syncretism and hence a controversial figure during the national movement. And today English still remains the official language along with Hindi except for Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim which have only English as their official language. Even though the language was retained, it did not mean that Indian Writing in English was not seen with skepticism. Buddhadeva Bose's famous denouncement of English as a chosen language for creative output is well known. The debate continued unabated even in the 90s with the various "nativist" proponents expressing strong opinions about the role of English in impoverishing the mother tongues. Namade's name comes to mind in this context. However, after decades of debates and discussions, we have now come to a point where we have attained the maturity to accept and understand that English may also be considered as one of the Indian Languages. What has strengthened this postcolonial conviction was the steady process of appropriation of the English language during the post-independence decades. If nationalism itself was a barrier to begin with, then it was also felt as a necessity for the much-needed national integration as well as transnational transactions. With the spread of education in the country, parallelly there was an exponential growth of English-medium schools and colleges leading to an increasing importance of English as a language of communication and creativity in the urban centres of the country. No wonder, a crop of talented creative writers writing in English soon came up changing the educational scenario altogether in terms of future possibilities and prospects. The discursive situation too was soon ripe for a postnational and postcolonial intervention favouring the Indian English Writers to narrate the nation and transnation as radically as possible.

It can be said that it all began with Macaulay's "Minute on Education" of 1835, followed by Lord Bentinck's English Education Act of the same year which gave a formal status to the teaching of English literature and sciences to the indigenous people. Macaulay's goal was well known as he famously said that his aim was the creation of "a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect" (quoted in Gopal 16). This new English educated bilingual native, the Bengali "bhadralok" or "respectable folk" which would go on to play a very important role in the political scenario of India later on, during the independence movement, was already in the making for some time now. With the formal introduction of English, this class would emerge as a force to reckon with and would soon usher in the Bengal Renaissance. Influential Bengali thinkers and reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy already were supporters of English Education and welcomed it enthusiastically with the conviction that Indians would greatly benefit from it. Rammohan Roy said in 1823 that "the Sanskrit system of education would best be calculated to keep this country in darkness" (Mehrotra 5). Henry Derozio tried to nourish the minds of his young students at the Hindu college by introducing them to new concepts and ideas – many of which were too radical for the time. He was an advocate of rationalism and skepticism. He started a movement called The Young Bengal Movement, a strand of Bengal Renaissance. With Macaulay's Minute, colonial education was formally introduced in India but the whole issue was a matter of great debate. One important word of caution came from one of the earliest directors of East India Company, who said, "we [have] just lost America because of our folly, in having allowed the establishment of schools and colleges...I(t) would not do for us to

repeat the same act of folly in regard to India" (Mehrotra 5). Yet, the "folly" would be repeated and it is not unknown the turn that history had taken in due course. The leaders of our anti-colonial movement would be none other than this very class, the go-between, the class that Macaulay wanted to create for political expediency and smoother administration of the British Government. The colonial master would soon introduce this class to the radical ideas of liberalism, equality and rationality and in an interesting turn of irony would themselves inspire them to fight colonialism. No wonder, Partha Chatterjee calls nineteenth-century nationalism a derivative discourse. These very ideas also gave birth to the Bengal Renaissance and our leaders and thinkers "attempted to reinterpret Hindu tradition to align it with their own understanding of the meaning of modernity and progress. This entailed a rewriting of Indian history that argued that an original monotheistic Hinduism had been corrupted into polytheistic idolatry and superstition" (Gopal 18). Mehrotra in his book *A Concise History of Indian Literature in English* (2008) refers to Kyalas Chunder Dutt's "A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945" (1835). It is about an imaginary account of an armed uprising against the British. Interestingly and ironically the insurgents were the middleclass educated Indians who were introduced to colonial education.

So the postcolonial identity, postcolonial Literature and even Indian Writing in English are all complex and hybrid contexts and cannot be understood in neat binaries of East and West, English and vernacular or nativism and cosmopolitanism. Postcolonial India has appropriated the language of the colonizer and made it its own. However, this too came with its resultant complex political, social and economic problems. While it is a known fact that English is a language of social mobility, more accessible to the affluent living in the metropolis today, it is also the English education or colonial education that undoubtedly questioned various oppressive hierarchies in the Indian society at that time. In fact, literature coming from the west probably even appeared liberatory to many of our own nationalist leaders. As I have already mentioned above, Bengal renaissance which had at its heart rationalism and liberalism were learnt from the colonizer by our bilingual natives. In other words, east or west, global or local, Indian Language or English - all of these cannot be understood simplistically as binary oppositions. The English speaking middle class also evolved from a complex mix of colonialism and nationalism. These complexities are forgotten by those who make denunciatory remarks about writing in a foreign language.

However, what staunch nativist supporters forget is that Indian Literature itself is also not a homogenous entity and that there are hierarchies even within the native languages. One may be reminded of Hindi and its relationship with the southern and other parts of the country. In the same manner, Indian writing in English is also a heterogeneous body of work. As a matter of fact, even the "English" in the Indian Writing in English remains a fluid concept depending on the cultural difference from which it comes and which it addresses back. While the "English" that emerges from the writings of a writer from the southern part of India may offer a flavour of its own culture, it may be differently oriented in the case of a Bengali writer or for that matter one from the North-Eastern part of the country writing in English. Easterene Kire in one of her interviews once called her English, Naga English and Amit Chaudhury's novels set in Kolkata would give a perfect idea about how a Bengali writer would represent the language. In *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin talk of this refashioning of English that was happening in the colonies. McLeod refers to it as follows:

This refashioning worked in several ways... writers were creating new 'englishes' (the lack capital E is deliberate) through various strategies: inserting untranslatable words into their texts; by glossing seemingly obscure terms; by refusing to follow standard English syntax and using structures derived from other languages; of incorporating many different creolized versions of English into their texts. Each of these strategies was demonstrated operating in a variety of postcolonial texts, and in each the emphasis was on the writers' attempt to subvert and refashion standard English into various new forms of 'english', as a way of jettisoning the colonialist values which standard English housed. (McLeod 26)

R.K Narayan's opinion about the English language which he calls "Bharat English" in the 30s is the most apt in this context, though Raja Rao's Foreword to *Kanthapura* is more often quoted:

The time has come for us to consider seriously the question of a Bharat [i.e. Indian, 'Bharat' being the indigenous name for India] brand of English... Now it is time for it to come to the dusty street, the marketplace and under the banyan tree. I am not considering a mongrelisation of language... Bharat English will respect the rule of law and maintain the dignity of grammar, but still have a *swadeshi* [native] stamp about it, like the Madras handloom or check [sic] shirt or the Tirupati doll. (Narayan quoted in Krishna Sen 129)

Indeed, Narayan's "Bharat English" succinctly sums up the "englishes" that have emerged from the colonies - a result of gradual conscious and unconscious assimilation. Narayan was pretty conscious of the language he was using. His novels are peopled with indigenous and local figures, especially commonplace Tamilians who are superstitious, worshipped local gods, believed in spirits etc. He suited his language to represent them. In his essay "A literary Alchemy", he makes another important observation. He says:

Passing from literature to language, 'Indian English' is often mentioned with some amount of contempt and patronage, but is a legitimate development and needs no apology. We have fostered the language for over a century and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own habits of thought and idiom. Americans have adapted the language to suit their native mood and speech without feeling apologetic, and have achieved directness and unambiguity in expression (Narayan quoted in Krishna Sen 130)

This exactly is the act of appropriation of the colonizer's language which is also theorized in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). This new "English" is different from the one at the centre and there is an unbridgeable gap between the two and, as John McLeod has it, this gap is positive because new identities are created through this difference:

The new 'english' of the colonized place was ultimately, irredeemably different from the centre, separated by an unbridgeable gap... The new 'english' could not be converted into standard English because they have surpassed its limits, broken its rules. As a consequence of this irredeemable difference, new values, identities and value-systems were expressed and old colonial values whole heartedly rejected. (26)

The English language was not the only thing that the British introduced to the colonies like India. Indians were also introduced to various literary styles of the British as well. So even when the writers were writing in vernacular, they adopted the style of the British. Krishna Sen says:

What is interesting is that through the interface with English the vernaculars themselves came to be enriched with genres hitherto unrepresented in Sanskrit or any of the native literatures- verse forms such as the sonnet and the ode, subjective narratives like the essay

and the autobiography (signaling 'the birth of the subject') and most significantly the major changes agitating traditional social formations, the novel. (127)

India was introduced to prose and prose fiction, a form unknown to Indians and as a result the 1840s saw a proliferation of newspapers especially in Bengali, Marathi and Hindi. Examples of some such newspapers are *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, *Digdarshan*, *Prabhakar*, *Vartaman Tarangini*, and so on. As is known, the newspapers played a very important role in the anti-colonial movement of the country. The newspapers brought the common people together, infused the feelings of patriotism in them and played a major role in spreading awareness. As regards our vernacular literatures, even though they were written in regional vernacular languages, the influence of English literature on them was undeniable. Whether it is Rangal Banerjee who wrote *Padmini Upakhyan* (1858) or Madhusudan Dutt who introduced the blank verse in Bengali or Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya who wrote the first English novel, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) or O Chandu Menon who wrote in Malayalam, most of the writers were influenced by European literature in general and English literature in particular. Disraeli's *Henrietta Temple* (1837) influenced O Chandu Menon's *Indulekha* (1889). So even when many of our writers wrote their novels in their vernacular languages, the form, the style and the content were very much influenced by the European and British writers and the new forms introduced by them. Postcolonialism acknowledges this cultural exchange, making the question of hybridity almost a condition of possibility.

English today is a postcolonial entity and a postcolonial tool and Indian Writing in English which has evolved over the last two hundred years expresses our multicultural and hybrid nationspace the best because English as Amit Chaudhuri very forcefully argues is the representation of this hybridity itself. We have to move beyond simplistic understanding of what is quintessentially 'native' and think of Indian Writing in English as Native too. John McLeod in talking of literatures emerging from the colonies says how the shift from being Commonwealth Literature to Postcolonial Literature is significant because we have moved "towards a more politicized approach which analyzed texts primarily within historical and geographical contexts...their 'local' concerns were fundamental to their meanings..." (McLeod 27). Indian Writing in English is representative of the nation and its fragments, the centre and its margins, women, gender, sexuality, diasporic identities and the subaltern. The essays in this Special Issue of the Journal modestly hope to offer some perspectives on this very plural nationspace.

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