

Subjectivity and Trajectory of Indian English Novels

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Abstract

Indian English Literature is a body of literature written in English language by writers of Indian origin. Generally it can be described as a cultural exchange of the Occident and the Orient. Veteran literary critics like K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and M.K. Naik consider Indian English Literature as the most appropriate appellation for this body of literature. Novels are the most effective chronicles of the discourses of Nations. But the medium of English language became problematic. But it is found that the language does not carry the stigma of colonialism any more. Further it has acted as a Calibanic paradigm to set counter discursive strategies and resistance.

KEYWORDS: Indian English Literature, subjectivity, trajectory, cultural exchange, Calibanicparadigm, counter discursive strategy.

Introduction

Literature is a wonderful terrain where imagination can make literary subjectivities with no limitations of institutionalized ideologies. Gauri Viswanathan in “An Introduction: Uncommom Genealogies”, argues that Indian English Literature can be more effective on such a level:

Wonder, unlike tradition, has no institutional home, no anchoring mechanism that channels its expression in determinate ways. It does not require a structure of reference and intertextuality to construe its meaning — indeed it thwarts all identification with systematized form of knowledge. It is from this non- institutional site that post-colonial criticism can perhaps be its most vigorous and emancipatory, its driving force being an imagination just in the service of crafting a new literary subjectivity that includes, but also at the same time goes beyond, ideological critique. (27-28)

It is also important to note that expansion and not contraction is the spirit of literature. Segmentation becomes impossible as syncretism has been widely accepted in the global village. “Both literary theorists and culture historians are beginning to recognize cross-culturalities as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation justified by the myth of group ‘purity’ and as the basis on which the post-colonial world can be creatively stabilized” (Bill Ascroft, Griffiths and Tiffin³⁶). It is this delineation of the binaries and the nuanced shades of cross-culturalities and syncreticism that Indian English fiction deals with as one of its major concerns.

Definition of Indian English Literature

The writings rooted in the cultural realities of those societies whose subjectivities have been decided generally by the past experience of the colonial rule directly

reflect the intricate issues of colonial imprints. The literature in such societies, generally discuss the postcolonial issues. Bill Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin define postcolonial in *The Empire Writes Back* as “all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). Indian English Literature directly reflects the literary and cultural exchange between the Orient and the Occident. Literature, written in various Indian dialects, has more diverse regional and personal issues rather than the imprints of the British rule. So naturally, Indian English Literature gets a better attention of the readers outside the country. Meenakshi Mukherjeesays:

...most of our fictional literature has been conditioned by other, either older or newer, more local, diverse and complex pressures and intricate social hierarchies than what can be explained by British rule in India. This may be one reason why many of our bhasha classics – of past and present – even when translated into English, do not get noticed either by the academic establishment or the publication/distribution system outside the country. (89)

It is very difficult to define Indian English Literature with all its unique features. M.K. Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* defines Indian English Literature “as literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality” (2). It is Indian sensibility making the expression in English Language. Various terms have been given at different stages to the body of Indian English literature, like “Indo-Anglian Literature”, “Indo-English Literature” and “Indian Writing in English”. The term “Indo-Anglian Literature” was first used as the title of the specimen composition of some native students, published in Kolkota in 1883. The phrase was used as the title of K.R. SrinivasaIyengar’s first book, *Indo-Anglian Literature* in 1943 and thus attained wide currency. However the term did not get acceptability from many critics in the field as the name suggests a relationship between two countries rather than a body of writings. Later K.R. SrinivasaIyengar himself used the phrase “Indian Writing in English” and published a book with the title in 1962. Later a more compact and appropriate term, “Indian English Literature”, substituted the phrase, “Indian Writing in English” and the same is accepted by the SahityaAkademi. The front inside paper cover of Naik’s *A History of Indian English Literature* shows that “the SahityaAkademi has accepted ‘Indian English Literature’ as the most suitable appellation for this body of writing”. It also explains that “Indian English Literature began as an interesting by-product of an eventful encounter in the late eighteenth century between a vigorous and enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India, and is now nearly two hundred years old.”

Indian English Novels

In fact the “novels” are the real chronicles of the discourse of nations as they disseminate ideas that construct national life. Meenakshi Mukherjee tells in “The Anxiety of Indianness” in *Mapping Cultural Space*, that “...the novel as a genre has traditionally been implicated in the construction and consolidation of the idea of the nation” (84). Most of the novels of Indian English Literature are considered as Naik says in the preface of the book *A History of Indian English Literature*, “a significant by-product of the eventful encounter between India and the Indian ethos

on the one hand, and England, the English language and Western culture on the other”(i).

One controversy related to Indian English Literature in the early stages was about the use of English language as the medium. Raja Rao’s comment in his forward to *Kanthapura* (1938) is often quoted: “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own, the spirit that is one’s own”. But he himself soon modifies his opinion and tells that “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”. English language which was used for subjugating Indian culture and to establish the upper hand of the Occident itself has been helpful to accommodate a lot of diversified concepts and information which helped India to move towards the path of the western concept of modernity. John Mee opines:

Originating in conquest and colonialism – still a badge of and means to privilege – the medium by which India communicates with the outside world and often by which the Indian languages communicate with each other, English is perpetually on the internal and external boundaries of Indian culture. By virtue of this position, Indian Writing in English is uniquely placed to re-imagine the nation. If it has sometimes acted as the instrument of globalizing culture, moving over the surface of Indian culture without acknowledging its privileged position; or, alternatively, rethematising India as an endless narrative possibility, an infinitely open market, than equally it has been used to situate modernity in relation to India. (335-36)

Further the language at times served as a Calibanic paradigm for the subversion and appropriation of the Eurocentric notions. Thus “Indian English Literature” often serves the counter discursive strategies to displace colonial imprints as Harish Trivedi suggests in the introduction to *Colonial Transactions*, “we should perhaps similarly parade some choice examples of our own Occidentalism, which was a land of comparable (mis)knowledge with which we empowered ourselves to resist the West” (20).

Naturally the themes mostly handled in the Indian English Novels also suited the purpose of resisting neo-colonialism. In the initial stages the themes were explicitly related to the national movement, Gandhism, Nehruvian modernity and cosmopolitanism, history, social reforms, political changes, psychology, philosophy, socialism, the East-West confrontation in its multiple dimensions and other such pan-Indian concerns. To enhance the polarization, the British, as expressed in their literature, on the other hand considered Indians as a primitive people as AshisNandy says: “The Raj saw Indians as crypto-barbarians who needed to further civilize themselves” (7).

In 1835, a story, “A Journal of 48 hours of the year 1945”, written by KylashChunderDutt was published in *The Calcutta Literary Gazette*, as Naik in *A History of Indian English Literature* (106) says and that is considered as the first piece of Indian English Fiction. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s *Novel in English* Rajmohan’s Wife was serialized in a magazine. A few other novelists including some women writers appeared in the nineteenth century. But most of these novels were social or historical novel in the models of the novels of Daniel Defoe and Walter Scott.

In 1909, a Bengali novelist, Sarat Kumar Ghose wrote *The Prince of Destiny: The New Krishna*, which is the first novel which has the theme of East-West encounter. Later by the end of the First World War, Non-Co-operation movement, Civil Disobedience movement, Quit India movement and Khilafat movement influenced the Indian English Novels and East-West relationship became a prominent recurring theme in the genre.

The major trio, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao also published their first novels almost in the same period. Mulk Raj Anand is notable for his burning humanitarian zeal and realism. R.K. Narayan's gentle irony, humour and realism make his novels interesting and quintessentially Indian. Writing about themes of R.K.Narayan's novels, Meenakshi Mukherjee in *Mapping Cultural Space* says: "If complications arise, they are bound to be resolved by the end and normalcy restored. What is always emphasized as its Indianness, by which are meant a good humoured inertia and a casual tolerance which almost any reader in the country is expected to recognize as familiar" (81).

Raja Rao's novels show an in depth involvement of Indian philosophy and ethos in them. Raja Rao, according to K.R. Srinivasalyengar, moved from 'karma' in *Kanthapura*, to 'jnana' in *The Serpent and the Rope*, and on to 'bhakti-prapatti' in *The Cat and Shakespeare* (410). His novels *The Serpent and the Rope* and *The Cat and Shakespeare* are often taken as examples of East-West encounter. The period after the attainment of Independence should be treated as a new era. Partition, the communal riots, the war with China and Pakistan, the emergency, and the Bhoodan movement are some of the major events in the period which directly or indirectly influenced the Indian English Novels.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* and *A Dream in Hawaii* have elements of East-West encounter in them. Many prominent women novelists also emerged after Independence. Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Esmond in India*, *A Backward Place*, *A New Dominion* and *Heat and Dust* also can be studied from the point of view of East-West encounter. Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*, *The Coffin Dam*, *The Nowhere Man* and *Pleasure City* also contain themes of East-West encounter. Anita Desai's *Bye-bye Blackbird* is also considered as a novel of East-West encounter.

It was the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, in 1981, that brought about a sea change in the history of Indian English Literature. Although G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatter* (1948) to some extent anticipates *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's novel stands apart due to its unique features. The novel successfully manipulates the western postmodern modes like magical realism along with Indian hybrid culture and myths. His non-linear narration in a zigzag manner, mixing of facts, fantasy, history, myths, past and present, omniscient narrator and untiring love of word-play invited global attention to the body of literature called "Indian English Literature". The money and fame the novel won for Rushdie was covetable and it inspired a host of writers like Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chanda, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhury, Upamanyu Chatterjee and Mukul Kesavan.

In one way Rushdie's novel changed the traditional concepts regarding novels as Meenakshi Mukherjee says:

...several assumptions were being challenged here: (a) major novels that change the literary map of the world must necessarily engage with issues in western culture (b) English is primarily the language of

Britain and America to be altered, shaped or fashioned only by them. In retrospect we see that *Midnight Children* had a very important role to play in reversal of the 'centre-periphery' paradigm in English literary culture, in dissolving the 'great tradition' of F. R. Leavis into a plurality of traditions, coming from many races, many regions, many cultures. (86)

Bill Buford, the editor of *The New Yorker* opines that Rushdie's success showed Indian writers "that great novels could be fashioned from Indian stories, with an Indian sensibility and a distinctly Indian use of the English language" (8).

At the same time there are also critics who consider that Rushdie's novel has nothing sublime or profound in it apart from its craftsmanship. Makarand R. Paranjape acknowledges the impact *Midnight's Children* had on the Indian English Literary scene, but remains skeptical about its essential worth. He praises its "stamina", but condemns its "phyness" and finally sums up:

Rushdie merely rewrites in his madcap manner, the major events of post-independence India. The novel fudges from newspaper reports and other sources of contemporary history, passing off boring and colourless journalese as fiction by rewriting and disguising it up. Finally, no vision of India according to Rushdie emerges; we realize that the author is a hoax, that despite the almost irritating cockiness of tone, he doesn't really know where he is going or what he is up to. One cannot write a *Mahabharat* of modern times without having an equally large, inclusive, profound, and wise philosophical outlook. This is missing in *Midnight's Children* and the book turns out to be one great, big, confused bluff. (220-221)

But it should be admitted that Rushdie's novel has introduced a new kind of writing from the subcontinent to the English speaking world. Although the deliberate intrusion of mythical or historical characters in novels is sometimes considered as stooping "into an unequivocal parody intended to entertain the consumerist international readers"(116) as Vanashree Tripathy says, the new generation novels definitely broke away from the western concept of traditional novel and explored Indian narrative modes and tradition with enormous confidence and success. Thus Indian English novel has changed and developed much to seek the international attention with its dauntless treatment of themes and narrative styles. But essentially Indian English Literature remains, as "the literary and cultural exchange between India and England [West]" (15), as Harish Trivedi observes in his *Colonial Transactions*. The thematic core of most of the Indian English Novels are a sort of a cultural encounter between the East and the West, although, in a less offensive and humorous way.

Conclusion

In fact, after the age of territorial colonization, people, especially from the erstwhile colonies, spread all across the globe and diasporic communities have become a common feature. During the period of colonialism itself, massive displacement of people especially for labour purpose was practised. This practice also was one of the motivations that helped voluntary as well as forceful dislocation of people in large scale in the postcolonial era and it is often considered as a fall-out of

colonization. . But the translocated people during the colonial era had the stigma of imperialism while the diaspora is often considered as redemptive and anti-imperialistic, who are “constantly recreating and refashioning” (399) as Ali Behdad puts it. The diasporic and ethnocentric writings often were counter discursive and created productive challenges to the eurocentrism of the West. Increasing globalization in the publishing and marketing scenario won a boom for such literature. The exile of some of the writers was even considered as “a form of cultural resistance”(399) as Ali Behdad explains with reference to the case of the migration of Caribbean intellectuals to Europe and North America. “Moreover, the cultural effects of globalization are increasingly reciprocal, with mass migration producing significant cultural changes in host nation” (111) as Elizabeth Jackson rightly points out. Social and cultural alienation and disjunction affected the world order at large and a “Europe and it’s Other” paradigm became the hub of the discourse.

Colonial regimes are largely displaced by neo-colonial forces like the multinationals although colonialism as such still exists in some parts of the globe as in Tibet, in East Timor and in the occupied territories in Palestine. Imperialism of the cultural, economic, military and political kind still continues to exist. “Production of culture” through the unending possibilities of media has been foregrounded by the neo-colonial forces along with the local, the national and the cultural spaces in between. Geographical and cultural displacement and the celebration of hybridity have made the spatial and temporal irrelevant. Now the exploited and the exploiters are topographically well mixed up. Thus it becomes clear that the dyad, the West and the East, are not strictly geographical locales and they represent certain codes of culture and tradition. However, the topographical borders or the nativity of the characters is insignificant as far as the encounter is concerned and so Indian English Novels which mainly project this encounter acquire ever increasing significance.

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