



READING ENGLISH AS AN INDIAN LANGUAGE IN SELECT INDIAN NOVELS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract :

The paper discusses the ways in which the English language has undergone a prismatic transformation in the decades since Independence. The relevance of the language as an agency in the discourse of power and subnational engagement opens up interesting insights into the fissures that run through the ideology of the nation. The paper examines if English should even be seen as a foreign language and a colonial legacy or if the Indian melting pot has put forth an Indian variety of English

Keywords: English, Fiction, Indian Writing, Subnationalism

Introduction :

An advertisement for a popular brand of chocolate had a rather simple but significant scenario to offer. A young man goes for the college play auditions and speaks his peculiar lingo of English. He is thrown out. He then munches on the chocolate and celebrates his 'broken English', shattering all the staid conventions and elicits 'action', 'reaction', 'sensation' through his munchification.

Thus, the celebration of the Indianness of English presents a very potent picture of the comfort level that Indians now enjoy in the language and the ways the language is used to realise the means of their livelihood. The National Council of Educational Research and

Training states that "The level of introduction of English is now a matter of political response to people's aspirations rather than an academic or feasibility issue." (NCERT 2005: 38)

Objectives :

English has had a very tenuous relationship with India. From being seen as the language of the oppressor, to a corridor of communication with the coloniser, the knowledge of English then went on to herald the arrival of the modern Indian. The Modern Indian was one who was steeped in the ethos of British modernity, and yet was able to understand and negotiate the ideals of Indian customs and modes of cultural economy. From there, the language went on to stand for the sound of progress. Newly independent India sent its voice out to the world in English. The midnight address of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, made in English, was more of a manifesto of the ethos of the new nation and was as much for the international community as it was for the Indians. Since then, English has come to be a status symbol and an indicator of the economic and cultural progress of Indians. Knowing the language was seen as a means of garnering a better life. The conundrums, concords and complex grammatical and lexical codes suddenly no longer appear a problem as the use of Hinglish not only provides a campy version of the language. English then becomes uniquely Indian. The emphasis is not on correctness, but on creativity and in that instant,



English is transformed into an agency that is well poised to convey the complexities of the Indian psyche and political landscape. The mastication of the English language thus becomes the by word for a very strong subnational movement that is seen in literature and the arts these past few years. The paper looks at the way that Indian novels in English have evolved a new language that is very different from its predecessor- the sort used by literary giants such as Sarojini Naidu, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand.

Discussion

The works of Salman Rushdie, especially *Midnight's Children*, opened possibilities of a lot that could happen with English in India. The unapologetic wantonness or liberties that he took with the language went beyond the adept. The characterization process was equally applicable to English just as it lent an effective hand in subverting history and the idea of the nation.

This possibility that Indian writing in English presented was magnified with Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Roy's language served as a separate entity that prided itself on its un-Englishness. This was indeed the Empire writing back- the narratives had an inclusive 'Us'- the wide west just took an active interest in this new and refreshing topology of Indianness. The slew of promising books- both fiction and non-fiction seem to have the guns trained on the idea of India as a homogenized whole. The introspective, unidirectional narrative of personal grief, stereotyped frustrated women, spiritually bereft men have all given way to a polyphony. The new writing is intensely conscious of the fractures and fissures of India's sociological, political, cultural and gendered systems. The writings are driven by these concerns and defiantly exhort the readers to not treat these works as mere fiction. Examples abound- Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger*, Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins*, Srividya Natarajan's *No Onions nor Garlic*, Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* and Miss Laila, *Armed and*

Dangerous, Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*, Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*, *The Blind Lady's Descendants*. These are works that have escaped classification based on the caste affiliations of the writers- something that is the wont in India. Apart from these works written in English, there is a huge corpus of regional language translations that are leaving indelible marks on the reader's consciousness.

The subnational movement, as mentioned before is a politically charged and creative space that employs subversion and carnivalesque to be taken as a viable opponent to the mega narrative. This is reflected in India's English as well. K. Satchidanandan writes,

It has been some time since the subcontinental English fiction came of age and began to grapple with Indian history and reality with a confidence an artistry one seldom comes across in its early practitioners. This new confidence that one first found in writers such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh marks many of the new writers who do not mind taking the risks involved in portraying Indian rural reality in English:And looking at the result, one can well say it has not been a vain adventure: we now have a corpus of such fiction that can legitimately claim to be as much Indian as fiction written in the languages whose losses in texture are compensated to a great extent by the intimate insight into the lives and minds of the men and women who people their ably painted landscapes.

The very idea that English is better equipped to voice the concerns of Indian modernity when compared to the vernacular, establishes its Indianness.

If looking alike is a crime,

Half of China would have been in prison.

- Adv. Fakir Ansari (1957-) (158)

Those who do not love me do not deserve to live

- Colonel Gaddafi (1942-2011) (207)

These two statements appear in Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*. The second statement is by a well-known dictator while the first is made by a



character in the novel. The book is structured such that at critical points in the narrative, there are epigrammatic statements like these- as though they are nuggets of profound wisdom made by very wise men. The narrative centres around an accused of the 11/11 Mumbai blasts and the subsequent court proceedings, comments made by film stars, dialogues from English films, musings of a poetry club, the members of which are not even characters are thrown in to create a polyphony of disjointed voices that seek to upset the linearity of the novel's structure. These voices seek to be heard in a scenario where they could have been left out for the sake of homogeneity.

On the day of the blast, Imran Jabbari was with me the whole day. Where? Wherever he claimed to be.

- Haji Masood (1929-) (128)

It is never mentioned where such statements are made but one can assume that many are made in the courthouse during the trial of the accused. The utter hopelessness of the situation induces both laughter and pity, not just for the under trial but also for the legal system that is a monolithic institution. One cannot help but think of Chaitanya Tamhane's Marathi film *Court*- about the trial of a folk singer whose songs on oppression and exploitation so moved a municipal worker that he committed suicide. The singer was on trial for inspiring suicide.

The technique of juxtaposition enables Salim to showcase the lives of the other India- one that is defiant and angry and draws its icons from across the borders. The characters hail from a part of Bombay called Little Pakistan- this could just as easily be Mumbra in Mumbai which was once called mini Pakistan. The protagonist's friends all have names of significance in Pakistan – Jinnah, Zia, Wasim, Imran, Inzamam ul Haq, Navaz Sharif, Zulfikar, Yahya. Their knowledge of history is so skewed that the poster containing the following message was thought to be an advertisement for an SMS offer –

My life is my message.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) (117)

Young Imran Jabbari thought that Independence Day was on August 14 and was made to write August 15, two hundred and fifty times by his Hindu teacher and further, he was asked to get his father's signature on the document. The rivals of Vanity Bagh were the Hindu majoritarian colony of Mehendi and these two colonies seem to be microcosms of communal tensions that India has often witnessed.

This failure to recognise the iconic images of India's 'Indian' ideology is something that one can find in Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* where the Dalit Peon, Ayyan Mani routinely writes the Thought for the Day- generally scathing remarks on the caste system and attributes them to famous people.

If you want to understand India, don't talk to Indians who speak in English

- Salman Rushdie (377)

It's a myth that Sanskrit is the best language for writing computer code. Patriotic Indians have spread this lie for many years

- Bill Gates (30)

Ayyan Mani, with an IQ of 148, is a peon at the Institute of Theory and Research and chafes at the thought of Brahmin scientists earning huge sums of money for pondering over very abstract problems for decades at a time. The frustrations of the caste system are placed under a spotlight through the subversive writings of this peon. He inserts a phoney quote once a week so as to not attract too much attention and this subversive act gives him the sustenance to get by. Manu Joseph uses the subversive interplay of language and the absurdity of the one credited with saying the quote to drive home the extreme ridiculousness of the caste system. The miscredited, never uttered quotes serve to show the anger simmering with Mani and also underline the moral responsibility that everyone, including



the reader must take for not dismantling this crippling discrimination. That the indictment comes from world famous people- who would be bewildered to know they are rumoured to have said this- makes it even more acerbic.

Throughout the novel, Joseph subtly uses English in its subversive capacity to draw focus on India's exploitative caste system. He uses the language of the invaders to launch an attack on 'Indian culture' - something that is understood as synonymous with upper caste Hindu culture.

Reservations for the low castes in colleges is a very unfair system. To compensate, let us offer the Brahmins the right to be treated as animals for 3000 years and at the end of it let's give them a 15 per cent reservation.

– Vallumpuri John (120)

The impossibility of the personalities attributed to the quotes or in some cases, their obscurity, lends the Notice Board the various possibilities generally available to graffiti sites. The quotes by Anees Salim, too are graffiti as they paint a polyphonic landscape where icons are broken and remade. Language thus, takes on the role of graffiti, revelling in the possibilities of providing interludes of disjointed discourses.

Conclusion :

There is immense creativity and vitality in the way in which language is used in these works. The usual format of infusing the text with staccato references in the vernacular, with or without a glossary was seen as an act of defiance. The writers such as Salim and Joseph have taken this a step further by deploying their language to dismantle the idea of political monolithic and monotheistic narratives. Their worlds speak a language that is iconoclast and psychedelic.

A greater crime than the Holocaust was untouchability. Nazis have paid the price, but the Brahmins are still reaping the rewards for torturing others.

- Albert Einstein (351)

In view of the literary movements, where Dalit experiences are supposedly best expressed by those who underwent these experiences, where the vernacular was the best medium of expressing the rage, pain and protest, Ayyan Mani's wordings, in a mainstream language destabilises the upper class bastions of privileged knowledge. In the process, the sense of entitlement that the knowledge of English brings with it is also dismantled. For those that write out of India today, English is possibly English.

To conclude, it is fitting to quote from Manu Joseph in a *New York Times* article,

English is indisputably Indian now, and the most useful language in India. But it is not the most beloved, nor the medium of abuse during road rage. That special place Indians will always grant only to their mother tongues.

Notes :

¹ Title from *Vanity Bagh* (176)

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