

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 4 April 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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Spatial Fixity and Postcoloniality – The Issue of Language in Indian Writing in English

Mithun Bhattacharjya, M.A.

Commenting upon the problem of using English language by an Indian writer, Raja Rao writes:

“One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own, the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up....We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.”¹

The hot debate of using English as a creative medium, not just as a language of ‘intellectual make-up’ has, quite substantially, been diminished, by now. Indian writing in English is no more an illustrious endeavour of some young enthusiasts at something new; it is a phenomenon, a clearly recognized entity with a number of authors and a bulk of writings (fiction, non-fiction, poetry; many of them are canonized and translated into various languages over the world) to their credit. So, the question of English as a medium of creative exploration does not hold validity any more. But if we extend the argument forwarded by Raja Rao to a wider spectrum of postcoloniality as a reading strategy, and a discourse, then, the issue of language addressed by Raja Rao in 1963, much earlier than the formulation of postcolonial theory as a distinct discipline of critical studies, gains greater implications—language as a political tool, the interpolation of coloniality, the appropriation and hybridization of language,

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the nature of language influenced by space, race and culture. In this paper I shall try to focus on the concept of Indianization of English, and how far geographical/spatial fixity fixes up the distinctiveness of any language.

Language was, right from its origin, meant to be for communication; conveying message to others. As such, for the comprehension of any verbal code, the person at the receiving end is most important because he gets the meaning. The structuralist critics assume any language to be a sign system in which meanings (signified) of words (signifier) are 'arbitrarily' given and, the whole chain of meaning (the structure) can only be identifiable to a person if he is familiar with that chain. This view of language gives rise to the impression of the exclusiveness of origin of any language; implies a specificity, may it be cultural, racial or geographical. Now, no language has been determined by any one of these factors; but by the confluence of them all, and other influences as well. It's true that historically no language can claim 'exclusiveness' but the cultural and racial identities of the linguistic societies do formulate, the quintessence of any particular language. Thus, the linguistic practices of a society are, by far, explainable by means of socio-cultural investigations.

Postcolonial discourse pay attention more to the politics of language than to the philological aspect of language. The postcolonialist do a meticulous estimation of how the language plays an important role in reinforcing the objectives of colonialism. The colonialists made a conscious effort to perpetuate the hegemonic supremacy through the invisible operation of the colonial language and there by eroding the indigenous cultural heritage. Ngugi Wa Thiongo in *Decolonising the Mind* captures very illuminatingly, how the implementation of a particular politicized 'Canon' made the Kenyan students 'alien'² to their own social, cultural and linguistic heritage.

This charge of 'alienity' has often been brought against the Indian writers who write in English. Many accuse them for the lack of Indianness in their writings. Postcolonial theory "undermines the universalist claims once made on behalf of literature by liberal humanist critics"³. Literature comes not out of void, but it is a natural outcome of social, cultural, ethnic, religious and linguistic practices. So, what specially constitutes 'Indianness'? Is it merely a choice of any vernacular language or is the subject matter or both? If the choice of English diminish Indianness then, we have to through an open challenge to the existence of many 'englishes' e.g. Caribbean english, Canadian english, Australian or Kenyan english because in spite of being alike in one respect (being English) they are named differently. Their difference occurs not in the choice of the language, but in the differing way of using it. Here comes the notion of appropriation and hybridization of a colonial language. Kamala Das' robust and confident utterance is indelible:

“...The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest...” (An Introduction)

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This appropriation of language is to make the language useful to serve one's own purpose. This is what Rushdie terms as 'chutnification', and expounds in his fictions in a way that smells all Indian. But what does Indian English really mean? Is it 'half English, half Indian'? And, if so, does it appear to be ludicrous or bizzare? Surely not. Indian English is English in a different way as are Caribbean or Nigerian englishes.

What does this different way consist of? Is it merely the inclusion of some vernacular words or distortion of the syntax of the language or something else? Language is the metaphor for a particular cultural society; language represents a society, and social practices determine the way a language unfolds its meaning. The contributors of Indian Writing in English demonstrate the spirit of India in a conspicuous way. But, this notion of 'Indianness' has been contested by many.

A.K. Mehoratra, a leading poet and critic, underlines this craving for 'Indianness', saying: "A good poem is a good poem, and not because it matches the colour of the poet's skin or passport"⁴. He refuses 'Indianness' merely to be a transportation of linguistic and cultural materials into the realm of art. In fact, the raw Marxist 'structure' and 'super-structure' model does not hold strong any more. The transcendent quality of art, need to be taken into account. But still, geographical, or to say, cultural specificity colours literary compositions. For example, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* is not merely a depiction of rural India, Gandhian movement, women empowerment but most interestingly, it follows the 'sthalapurana' tradition which is quite different from modern Western narrative techniques.

Without this story-telling mode, *Kanthapura* would have lost, perhaps, much of its charm. 'Sthalapurana' is a traditional way of story-telling in rural India. A much later work than *Kanthapura*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* also uses this 'story-teller and listener' model which facilitate the readers to move smoothly between the personal and national, real and magic-real world of the fiction. So, inclusion of vernacular world, native settings and characters, cultural and religious myths and a traditional way of narration give Indian Writing in English a special character.

This speciality is to some extent akin to 'authenticity'. By 'authenticity' the postcolonialists mean a pre-colonial purity. This purity, they think, can be achieved through the pre-colonial practices. At the same time, it is true that the global village that we live in, undermines any claim of "a 'pure' and unsullied cultural and linguistic condition"⁵. The intersection of different cultures, linguistic communities, crosscurrents of different philosophical and ideological views, and the rapid advancement of modern telecommunication technologies undermine the notion of a 'pure' culture. What is indigenous is really a heterogeneous culture. Language is adapted as a tool to express cultural experiences. The cross-cultural identity is the reality of the day. The tumultuous variety of cultural experiences within the territory of India, be best rendered in English which is essentially a versatile and non-regional language.

According to Paranjape, Indian Writing in English is now regarded "as a part of Indian literature(s)"⁶. It is not something 'alien' to Indian social and cultural reality. He sees the emergence of Indian Literature in English "as a part of the larger dynamics of the Indian renaissance of the 19th century in which India responded to the impact of the West and of modernity"⁷.

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So, Indian Writing in English stands, on the same platform with its regional counterparts. This unification, of this variety of Indian literature with other vernacular literatures is, indeed, a proof of the appropriated use of English language in any particular cultural society. This way of using English for cultural representation establishes its link with the space. I shall conclude by mentioning Gabriel Okara who attempts to develop “a ‘culturally relevant’ use of English by adapting Ijaw syntax and lexical parameters to English”⁸. In fact, any language has and should have a character of being identifiable with the space and culture which it represents.

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