



2003

# From the Diary of an English Teacher

Meenakshi Mukherjee

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## Recommended Citation

Mukherjee, Meenakshi, From the Diary of an English Teacher, *Kunapipi*, 25(1), 2003.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol25/iss1/9>

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## From the Diary of an English Teacher

### **Abstract**

More than ten years ago, Shirley Chew and Anna Rutherford invited me to contribute to their volume *Unbecoming Daughters of the Empire* (1993). Writing that piece about my childhood turned out to be more fun than anything else I had done earlier and while reading the other accounts in the book I became keenly aware how each of our lives are part of a larger cultural narrative. For the special issue dedicated to Shirley, I wanted to write something in the same mood — rather than another solemn academic paper. I share a warm bond of friendship with Shirley, and while I find her scholarly work impressive, what endears her to me most is the mischievous glint in her eyes as she recounts with verve some amusing anecdote concerning our profession. I wanted to share with her some of my experiences as a fellow English teacher.

RANJANA SIDHANTA ASH

## Women Writing Fiction in India's Languages over Fifty Years of Independence

English was decreed to be the official language of India from 1835, when the country was under British rule from 1835, — the same year Lord Macaulay's Resolution declared official funds would be 'henceforth employed in imparting to the Native population knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of the English language' (Spear 126–27). While English helped in the advancement of Indian higher education and the intellectual modernisation of a new middle and upper class — the Indian intelligentsia — it marginalised the regional languages of India which, in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, were beginning to break away from the dominance of classical learning imparted through Sanskrit and, later, Arabic and Persian (Zograph; Shackle). These regional languages, which are among the most important elements in the construction of Indian identity in a multilingual and multiracial land where people see themselves as Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, and so on, had to wait until India gained independence in 1947 to receive due attention through official, social, educational and cultural use.

The Eighth Schedule of *The Constitution of India* (1949) lists the fourteen constitutional languages that were then recognised: Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu and Urdu. Since 1949, the year in which the *Constitution* was adopted, more languages have been recognised, including Dogri, Maithili, Manipuri, Rajasthani, and Konkani. They are connected with the political aspirations of those living in the specified regions and have become constitutionally recognised with the formation of new states of the Indian Union; for example, Goa, the region in Western India, has Konkani as its official language. Nepali is another new entrant in the list of languages to be recognised by the Sahitya Akademi, India's Academy of Letters, which was founded in Delhi in 1954. Since then, many of the states have instituted their own Sahitya Akademis for the promotion of their regional languages and literatures. The main thrust for literary translation began with these agencies, and commercial publishing houses are now including translated fiction and poetry in their lists.

Article 343(1) of the Constitution declares Hindi, in the Devanagari script, to be the official language of the Indian Union. The issue of government documents in Hindi demonstrates the pre-eminence of that language, although researchers still use the English version of the documents. Indeed, English still

occupies an ambiguous position in present-day in India, which adds to the complexity of that country's linguistic situation. According to the Constitution, it was supposed that English would continue for official purposes for fifteen years, from 1950, and then possibly for another similar period. However, it has lasted much longer, and shows no sign of decline. Whether in education or employment, or the professions and social intercourse, English retains not merely a foothold but a continuing important position. Although not included in the Eighth Schedule's original list of the fourteen languages recognised for governmental use in the various states of the Indian Union, English, because of its international economic importance, continues to be used as the medium of instruction in higher education — especially in colleges and institutes of technology — as well as for the new forms of electronic communication in which India plays a significant role.

In contrast to the dominance of English, the importance of the regional languages has been enhanced through India's political democracy. Campaigns, the political rhetoric of electioneering, and the actual business of legislatures at the centre and in state capitals, are increasingly conducted in the languages of the regions. The prominence (both within India and abroad) accorded to Indians who write in English, however, does not match the actual practice of contemporary writing in India. The great majority of both men and women writers, use their own language which could be that of the region in which they were born and raised, or some other, as a consequence of political upheavals such as Partition and the division of the country.

Also, there have been shifts from one language to another, such as from Punjabi to Hindi or from Urdu to Hindi. The bilingualism of so many Indians makes for a relatively easy transference from one regional language to another to which it is related linguistically and culturally. The doyenne of Punjabi women writers, Amrita Pritam, has occasionally shifted from her native Punjabi to Hindi. However, the shift to English is relatively new, as exemplified by the prominent media journalist, Mrinal Pande, who made her name as a writer of Hindi short stories, but now writes in English.

That Pande should turn to English after a dedicated professional career in Hindi journalism and fiction, is somewhat surprising, particularly as she described English's privileged role in India as a 'dictatorship'. However, her apparent 'defection' to English can be understood in light of an essay published in 1991 in which she speaks of the necessity to 'deconstruct' the English power base:

while this dogmatic set-up we had inherited from the British Sahibs, cannot be subverted overnight, it can certainly be deconstructed little by little, if we can only make power aware of its guilt, and less and less able to believe in itself or its legitimacy. (1991 x-xi)

Her semi-autobiographical stories, *Daughter's Daughter* (1993), might be understood to be part of this 'deconstruction'; published in London and written

in English, unlike her stories in Hindi, they were intended to reach an international English-speaking/reading audience. It appears that English, for all its cultural baggage, is pragmatically the most appropriate medium by which Pande might reach the widest audience for her stories of survival by women in a society in which 'girls are being destroyed in wombs by new techniques [and] being tortured and burnt for dowry by older ones' (1993 9–10).

The alternative would have been to have her stories translated, and this I believe is the better alternative if the true worth of contemporary Indian writing is to be appreciated by those concerned with the 'post-colonial' literatures and cultures of post 1947 India. For every writer that is published in English, there are hundreds more writing in their own languages and being published, initially, in quality literary journals such as the Bengali, *Desh*, the Hindi, *Hana* and the Malayalam, *Matribhoomi*. Most of the works are by men but there are increasing numbers of contributions from women writers. The latter compose verse as well as fiction, short stories, novellas and even novels (often in serial form).

The reluctance of publishers to consider material in translation is a barrier to the non-Indian reader's appreciation of the quality of what is being written today by women. Subjects such as Comparative Literature, Women's Studies, and Rural Development, cannot be comprehensively treated without using works translated from one of the Indian regional languages into English. The publishing houses are gradually making the work of the better-known Indian-language authors available in English translation, though the resulting texts are not always of a high quality. Unfortunately, at present, more care appears to be taken over translating European literature into English than is taken over translations from Indian-language texts into English. There is a need for critical and knowledgeable awareness of translations from Indian literatures. The monumental work, begun by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, looks to remain the best anthology for women's writing in translation. The second volume (1993), which covers the twentieth century, introduces the literature of some fourteen languages, and includes writing in translation often omitted in courses on Commonwealth Indian literature that concentrate on writing produced in English. For example, the anthology contains the story *Neipayasam* ('Rice Pudding') by Madhavikutty, the name under which Kamal Das publishes her work in Malayalam, the language of the southern state of Kerala (393–97). Students of Commonwealth literature, familiar with Kamala Das' poetry in English may find this story by her in her mother tongue of interest.

It is fortunate that there is a growing awareness among those concerned with Indian writing that the true measure of 'Indian' in literature is its multilingualism. The number of translations of modern works is growing, but not breaking through the intellectual barriers of the academy, or the commercial barriers set up by the book trade. Anthologised material provides the initial step. Lakshmi Holmström, one of the best Tamil-English translators, brought out a collection of some of the finest stories by Indian women — many translated from the Indian language,

and some translated for the first time — over a decade ago. *The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women* (1990) remains an excellent starting-point for gaining a knowledge of the diversity, both of women's lives and of literary expression. One of those who features in that anthology is the writer and political journalist C.S Lakshmi, who writes in Tamil under the name Ambai, and Holmström's other translations of her short fiction give readers a good entry-point into women's writing in Indian languages. It is to be hoped that Ambai's recent visit and talks in London will stimulate some British interest in the reprint of Holmström's translations, originally brought out in Chennai (Madras), India (Ambai 1992).

Kali for Women, India's first feminist book publishing house, was established in 1984 by two Indian women, Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon, as their promotional material stated, 'to present the variety of contemporary Indian women's creative writing as well as producing academic titles which reflect and contribute towards the debates and issues being addressed by women in India today...'. They published the first translated collection of short stories by Ismat Chughtai (1990), probably the finest practitioner of the genre in Urdu. If its publication in India may have limited its readership, one hopes that her novel, *The Crooked Line* (1995) [*Terhi Lakire*], translated from the Urdu by Tahira Naqvi and included among the eight novels published by Heinemann as part of the Asian Writers Series, may receive the attention it deserves in any course of study of Indian writing as part of Commonwealth Literature.

Even now, when increasing numbers of India women work outside the home, women's lives still revolve around the family; but there has been one important change, mainly as a consequence of the democratic nature of India's post-colonial government. The leaders of India's nationalist movement (a movement that led to independence in 1947), also created the world's largest parliamentary democracy, despite all manner of obstacles in a society divided by caste, class, religion and language. Women participate fully in the democratic process, as voters, as candidates, and as elected representatives. The literature which reflects such a reality requires a closer relationship with ordinary men and women than one might find in educational institutions, in which the medium of instruction is English, and which are generally intended for the privileged or those few fortunate enough to obtain financial assistance. Those who write in India's regional languages would appear to get closer to this 'grass-roots' world than those restricted to English (though this is not to ignore the achievement of writers such as Mulk Raj Anand who, in the novel *Untouchable*, transcends class barriers, or R.K. Narayan, who overcomes issues of social exclusivity in his short stories). The political climate of contemporary Indian society and awareness of issues larger than gender inequality make the literature written in the regional languages more important for those seeking to go beyond the narrow confines of the English-speaking class in India though that class comprises several million people. The politicisation of Indian life — at both regional and national levels — has produced

some important works, among the most acclaimed of which are by women and written in languages other than English. One cannot possibly claim to have studied the Indian writing of our times and omit names like Qurratulain Hyder, Mahasweta Devi and Mannu Bhandari. Qurratulain Hyder writes in Urdu and, in her own phrase, 'transcreates' her Urdu fiction into English. Her magnum opus, *River of Fire*, written originally as *Aag ka Darya*, provides a fictional account of Indian history from Buddhist times to the present, 'full of the clangour of conflict, the deviousness of colonisers, the apathy of maharajahs, and the irrelevance of religion in defining Indianness' as the book jacket says (1998).

The work of Mahasweta Devi's has been disseminated by Gayatri Spivak, who translated two of her stories from the original Bengali in her book *In Other Worlds*. Spivak discusses Devi's work in her essay, 'A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World', and in her later book, *Imaginary Maps* (1995), she translates three more of Devi's stories and includes a conversation with Devi. In the context of the political upheavals that have been going on since the late 1960s — uprisings in rural and urban areas, which are often led by Maoists — Mahasweta's political novels about tribal people rising against the British, or about today's struggles, depict a reality rarely represented in Indian novels in English. Probably Devi's most compelling work is a novel translated as *Mother of 1084* by Samik Bandyopadhyay. It deals with one day in the life of a middle-class woman who has to identify her youngest son's corpse in the police morgue, where it has been thrown after a military attack on the son's urban guerrilla group. She has known nothing of his work, and is now impelled to meet some of those who had been his friends and associates. Coming home, she finds she must get ready for a party her husband is giving for the new police chief and some of his wealthy acquaintances. The representation of the well-to-do middle-classes as 'corpses with their putrefied lives', and the mother's heart-rending cry — a scream of 'blood, protest, grief' (1997 127) — is a dark vision of the future. The emotional writing which concludes *Mother of 1084* represents a window on that 'other' reality far from the cool, personalised private worlds of the men and women usually found in the novels written in English by Indians who rarely get beyond domestic friction and triangular liaisons.

Mannu Bhandari (who seems now to have retired from the world of writing), having produced conventional stories of domestic discord, went on to write one of the most compelling political novels of village politics set in contemporary North Indian. *The Great Feast*, translated from the Hindi by Richard A. Williams, must rank as one of the most profound analyses of the way in which democratic politics really is enacted in societies where feudal mores and values are rarely distant. The landlords, the professional politicians and the sycophants who constitute the new post-colonial rural scene in Bhandari's novels are far removed on one level and yet remarkably similar to the characters depicted in *Godaan*, the great village epic written in Hindi some fifty years before this novel. Written

by Premchand in 1936, and translated from the Hindi as *The Gift of a Cow* in 1968, *Godaan* has recently been issued in a second edition with an introduction by an Indian woman scholar, Vassudha Dalmia (Premchand 2002). *Godaan* ranks as a landmark text in Indian fiction for its depiction of rural reality: it delves into the politics of rural communities and, in particular, it investigates the hierarchies of class and caste that divide and order life. Bhandari's novel could be seen as democratic India's formulation of an independent peasantry still tied to old hierarchies and social distance but having to play the new game of elections and votes. Like Premchand's novel, it cuts through the preconceptions of traditional Indian values and, specifically, it uncovers the reality of twenty-first-century power politics. Bhandari's foreword encapsulates, in brief, that political consciousness which distinguishes those parts of the world where class struggle and liberation movements animate women as much as men to raise fiction beyond the entanglements of sex and love:

It seems to me that it is very important, comfortable and reassuring to observe the interior drama of one's life, to consider one's personal distress and inner turmoil. But when one's house is on fire, confining oneself to one's inner world and giving expression to only that, appears irrelevant, ridiculous, and to some extent indecent....  
(Bhandari 1997)

This brief survey of the kinds of writing women have produced in Indian languages since Independence suggests something of the range and vitality of these literatures, whether their authors are working in the genre of short story or of epic novel, relating the minutiae of domestic life or attending to the broad sweep of historical events. At the same time, it is clear that bi-lingual women writers make aesthetic, political, cultural and pragmatic choices when they decide to work in one language rather than another. Moreover, the reader of women's literatures in English (whether those works were produced in English, or translated from another Indian language) is made keenly aware that to study Indian women's writing, one must also appreciate, and even to some extent reconstruct for oneself, the specific cultural and political conditions that lie, not only behind its production, but also its dissemination.

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