Where do we belong? The 'Problem' of English in India

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Abstract

'Where do we belong?' is not a question that necessarily troubles a writer greatly; it is enough to know that the writing comes out of oneself. But for a writer living in India and writing in English, the matter is not so simple. One has to recognize the fact that there are various problems and dilemmas entangled in this issue which need to be understood and explored. Let me begin with a personal declaration: I was born in this country, educated here, I have lived all my life here, I know no other life, my writing comes out of this life, out of a deep involvement with the society I am a part of. Why then am I different from a writer who writes, say, in Hindi? Obviously, it is the language that sets me apart from the Hindi writer.

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Does this mean that a language can alienate a text from a culture? There seems to be a possibility that it does. Why else would a publisher’s blurb describe a novel in English as ‘displaying a profoundly Indian sensibility’? Or why else would a reviewer speak of my latest novel as having a ‘context that is comfortably Indian’?

The reason lies, not in the short and troubled history of Indian literature in English, but in the English language itself. The hostility English often seems to attract has less to do with the fact that it is the language of our ex-rulers and colonizers than that it has become the language of a certain class of Indians, that is, the privileged, the elite, the ambitious. More important in the context of literature, it is not the emotive language of most readers. Generally, English does not get under the skin as our own languages do. This is perhaps why English writing can never get the kind of response that writing in the indigenous languages does. English creates a space between the user and the reader/listener, it rules out that special kind of intimacy possible only with the language one has learnt as an infant. I see the very intimate connection between a language and a people in the response of indigenous language writers to their society, its issues and concerns. I rarely find English language writers taking up issues in this way. And when they do, I wonder if they have the same sense of frustration and futility I have when, deeply disturbed about something, I write about it and know that my polite little piece will reach out to only a few English-speaking readers – most of whom will be thinking the way I do, anyway.
This feeling is at its strongest when I write about women’s issues and know that the language keeps out that mass of women whom I really want to involve.

English differs from the other Indian languages in this, too, that it was not born upon this soil, it has not grown through having been used daily by all classes of people, it has not developed layers, like a pearl, through years of association with the history and culture of a particular people. A language, which does all this, encodes a whole culture, and there is, as the writer Shama Futehally says, ‘a shared suggestion between reader and writer’. Each detail does not have to be spelled out or explained. This does not happen in English, which is why footnotes, parentheses, glossaries, are often necessary. A related point is that those of us who write in English are, in a sense, translators, even if not conscious ones. I became aware of what this involves when I was translating a piece in Kannada from my father’s autobiography. A certain phrase halted me in my tracks. How should I translate it? Since a word is embedded in the culture of the people who speak it, it always carries a load of more than what it literally means and says. How do you transfer all this into a language that is alien to that culture? How do you get in all the connections and associations the word or phrase carries? I realized then that we have to resort to some of the negotiations between languages that translators do. Do we lose out in this process? What would I, as a creative writer, have done with the phrase in my own writing if it had been necessary? Would I have omitted it? Simplified it? Or would I have circumvented the problem by using some other word, losing thereby many of the nuances of the original? Either way, some kind of self-censorship would have been at work.

I realized then that certain concepts are untranslatable; and if translated into a language which has no room for them, they become exoticised. This exoticisation has been, and still is, part of the outcome of English writing in India. It is the method used by writers who attempt to ‘showcase’ our culture for the world. Differences then become oddities, people and their habits become ‘quaint’. It is as if, writing in English, writers cross a line and become outsiders, looking from out there at the people they are writing about. Writing in English also means using a language which most, or at least many, of one’s characters do not speak. An unpleasant consequence of this is that the non-English-speaking character becomes, through the use of an oddly spoken English, comical and is thus denied a certain dignity which would be hers/his but for the language.

However, since for many of us English is no more (and no less) than the medium through which we express ourselves, we cope with these problems in our own way, not letting them obtrude upon the purpose of our writing. What we want to say is far more important. To speak of my own experience, the language has never presented me with a major
hurdle and I rarely find myself struggling to ‘English’ things, since I am more concerned with the interior landscape. But then again, since my writing is so involved with women’s lives, the challenges are greater, because English has no place in most Indian women’s lives, in the details of their daily living.

In recent years, however, I have begun to realize that the biggest problem is that, often knowing no Indian language but English, we have no access to our indigenous literary tradition – not at first hand, anyway. For a writer this is a great loss. The handicap, as I see it, is not that we are distanced from our culture – for we are as much part of it as anyone writing in the other Indian languages, we are always writing out of this culture – but that we are distanced from the literature of our country. Not to be able to read the literature that is part of one’s life, history and culture is a major disadvantage. The time when it was possible to gain access to our literary heritage without reading is long past; kathas, puranas, kirtans, folk plays, story-telling – these are no longer part of an educated urban person’s life. The present generation of English-educated urban Indians is in fact often twice removed from their indigenous language, for the parents are generally English-educated also. Our myths and stories can reach them, if at all, only through English translations. It is like getting the Mahabharata exclusively through Peter Brook.

Despite all these problems, however, the truth remains that we are part of the same literary tradition as the indigenous language writers. It is possible to see this truth through negatives, by considering the various labels that are pinned upon English writers here. ‘Indo-English’ sounds to me as bizarre as, say, ‘Indo-Kannada’, or ‘Indo-Hindi’. ‘Commonwealth’ refers to something that has really no existence. ‘Post-colonial’ confers a significance on a specific and narrow period of our history, whereas I consider myself a product of so much more. ‘Third World’ is an insulting marginalization. The fact is that our writing, even if it happens to be in English, was not born simply out of contact with the colonial powers; it is part of the same stream all our literature belongs to, the source of which goes even beyond the first great invasion of this country.

Yet there is a snag. There is no single entity called Indian literature; we have many different literatures, each with its own language, identity, history and, most important since the constituting of the linguistic states, with its own regional parameters. Where does English belong in this structure? A research scholar recently asked me, how, as a regional writer, I differentiate myself from an Indian writer like, say, Anita Desai? The answer is clear: we are always both. Regional is not opposed to national, it is part of it. The two are not mutually exclusive. Anita Desai has herself raised this point in a paper she read at a conference in Sweden, the theme of which was ‘A Sense of Place’. Answering a reviewer’s criticism that her writing lacks regional identity, she admits
that, unlike R.K. Narayan or Mulk Raj Anand, she cannot lay claim to one particular region. Yet, she says, ‘I refuse to be dismissed from the company of “regional writers” on the basis of mere facts.’ Writers can, in her view, create their own territory, mark out their own spaces – and often do. In effect, all our homelands are imaginary; we create or recreate them in our minds.

Nevertheless, English has to struggle to find a place for itself. Linguistic states, linguistic chauvinism, political patronage and political pressures are responsible for creating such a situation. A rigid drawing of boundaries, defensiveness and paranoia seem to have taken over so that each state admits only its ‘own’ language as having any right to exist within its boundaries. English is, of course, the main threat. It is a foreign language, the language of the elite. Moreover, political correctness seems to demand a certain stand, so that, even in the literary world, one hears that a literature should be in the language of the people; or that great writing can only be achieved in the mother tongue; or that there are two writing cultures – English and the regional languages – and the future of Indian literature lies in the latter. There are also writers who claim that they could have written in English but have refrained from doing so, making a virtue out of this. As if any part of writing is a matter of choice, and not, as Martin Amis rightly says, one of recognition. My question is: can the use of a particular language condemn a whole body of literature?

I believe that there is something such as the language of one’s creativity and, for some of us, this happens to be, for reasons beyond our control, English. Most writers in English are as rooted in their regional identities as those who write in other Indian languages. Jayanta Mahapatra is from Orissa, Kamala Das from Kerala, Githa Hariharan from Tamil Nadu, and I belong to Karnataka and Maharashtra – these identities are unmistakable; and it is out of these identities that we write. Writing is but a part of the amalgamation we call Indian literature. To say that English writing is better or worse than Indian literature is as absurd as saying that Bengali literature, for example, is better than Indian literature. It is also wrong to set a literature that is barely a century old against those that are centuries older.

That said, we have also to note that there is the tendency, as Aijaz Ahmed puts it, to ‘view the product of the English writing intelligentsia of the cosmopolitan cities as the central documents of India’s national literature’. Which makes English writing national and, all else, regional. Two things make this argument possible: one, in the international arena, English writing is visible and therefore recognized. And two, the English media in our country, being more powerful and with a much wider reach, successfully projects English writing as if it is the only writing we have. In recent times, English writing has received such an excess of attention that it has attained a spurious importance, quite disproportionate at times to its merit and volume. A recent review of
Rohinton Mistry’s ‘A Fine Balance’ in *Time* referred to the author as a contender for the title of the Great Indian Novelist. The other contenders were obviously those who also wrote in English. To the reviewer, Pico Iyer, who has no access to the literature of other Indian languages, this assumption seems inevitable. What is more disturbing is that even Indians in India make such sweeping and startling statements. Some time back, there was a full-page newspaper article on two forthcoming novels in English, one of which was described as ‘the greatest Indian novel of the century’! It made me wonder whether the writer of this article knew that there are other languages, other literatures in this country!

The truth is that, however exciting and lively the scene in English writing has become in the last decade or so, if we look at it dispassionately, we will find that most of the excitement is media-generated and exaggerated. The point is that the belief that English writing and the English writer are so wonderful exists only in English. I wonder what writers in the other Indian languages think of this; or if they care at all. It sometimes appears that at no time in our history are lines so strongly drawn between the different languages. Each language is so secure in its own idea of its own significance and worth that it smacks of smugness. In fact, a frog in a pond attitude informs all our literatures. The late Shri Umashankar Joshi called this malaise, ‘literary narcissism’; and added, ‘One has to look at one’s neighbours’ face in order to fathom one’s own deeply.’ Indeed one does!

To me, the most unfortunate thing that has happened in recent years is that English writing, which was poised for a take-off into adulthood, has suddenly started moving away from its moorings and is becoming a part of a body of international writing. The emergence of ‘third world writing’, and the enormous significance bestowed upon it by Western critics, has had a great impact on the writing in our country; almost, I would say, has changed its direction. The fact that this ‘third world writing’ is supposed to ‘give appropriate form to the national experience’ (Aijaz Ahmed) has meant that novels concerned with the nation, national issues and nationalism are those taken seriously. Since the international critic’s stamp of approval is reserved for such books, it has also meant the marginalization of all writing that does not lie within this format. As feminist critics have pointed out, women’s writing and women authors have generally been ignored as a result of this process of canon formation. Recently, I was asked to respond in a newspaper column to Rushdie’s contention that there are no significant women writers in India. I had to first ask myself the question, ‘What does Rushdie consider significant?’ The answer obviously was: the issues his books touch upon, the themes he takes up. If women do not address themselves directly to these issues, they become insignificant. Rushdie is, perhaps, not aware that women’s writing in India, in English and indigenous languages, is bursting with excitement and energy.
When we have theories which make some writing major and significant, it is inevitable that the rest sinks to being minor and insignificant. To categorize themes also as major and minor creates a kind of pressure on writers, specially younger writers, to take up 'major' issues. The unhappy prevalence of this was brought home when I read an article on the judging of a Commonwealth prize. One of judges admits that a certain (Australian) novel had an edge over its rivals because of its concern with the post-colonial issue of national identity and national history.

In India, this is a post-Rushdie phenomenon. It is inevitable that genius, originality and, above all, success should spawn imitators. Rushdie's non-fictional writing, his statements on his own works, the force of his arguments, the brilliance of his language - all have been as influential as his creative writing. Rushdie sets himself up as an Indian writer in opposition to Western critics, which makes his impact on us that much greater. But Rushdie's situation, his position and his genius are unique; to use his work as the touchstone for all writing in this country seems wrong. A recent article on the new authors of the Indian diaspora in the United States praises them for 'side-stepping the frayed clichés of Indo-Anglian writing'. Apart from wondering what these 'frayed clichés' are, I ask why English writing in India has to be set in the context of this diasporic writing? Is this an offshoot of Rushdie's theory that the central or defining figure of this century is the migrant? One could refute this with Rushdie's own statement that 'literature is self-validating' - it does not matter who writes it or from where.

One cannot say of Indians who live abroad and write about India that they are appropriating a history that is not their own. Nevertheless, some differences do exist. To Indians living in the West, India is, unavoidably, seen as 'India-as-opposed-to-the-West'. Rushdie has spoken of writers who as outsiders have advantages insiders do not have. But are not all writers insiders and outsiders at the same time? A (good) writer begins with an inside-the-experience involvement, yet steps outside of it at the moment of writing. Moreover, it is not only the writer living abroad who creates imaginary homelands, or 'Indias of the mind'. None of us can approximate to an absolute reality; we all create our own.

A major difference, as I see it, is that it is not so much the national identity that matters to those of us who live in India, but our regional, linguistic, religious, caste and gender identities. Our Indian identity becomes important only when we leave, only then do we need to produce our passports. Urban living, corruption (both within the individual and society), the breakdown of the old family system, women's struggle to improve their lives, the new relationship between the sexes, the rapid erosion of certain traditional values and beliefs - these are the concerns for most of us living here.

This is not, let's make it clear, a disparagement of writing from abroad.
The point I’m trying to make concerns criticism. How many of our critics are able to see without their colonial blinkers? We seem to have become incapable of making our own valuations or judgements. So overcome are we by the success of some novels, every writer who writes in the same manner immediately becomes a contender for the Booker Prize. To write a book in which, as Shama Futehally puts it, ‘language is exhibited without purpose’, is to be certain of getting a positive critical response. Our English newspapers wait with bated breath for the announcement of the Booker. Post-colonial, my foot! We seem to have got ourselves entangled in the Empire-strikes-back net and are unable to get out.

The main problem is the lack of powerful critical voices in our country, voices that speak with authority, knowledge, a sensitivity to our concerns, and are not overawed by the critical noises from the West. Jacqueline Rose has pointed out that

What matters is not the boundary between living and dead writers, but the distinction between those writers who live through the responses they give rise to and those who – for want of such attention – fall into oblivion.

And it is the critics who keep writers alive or relegate them, through inattention, to oblivion. More important, it is the task of critics and scholars to separate the chaff from the grain, and to create, not a hierarchy of writing, but a meaningful mosaic. To maintain a healthy literature, writing and criticism must go hand in hand. And what do we have here? We have a plethora of magazines and Sunday papers that review books. But who are the reviewers? Most often, one of the newspaper staff. An English Literature degree is enough to qualify for the job. If the author is a woman, a female journalist fits the bill perfectly. Post-Shobha De, a flippant, wise-cracking style has been perfected and is used indiscriminately for all books. A book is read and reviewed wholly without any references, as if it stands entirely on its own, belonging nowhere. The fact that many reviewers (journalists) are often only-English knowing urbanites makes for an unforgivable ignorance about some fundamentals. I have to agree with the poet Vijay Nambisan who says that the problem is one of cultural divide and the divide is not necessarily transnational.

The failure of criticism seems to be the biggest drawback facing English writing today. I see, in the number of writers commenting on this state of affairs, an increasing disquiet about the abysmal standards of criticism, and a sense of angry impotence. How does one respond to the kind of criticism we have to encounter? What do we do when ridicule and destructive judgement are all that the reviewers seem to be capable of? Ignorant and illiterate reviews have made me rethink my stand that authors should not review books. I now agree with the opinion that authors, in fact, make good critics, for this reason above all, that they know what the writing of a book means. Some of the best reviewers I
have read in India are poets and novelists – Keki Daruwala, Vijay Nambisan and Shama Futehally, to mention just three. Unfortunately, for various reasons, very few writers venture into reviewing. Therefore, what we have as a counterpoint to the hack reviewers are scholars and academics, who, it seems, only write for each other because their writing is often incomprehensible to the common reader. The result is a very wide gap between popular reviewing and serious criticism; there is nothing in the space between the two. The role of the critic in offering reasoned and balanced criticism has become even more vital today when money is playing an increasingly important role in literature. The market seems to be dictating trends, creating ‘great novels’ and celebrity writers – and possibly influencing writers as well? Is it the dictates of the market that is making poetry less visible on the literary scene today, that is making more poets turn to fiction? I am troubled by this fact, for it should not be forgotten that it was the poets who made waves in English writing in this country, the poets who found their own voice and evolved their own language first. Nissim Ezekiel, Kamala Das, Gieve Patel, Gauri Deshpande – these were the writers I felt a kinship with, not the novelists. But today the poets seem to be generally neglected by scholars, critics, students and publishers.

What we need at present are critics who can put our writing in the right context – which is here. It is certainly not wrong for a critic to use literature written and published outside the country as a reference point, but to make it the only reference point is ridiculous. To make all the writing in our own country (except that written in English) invisible is absurd. To think that we have a one-way traffic with literature existing outside of India (which for us still means only the West) fills me with despair. I realized how fruitful it is to link any writing to our own when, in the course of writing about a book published in the States, a volume of letters between mothers and daughters (Between Ourselves), I came across a Marathi magazine which carried a series of articles by eminent women on their relationships with their mothers or daughters. To put these two together, to read them along with Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘A Very Easy Death’ made it an exercise in understanding for me, and, I hope, for the readers of my article as well.

For such an exercise we need bilingual readers/writers. Unfortunately there are not many people who can grasp two literatures with ease. Writers of the earlier generation were educated in their own mother tongue, rooted in it; only later did they go on to learn English and were enormously enriched by it; both scholarship and creativity benefited. I know there are many Kannada writers who have this facility, though it seems to be rare among English writers or students today. To hear of a student working on a writer who boasts of two published novels, whose only claim to this attention is the fact that she/he is a high-profile writer, brings home to me the poverty of refusing to look beyond
English language writers.

Of course it is possible, and this is being done, to put English in the context of translated works. But there are problems. There are too few translated works; the choice of books for translation is often arbitrary, haphazard, individualistic and, at times, political. Translated books, because of their greater visibility, may attain a position they don’t really have in their rightful context. For there is the problem that scholars now seem to be addressing themselves to the politics of language so that the value of a book and its author increases when it is translated into English.

Bilingualism is perhaps the only answer. This is neither an unknown nor an uncommon phenomenon in our country. It is this which will help critics and scholars to place Indian writing in English where it belongs. It is in this direction that our writing needs to go, not the way of the Booker. Globalization does not mean an erasing of regional differences in the name of ‘national issues’. Critics need to understand this.

I believe that the strongest link is between a writer and a reader; that between the two there is a creative partnership. Critics can be a part of this relationship, they can enrich the response of the reader, give the reader a sniff at the bottle. To quote an Australian writer and critic, Marion Halligan:

Books generate reviews, articles, debates, more books: we are all questioning, arguing, disagreeing, learning. None of us works in a vacuum. Even the fiction writer, sitting in solitude to make narratives out of her imagination, indeed most particularly the fiction writer, is busy discussing who we are now. But unless the critics are listening and replying, the conversation will turn into a monologue and all the liveliness and stimulation of crosstalk will be lost.6

We need this cross-talk between all the literatures in our country and we need critics who will make this possible – critics who are listening and replying. It is through a healthy and lively conversation between writer and reader that a literature grows. There is nothing wrong with being influenced by other writers, ideas and movements, whether Indian or not. Cross-fertilization is a very healthy thing. But if a literature born in this country, out of this society, remains distanced and estranged from its sister literatures, if there is no dialogue or exchange of ideas between them, then something is wrong somewhere. Our writing comes out of this society, the emotional bonds are here. If it remains linked to its source, it will grow in strength and vitality. If it tries to delink itself, if critics help it to do that, it will become an exotic hothouse plant. No amount of critical boosting will be able to keep it alive for too long. We are a country in which an audience of thousands will sit spellbound all night in a small town listening to a Kavi Sammelan (a poets’ meet); masses wait all year for the Sawai Gandharva music festival in Pune and give the artists their concentrated attention until the dawn; no celebrity status, national or international, can compensate for or equal this response. This is the umbilical cord through which life flows.
My concern is not so much about writers losing their way. I am convinced from my own experience that English does not distance us from our creative source, that a language cannot by itself create a space between a text and the culture it belongs to. I know that writing, being an intuitive, individualistic and often unconscious process, can withstand pressures to conform. And therefore, even if some writers follow market trends, there will be others who will continue to listen to the voice inside, to follow their own genius. It is critics who need to widen their understanding, to learn to contextualise correctly, to shake off the vestiges of colonialism that makes them ignore the distinctiveness of our writing. In other words, we need to see ourselves with our own eyes.

NOTES