



“Indian English Fiction I: Beginnings Of An Autonomous Idiom”

Shabeena Kuttay Department of Higher Education, JK, India,
shabeenakuttay@gmail.com

Abstract:

Throughout its existence English language has changed, especially after coming into contact with other cultures, languages, people etc. and in each case benefiting enormously. The result of the long journey of change is that English language comes in different versions belonging to different regions and communities. It is primarily through the use of English for creative purposes that today we encounter diverse literatures in English-literatures that are essentially different from each other as well as from the native English literature, but fundamentally alike in that they are the result of creative expression of people from various parts of the world. Since language tends to change differently in different places, the English as used by the native writers is different from that of the Indian, African, Caribbean, Canadian writers, and even from each other.

The aim of the paper is precisely to foreground this ‘difference’ through Indian fiction writing. As the title of the paper suggests, it talks about the process of acculturation, nativisation, Indianization as employed by the major writers of Indian English, describing briefly the slow growth of writing in the sub-continent in relation to the development of popular literacy and popular education in English, to the rise of national feeling and finally to the Indianization of the foreign language.

Keywords: Nativisation, Indianization, Indian English Fiction, Postcolonialism.

Introduction

From the times of the Anglo- Saxons when English language came to be used for the first time, to the times of Shakespeare when English as a language became of interest to the learned, down to the present times when most of the literature in the language comes not from England or the English speaking first world but from the third world, change has been the hallmark of English language especially for creative expression. It would not be preposterous to say that the major changes brought about in English language

are the result of Imperial Colonisation of the Asian and African lands. Infact, the widespread usage of English today is the outcome, indirect if not direct, of the language transplant across the world that has resulted in new forms of English. In innumerable countries English has distinct local flavour that may conveniently be regarded as evidence of an emerging national standard within the world community of English users. Throughout its existence English language has changed, especially after coming into contact with other cultures, languages, people etc. and in each case benefiting enormously. The result of the long journey of change is that English language comes in different versions belonging to different regions and communities. Where we have, on the one hand, the 'standard' British English inherited from the Empire, we also have the English, which the language has become, in the present world especially in the erstwhile colonised countries - Indian English, African English, Canadian English, and Caribbean English etc. The language we have at present is the product of many internal and external changes brought about by migrations, invasions, cultural exchanges, new settlements, colonisation, and more recently by globalisation and technological developments. Recognised as a major world language, English continues to be used almost all over the world for communication and commerce, information technology, scientific and economic purposes, literary pursuits and creative expression.

It is indeed through the use of English for creative purposes that today we encounter diverse literatures in English coming from all nook and corners of the world - literatures that are essentially different from each other as well as from the native English literature, but literatures that are fundamentally alike in that they are the result of creative expression of people from various parts of the world. And since language tends to change differently in different places, the English as used by the native writers is different from that of the Indian, African, Caribbean, Canadian writers, and even from each other.

The aim of the present paper is precisely to foreground this 'difference' through the case of Indian English with special focus on fiction writing. There is no doubt that English as employed by the Indian English novelists is different from the Standard English but it is in no way inferior or marginal. Just as any cultivated Englishman's language will strike most Indians as decidedly un-Indian and British, but not as inferior. It is on the whole not deplorable that British English and other Englishes should be different; however, it is deplorable that the differences should make the English and the others misunderstand and still more consider each other as marginal or inferior.

Initially the attitudes and reactions to other Englishes in general and third world

Englishes in particular, like the Indian English, were far from those of tolerance, let alone recognition and acceptance. But the international success and acclaim achieved by some of the Indian English novelists like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga, and others, has proved beyond doubt that their English usage might be different from that of the native writers but in this difference lies their essential contribution to the English literary tradition. In the course of time, however, the scenario has changed completely. There has come about a change in the attitudes of Europeans towards these third world literatures and Englishes, primarily due to “rational linguistic outlook following the rapid growth of the linguistic sciences in the West; and political emancipation of many English-using Third World countries.” Interestingly enough, the attitudes of third world users of English themselves have undergone a sea-change in recent years. English which to most of these countries was a symbol of colonial oppression is no more regarded as the language of the masters. It has come to be used abundantly for creative expression resulting in a vast corpus of third world literatures. Indian English fiction, however, has the longest standing amongst these literatures.

“Indian English Fiction: Growth of an Autonomous Idiom” looks at the beginnings of the Indian English fiction vis a vis the changes brought about in the English language by the Indian English novelists before Independence. It deals with a distinctive body of fiction that emerged from India in the late nineteenth century, stretching across the twentieth century and continuing its conquests in the twenty-first century. As the title of the paper suggests, it talks about the process of acculturation, nativisation, Indianization as employed by the major writers of Indian English. I have tried to stress on the main landmarks in the history of English fiction from Indian writers which ranges from 1860s to the 1940s, describing briefly the slow growth of writing in the sub-continent in relation to the development of popular literacy and popular education in English, to the rise of national feeling and finally to the Indianization of the foreign language.

There exists an established continuity between works of the various generations of Indian English novelists. The first generation being the novelists writing between 1864 and 1930 – the earliest novelists who were in the truest sense the pioneers of the genre in India beginning with Bankim Chander Chatterjee. In the second generation are included the novelists of 1930s to 1970s, which included the great trio -Rao, Narayan and Anand, and their contemporaries as well as the novelists writing after the Indian Independence. Though the novelists of this period show a vast diversity in their thematic concerns and preoccupations, they more or less wrote in English too self-consciously, which brings their contribution to the Indian English idiom under the same

category. This generation is divided into two sub-categories – first category of writers before Independence and the second category that comes after the Independence. The Indian novelists writing in English throughout the three phases are shown introducing not only the innovations in language use but also adding a distinct Indian flavour making it not just a dialect but a literary idiom. The third generation includes novelists writing from the 1980s to the present day that burst forth almost suddenly into limelight by recognition from the English speaking first world. The growth of the English idiom in the vast literature written by these generations is analysed particularly for the use of English in a community having multilingual and multicultural tradition of its own.

“I will stay here, whatever maybe the rank and status you assign me...I am more Indian than you can ever be. You are probably 50, 60 or 70 years of age, but I’ve actually been in this land for 200 years.”

-Indian English by R. K. Narayan

The history of English language roughly stretches over the last 1500 years since the language first became recognisable as Anglo-Saxon. In the annals of its specific history, English has been changing and evolving, up till the present times when it has been accepted as a World language, and it continues to grow. Change is a fundamental principle and language too is subject to change over time. We may not be aware at all of the imperceptible changes that are taking place, until we find ourselves distinguishing between languages and sub-languages, language varieties and sub-varieties, dialects, pidgins, creoles, jargons, etc.

English began as a lingua franca of some Germanic tribes in Europe and over years changes, internal¹ as well as external², were seen due to movement of people and cultures, colonisation and the influx of communication and technology has now come to its present status. It is, undoubtedly, World’s most widespread language with millions of

¹ The concomitant internal history would subsume changes in the English word stock as a result of contact with so many languages; formation of English as a fit medium first for poetry then prose, then for science and other registers, for media and communication, its standardisation and finally, with geographic expansion, the splitting of English into several recognisably different but related varieties.

² The external factors consist of- the early migration of the Celts to the island, the Roman rule of England, the subsequent migration of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, the conversion of the English people to Christianity, the Scandinavian invasions and settlement, the French conquest of England, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, settlement of America, Canada and Australia and finally, the colonisation of Asia and Africa.

people speaking it as either a first language or as a second or foreign language. In the history of its existence English language has fluidly transcended borders morphing enormously to reflect the globalised world. The result of this process is the various versions of the original language across the world.

However, without much doubt one can easily conclude that the major change brought about in the English language is the result of Colonisation of the Asian and African lands by Britain, followed by the acceleration of information technology and communication . The widespread usage of English today is the outcome, indirect if not direct, of the language export to non-English lands giving rise to new, non-native varieties. In India, for instance, English came with the Britishers as a language of the masters, rulers and exploiters- a language of domination, oppression, subjugation, just as it did in other colonised lands like Africa, Asia, and Pacific Island countries, Australia and New Zealand. And today each of these countries has its own variety of English, for English went wherever the Britishers went and established their Empire. The English language continued to be used by the English as a tool for maintaining their ‘cultural hegemony’ over their erstwhile colonies, long after these colonies had gained political freedom. As Ashcroft et al say in *The Empire Writes Back*:

“One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities...Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth’, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established.”³

English language also, as we have seen, has undergone an inevitable process of acculturation i.e., adoption, nativisation, and domestication. So today it may be more accurate to speak of Englishes rather than English, where we have on the one hand the version of English inherited from the rulers, and on the other hand we have the language of the present day world especially in the now-decolonised countries - Indian English, African English, Canadian English, and Caribbean English etc. Variants though they are of the ‘original’ language, yet they have been the site of some of the most enriched and accomplished literatures. To acknowledge these literatures is to accept the globalisation of the English language, and to question and reject the idea of the linguistic

³ Bill Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. 1989; London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 7.

purity or superiority of the 'standard' English, for English today is an International language not only of everyday communication but also of literary and cultural production. So the countries that had been relegated to marginal and peripheral positions, generally referred to as the 'third world', today contribute as much to the development and growth of the English language as the developed 'first World'. English as a medium of creative self-expression has resulted in tremendous corpus of Third World literatures- Indian literature, African literature, Canadian literature, Literature from the middle East, Caribbean literature, - all written and circulated in English. Of these three major literatures in English, Indian literature in English has a much longer standing as it began as early as the nineteenth century.

The Humble Beginnings of Indian English fiction:

With a literary tradition of more than 200 years, the Indian literature in English has gained recognition as an important part of the English literature traversing boundaries of language and community, and also as an academic discipline worthy of serious study and research worldwide. The credit for this goes to the canonical poets, prose writers, novelists and dramatists, some of whom are even forgotten figures now, who have made significant contributions to the evolution of Indian English literature and idiom, particularly by the novelists.

The history of English in Indian subcontinent began around the year 1600 when the Britishers first landed on this land as mere traders but the literature in the language could only be possible when the language had gone deep into the roots of the Indian traditions and culture. One factor responsible was the events from 1818 and 1850 when the Govt. of India came directly under the Crown. Though the assumption of the Govt. of India by the Crown was only a 'formal rather than a substantial change', it meant the birth of a great new epoch politically and socially. A very significant role played by this new set up was in terms of the reforms at various levels- administrative, social, educational, fiscal that were accepted by the Indian society without much resistance. One of the reasons for such acceptance of change and reform might have been the support they received from respected and influential Indian zealots of social reform like Raja Rammohan Roy⁴. However, another reason seems to have been the change that

⁴ Raja Rammohan Roy, who is generally known for his plight against the traditional, orthodox practices of the Indian society in order to reform it, was certainly one of the earliest to write in English. He inaugurated that tradition in which Indians have found a peculiar intimacy with the English language, making it a natural second voice for the Indian mind and sensibility. His vigorous English, which balanced Victorian fluency with a quality of 18th century, measure and formality, used an extensive vocabulary- a slightly abstract diction, and long poised, supple sentences.

Western education had wrought in Indian thinking. One thing was therefore clear: the demand for English had been created in India and the educational system catered to this demand effectively. The educational system, however, came about in three phases⁵ with the approval of Macaulay's Minutes in March 1835 from Lord Bentick and an official resolution endorsing it. This was the foundation of a language policy in India resulting in monopoly of English. Thus, an official move that was primarily meant to help in the smooth functioning of the Company in a linguistically diverse India helped change the entire scenario of the colony, for an alien language implemented with an intention of maintaining colonial hegemony eventually became a tool of experimentation and acceptance, and with the passage of time it no longer remained a foreign language. Further developments domiciled English from a foreign language to one of the Indian languages. Here one is reminded of what Chinua Achebe had once declared that "The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use."⁶

The same became true of the English language in the Indian context because in the years that followed Macaulay's Minutes, as the British were able to successfully penetrate into Indian ethos, the Anglicisation of Indian education was the first step, which in turn deepened the roots of the English language - changing, growing and developing giving new impetus to Indian literature in English. In the contemporary times, the position and presence of Indian novelists writing in English is insurmountable, having been recognized nationally as well as internationally. However, this achievement has not come overnight, it has been a gradually changing process since English was introduced in the Indian subcontinent. The rise of Indian English fiction has implications for the

⁵ Charles Grant, a civil servant in the East India Company, first mooted the idea of "education in English" but the idea was actually realised by the Christian missionaries who came to the Indian subcontinent to proselytise. This marked the first phase in the introduction of 'bilingualism' in English in India. The second phase was essentially that of local demand for English, during which prominent Indians made efforts to persuade the officials of the Company to impart instruction in English rather than Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic or any other Indian vernacular language. This created the well-known Oriental-Anglicist controversy that resulted in the third phase of education in English and culminated in prolonged and insightful discussion on the merits and demerits of Oriental and Anglicist educational system in India generating two attitudes towards introducing English. The dissenting group, however, could not stop the Minute of Macaulay from passing.

⁶ Quoted in K.R.Srinivasa Iyenger, foreword, *The New Literatures in English*, by Chaman Nahal. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1985, p. 12.

literary as well as social contexts. When the novel form rose to predominance in England in 18th century, reflected on the demand and setup of that peculiar time in social, political and economic perspectives. Similarly, the rise of Indian English novel too reflected the temperament and demands of 19th Century India with the advent of Modern era reflecting the changing order.

I

Indian literature in English can conveniently be said to have originated in Bengal with the dawn of the era of prose and journalism and, eventually, manifested itself as a pan-Indian phenomenon. Newspapers like *The Hindu*, *The Statesman* and *The Times of India*, had already contributed to creating higher standards of English writing but also inculcated a public appeal of English especially within the educated and elite classes. Alongwith journals and newspapers⁷, spiritualists and orators and statesmen had helped the development of Indian English prose⁸ by creating again a taste for English expression in those times. The period had witnessed the birth of reason, of rationalistic approach, of liberalism and individualism. These changes were in many respects similar to those that took place in England in the 18th century that favoured rise of novel in India and England respectively. It can be said that the fast changing social order in the Indian subcontinent not only set the stage for the emergence of this new literary form but also favoured and demanded it.

It is true that the implementation of English education proved an important step towards adaptation of the language in India, but the use English for creative purpose preceded official implementation of language policy on education. Henry Derozio (1809-31), Kashiprasad Ghosh (1809-73) and Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1827-73), for instance, may not be much innovative in their usage of the language, but their contribution nonetheless is immeasurable for their earliest attempts writing way before much before Macaulay. The novel, short story and drama were practically non-existent before the mid 19th century. With the introduction of English there was a great spurt of translations. The English classics became the models for the Indians writing in English and their works were moulded closely on these masters and same was true of the first Indian English novelists who wrote before the early decades of the twentieth century.

It is generally considered that the Indian novel had its birth in the 1930s; but with Bankim Chander Chatterjee (1838-94)'s *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) and Lal Behari Day's

⁷ The first Indian newspaper *Hicky's Bengal Gazette* came out as early as 1780.

⁸ In the *Annals of Oriental Research* of the University of Madras (XVIII, II, 1963), N. Venkata Rao hails Cavally Venkata Boriah (1776-1803) as the "first English prose writer of eminence."

Govinda Samanta (1874)⁹ English was already explored as a medium of creative expression. These pioneers of the English fiction in India were innovators and experimenters in their own right. Like their more successful and popular counterparts in later times they too grappled with the problem of evolving a form and a medium for their novels. They were striving to reconcile their Indian themes to a form that was totally alien to the Indian traditions of storytelling and also to evolve a medium that would adjust itself to a sensibility which was essentially Indian. If they were not seized with an awareness of these problems, they would have ended up as blind imitators of the Western models. What makes them significant to the genesis of an Indian idiom of English is the fact that they show the beginning of an experiment, an experiment which is still going on, not only in Indian fiction in English, but also in fiction writing in all Indian languages. It is this experimentation, this pre-occupation with the task of evolving a form and a medium to suit their artistic purpose which lends continuity to the tradition of novel-writing in English by Indians. The novels which appeared before 1920s may, therefore, rightly be considered as the first phase of the growth and development of Indian novel in English.

Such novelists were the pioneers in the field of Indian English fiction and even though much of the work of their times was largely imitative, a number of these writers showed considerable mastery of English language. It was with their pioneering efforts of manifesting their creative impulse, which derived its sustenance from two distinct traditions having their roots in two distinct cultures, that the later novelists could further develop the Indian English idiom. The growth and maturity of Indian English novel can clearly be brought out from the time when first Indian wrote in English to the present day. English, though not native to the Indian soil, has been adapted by the Indian novelists from the earliest times to the needs of expressing Indian thought and tradition. Apart from imitation there was a certain degree of experimentation at Indianization of the language, which is defined by Kachru as “The process of Indianization of English includes, for example, finding words for culture-bound everyday objects, and conveying modes of feeling and thinking peculiar to the poets’/writers’ cultural milieu. For this they liberally resort to loan translations of idiomatic expressions just as they mix English and Hindi (or other Indian languages) vocabulary with a lot of speech mannerisms. They also write sentence fragments (equivalent of regional language, Kannad and Tamil, for example, discourse patterns). We can notice the conventions of Indian languages in

⁹There is no unanimous acceptance of *Rajmohan’s Wife* as the first Indian novel in English. Many consider *Govinda Samanta* as the first novel in English instead, because *Rajmohan’s Wife* though chronologically an earlier work, considering its appearance in a serial form in *The Indian Field* in 1864, came out in a book form as late as 1935.

Indian English- from rhythmic patterns to syntactic structures to social conventions.”¹⁰

It is with such efforts that a bridge was developed between the culturally and linguistically discrete non-native speakers themselves. However, the early experimentation in this early stage of fiction writing was a restricted and a more feeble one with examples of using romanised script for Indian words denoting objects peculiar to Indian society e.g., sari, pan, dhoti, supari, etc. There were markedly direct or indirect influences of English literature that shaped this new genre in India e.g., epigraphs from renowned British writers were common practice, and quotations and references were generally woven into narrative. There were echoes of canonical English novels often perceptible in the texts. The history of early novels in India is no doubt littered with examples of texts that began as derivative ventures but they far surpassed the novelists’ limited intentions by absorbing and reflecting the traits unique to their historical moment and cultural memory. Even today very few of these earliest novels in English are known or read, primarily because we have looked apologetically at the novel of that time as a derivative form. The novels published in the nineteenth and the early decades of twentieth century have been overshadowed in the development of both Indian English fiction as well as idiom. But as true pioneers they rightly deserve to be appreciated for their use of the English language as Meenakshi Mukherjee comments on Bankim Chandra Chatterje that “In *Rajmohan’s Wife* Bankimchandra’s attempt to negotiate the semantic and connotative hurdles that are involved in rendering an Indian (in his case Bengali) ethos in the English language, without any previous model whatsoever, forces us to think about the interconnectedness of culture and language, narrative voice and implied readership- issues that have not ceased to be relevant. It also makes us go beyond literary questions about how well one writes in English to non-literary questions regarding publication, distribution and marketing of a literary product in the local, national or global market. It is indeed worth considering the complex circumstances that made Bankimchandra shift from English to the mother tongue before he could gain national recognition, while in the late twentieth century India, one would expect the process to be reversed.”¹¹

Whatever fate was meted out to the earliest Indian English novelists, one thing is clear: once the Indian English novel made its appearance, there was no looking back. The initial attempts might be considered diffident but in no way unimportant. When we talk

¹⁰ Quoted in R.K.Singh, “Introductory,” *Indian English Writing*, ed. R.K.Singh. New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1987, pp. 3-4.

¹¹ Meenakshi Mukherjee, foreword, *Rajmohan’s Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. 1864; New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1996, pp. vii-viii.

of aforementioned Rajmohan's Wife or Govinda Samanta or the unfinished Bianca, we can not escape the inference that the continued and extended use of English from such early times in a country with its own ancient, sophisticated, multi-cultural, multi-linguistic and richly inclusive civilisation is an extraordinary fact of national and linguistic life. It can also be considered a powerful testimony to the expressive and creative capacities of the English language itself. About this Narayan himself has said:

“English has proved that if a language has flexibility, any experience can be communicated through it, even if it has to be paraphrased sometimes rather than conveyed, and even if the factual detail...is partially understood...All that I am able to confirm after nearly thirty years of writing, is that it has served my purpose admirably, of conveying unambiguously the thoughts and acts of a set of personalities, who flourish in a small town located in a corner of South India.”¹²

II

As mentioned earlier Indian English novel had its beginnings in the later half of 19th century and it developed more strongly and characteristically during first half of the 20th century. It was in the 1930s, to be precise, that successful Indian novelists began to write in English. Their contribution to the Indian English literary tradition is immense for they were the pioneers in the true sense who invented and established that tradition. There had been novelists writing in English as well as the other vernacular languages but what these earliest writers lacked was a sense of tradition- a tradition that they could follow and contribute to. And that tradition was inaugurated as well as established by the novelists of 1930s and onwards.

Eversince Macaulay had introduced English in the Indian educational system, there had been scepticism regarding the use of English in India questioning sometimes even the validity of such a creative literary expression, whether that was in the field of education or simply as a medium for creative expression. Despite their resistance, English was not only incorporated in the very roots of Indian educational system but it was used, and used brilliantly, by the Indian creative writers, and amongst them the greatest contributions were those of the novelists because they had to render an alien art form in an equally alien language. However, the novelists of the 30s deserve, as mentioned earlier, special reference for it was with them that the Indian English literary world got established indicating many of the main themes and techniques of Indian English fiction.

¹²Quoted in John Press, ed. *Commonwealth Literature: Unity and Diversity in a Common Culture*. (London: Heineman, 1965, p. 123.

They were succeeded by other, younger novelists, including women, who brought a modern spirit, new tracts of experience and new subject matter into fiction. It has become clear that the novel form and the English language complemented the Indian sensibility and Indian novelists writing in English made a noteworthy contribution to the literature in the language.

Beginning with the contributions of the “grandmasters of the Indian novel in English”¹³ i.e., Anand, Rao and Narayan, Indian English fiction came to be recognised for those aspects which were peculiar to the writers of India and to few other countries where English language was non-native. The distinct Indian way of using English became a great contribution to the literary world. It was with the efforts of these writers that the Third-World came to the foreground. The Western world did not approve or recognise such works of art initially. The writers from such colonised places as India, Africa, West Indies, Kenya who had faced the same political, social, economic backwardness and deterioration under the Western Imperial rule, have shown how English language can be adapted to reflect their respective environments and have proved that whenever the creative writer wields the language with honesty and in the certainty of his own vision, not only does it become his but he “remakes the language”.

The Indian novelists have been successful in presenting and revealing the Indian character and Indian life in an Indian variety of English- the Indianness of which consists in its cultural tones and not in the misuse of the language. India inspite of her variety and complexity is a cultural unit and there’s no better yardstick to measure the culture of a nation than her literature, which is an expression of society. The novelist in India, whether writing in English or in any of the regional languages, is so much a part of Indian cultural ethos that the language he uses seems a reflection of that. Whether we consider the trio or other novelists writing in English- those living in England or America in the direct milieu of the language in which they write or those living in close contact with Indian conditions and life- their use of English is a well suited medium to represent Indian life and emotions despite the diversity of experience of Indian society. In their hands English became an autonomous idiom and they formulated such a language which has the framework and basic structure of British English, in the Roman script, but having an organic capacity to grow freely and assimilate new words, new ideas and new constructions, new idioms, and if necessary, new letters of the alphabet, from each one of the regional languages of India.

¹³ Meenakshi Mukherjee, preface, *The Twice Born Fiction*. 1971; New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005, p.8.

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