Preserving Cultural Identity through Indian English Literature

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Abstract

The literature produced in India in English is a unique and highly complicated presence of colonial legacy and a powerful instrument of post-colonial resistance. English in India, as a result of its peculiar historical context, came out of the period of British rule of the Indian subcontinent never a neutral language, it was the language of governance, prestige and, in the hands of its colonizers, the deliberate exclusion of indigenous epistemologies. But paradoxically, generations of Indian writers have appropriated it and made it the weapon that has been used to register all that colonialism was trying to obliterate: the textures of caste, the plurality of religious life, the rhythms of the village and the city, the memories recorded in myth and folklore, the weight of partition and displacement, and the quiet dignities of everyday Indian experience. This paper suggests that, at least in the case of Indian English Literature, it has been, and remains an important force of preservation and renegotiation of cultural identity, not by documenting the identity, but by engaging it in active, creative and sometimes subversive ways with the English language and with the Indian civilizational inheritance. It looks at the work of the Indian writers who have developed alternative cultural imaginaries that go beyond the defining characteristics of 'Indianness' as a monolithic and stable cultural structure to create new, dynamic worlds of negotiation between tradition and modernity, locality and globality, memory and imagination, drawing inspiration from R. K. Narayan, Mulk

Raj Anand, Raja Rao and the diasporic and postmodern voices of Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. The paper also takes up some important theoretical frameworks from Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Frantz Fanon to shed light on the ideological aspects of this literary project.

Keywords: Literature, India in English, Colonial Legacy, Paradoxically, Preservation

Introduction

The connection of literature, language and cultural identity is never straightforward, however, in the Indian context it is even more complicated due to the immense amount of historical change the Indian subcontinent has experienced over the past three centuries. As the British East India Company came ashore on Indian shores and gradually established imperial power, it introduced not just armies and trade goods; it brought a worldview with written words, its worldview, its vision, its thinking, its ways of thought, its sense of values, its concept of reality, and its outlook on life: in the English language and its literary traditions. The aim of the colonial agenda was to produce, as Macaulay famously wrote in his Minute on Education (1835), a class of Indians, 'Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinions, and morals' (430). Therefore, the introduction of English-medium education was a conscious cultural decision with the aim of producing administrative middlemen, who would not be completely attached to the civilizational heritage of their own nation but would remain permanently enmeshed in the cognitive grid and moral language of their rulers. This was something Macaulay never expected and the history of the Indian English Literature makes no bones about it to have its own set of unforeseen consequences. Cultural displacement itself was the target of cultural recovery and assertion among educated Indians who used the tool. Beginning from the early twentieth century, when the novel, the short story, and the poem were among the first genres by which Indian authors in English ignited their presence and their work on the global literary scene, through the remarkable novelists of the modern era, the form of the novel, the

short story, and the poem have been used by Indian writers not only to entertain the western reader but to mark and claim the experiences of the particular Indian, the local Indian, the irreducibly Indian, that colonial and postcolonial powers have so often attempted to marginalize, simplify, or silence.

What it means to maintain the cultural identity through literature is, of course, a philosophical question. As postcolonial theorists have long said, identity is not a fixed identity, a constant identity, an essence that can be uncovered and preserved like a museum artefact, but rather a process of construction and reconstruction, always in dialogue with other identities, always shaped by the power relations in which people and communities are located. The 'third space of enunciation' of Homi K. Bhabha is especially relevant here: Bhabha has noted that there are no fixed identities in culture but they are constructed through the process of narration, between the colonizer's language and the experience of colonized (37). Indian English Literature occupies this third space in a manner which is uniquely productive; not to validate Western constructions of India through the use of English, but to disrupt them, to speak of the ‘supplement' things of Indian life and thought that can't be fully represented in the West and which stay just out of the frame. It is in this interstitial space that Indian English writers have made their own in-between, neither-nor, but-more-than space, neither nativist or colonial, but rather a space new in itself.

The Foundational Voices: Narayan, Anand, and Raja Rao

The trinity of R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao must be taken up with any discussion on the development of cultural preservation in Indian English Literature as they first began the possibilities of Indian English literature and the parameters of its cultural preservation. These three writers, whose works date from the 1930s and 1940s when the Indian independence movement was at its most critical stage, made remarkably divergent decisions regarding the use of English language and vision of Indian life that they wished to showcase in

it. Their distinctions are as revealing as their shared passion to represent India in a global language through literature.

Perhaps R. K. Narayan is the most loved or read of the three, and his accomplishment is the most subtly subversive. In this fictional South Indian town of Malgudi—a creation of Narayan's own that is as varied as a novel and as densely populated as a village—shopkeepers, teachers, printers, astrologers, and ordinary citizens were all taken as seriously and loved as objects of fiction were taken in the Victorian village of rural England. Narayan's English is squarely to the point and unpretentious, as it is subtly shaped by the rhythms of South Indian speech, the logic of caste relations, and the ubiquitous nature of Hindu mythology in everyday life. Narasimhaiah, as it is quoted, "Narayan does not explain India to the West, he simply presents it to them in such a way that explanation is not needed" (112). This presentation of Indian life is its expression on its own terms, without the apology of the native informant explaining himself to a foreign audience.

The experience of cultural identity is more polemical, more stirring in Mulk Raj Anand. Anand was deeply affected by the concepts of Marxism and his friendship with progressive British intellectuals, which he expressed in his English-language novels, exposing the harsh truths of caste discrimination, economic exploitation, and social hierarchy in Indian society. In his first novel Untouchable (1935), he recounts the story of Bakha, a young sweeper whose destiny by birth lies in social degradation, over the course of a single day – a journey that is as a search for the humanity of those the caste system aimed to dehumanize as it is a critique of the Hindu caste orthodoxy. Meenakshi Mukherjee's point is that the emotional knowledge of things that Anand transmits to an outsider audience his internal perception of oppression made legible to an outsider is what makes his work so special. Anand's "cultural work" consists here of a self-reflected reimagining of his subaltern characters' dignity and interior lives, and it is a work that is fundamentally at odds with the logic of caste's dehumanizing view of the characters

of its subalterns, so that, in fact, he is extending the definition of whose life counts as culturally significant.

Raja Rao is perhaps the most philosophical of the early Indian English Literature attempts to theorise the language/cultural identity relationship. His renowned introduction to the book, Kanthapura (1938), is among the most cited passages in the entire corpus: 'We cannot write like the English. We should not. Indian writing is our only medium of writing. We have come to consider the large world as our part of us' (Rao vii). This is the conviction that is expressed through Rao's novels. Kanthapura goes to great pains to present a narrative voice via the local chronicle of a village's sacred history, or the sthala-purana, and incorporates the rhythms of Kannada oral storytelling, the metaphysical framework of Gandhian non-violence, and the epic sweep of the independence struggle in a form that is recognizably novelistic but deeply and insistently Indian. Rao's English is not a transparent medium like that of Narayan; it is a conscious mediator, sometimes clunky, always philosophically charged, that draws attention to the struggle of translating Indian experience into a European medium.

Partition, Memory, and the Politics in Indian Narrative

While the first generation of Indian English writers was focused on establishing Indian life as a legitimate subject for serious literary treatment, the writers who came out in the decades after independence and partition found themselves faced with far more painful questions. The partition of India in 1947, which led to the violent separation of the subcontinent into two states based on religious lines, one of the largest forced migrations in human history, and the deaths of anywhere between a million and two million people, was a challenge for any work of literature to address the issue of cultural identity. Partition was not just a dismembering of a territory, it was a fracturing of communities, a tearing apart of families, a disruption of the complex cultural ecologies of areas such as the Punjab and Bengal that have been religiously and linguistically diverse for centuries, a wound in the collective memory of South Asia, a

wound that never healed. Literature on partition must, as Alok Bhalla has said, be literature of the violence at the very core of the process of identity formation the exclusion of the other that occurs not only in shared traditions, values etc. but also in the trauma it causes (203).

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988) is an account of partition and its consequences that is particularly focused on the interplay between memory, imagination and cultural identity. The novel, which shifts between Calcutta, London and Dhaka in multiple time periods, rejects the linear before and after that the partition historiography typically projects, and instead examines the nuanced, sometimes contradictory relationships between the ordinary people who create their own attachments to a place, to a community, to a cultural tradition. In his essays and interviews, Ghosh has spoken and written a lot about the "dangerous tendency of nationalist narratives to simplify and essentialize cultural identity, to draw clean lines where in fact there are only gradations, continuities, and shared inheritances (233). His fiction does what his essays claim: cultural identity is always more complicated, more plural, more bound up with those who are marked as the other than official narratives will admit, even in the wake of violent partition.

Salman Rushdie and the Postmodern Reinvention of Indian Narrative

Salman Rushdie, whose *Midnight's Children* (1981) is considered to have changed the course of Indian English writing and the world of postcolonial fiction, in particular, cannot be ignored when dealing with the issue of cultural identity in Indian English Literature. But Rushdie's accomplishment is in many ways a continuation of the project begun by Narayan, Anand and Raja Rao to turn the English novel into a good servant of the whole of Indian experience, and he has done so in wildly different formal terms. Unlike Narayan's reticence and understatement, Rushdie makes use of an excess: the voice of the novel's narrator, Saleem Sinai, is a stream of allusion, digression, myth, history, gossips, and self-contradiction deeply embedded in the oral traditions of Indian storytelling, and the traditions of the cosmopolitan,

multilingual popular culture of Bombay. His concept of the 'chutnification of history' is deservingly a recurring theme in the discussions of the novel, as the novel's narrative is a product of a spicy, heterogeneous mixture of ingredients, which cannot be boiled down to any single flavour (Rushdie 459). Indian culture is not a pure and untouched tradition to be retrieved and saved from outside invasion; it is always hybrid a mixture, product of conquest, trade, migration and creative adaptation. Its form, effusively of the Sterne and Grass, the *Arabian Nights* and the *Mahabharata*, Hindi film and English schoolboy fiction, is a realization of this vision.

The enlightening theory of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is relevant in explaining what is at stake in Rushdie's literary project. What is troubling here is Spivak's idea about the subaltern; the people who are systematically oppressed by the dominant discourses of colonialism and nationalist resistance, and it is possible that Indian English Literature, with its claims of cultural preservation and resistance, does not actually represent the voices of the majority of Indians, who are often rural, multilingual, and non-literate, and who are oppressed by the Kolkata-based, upper-caste, educated, English-speaking elite whose relationship to other Indian cultures is itself mediated by structures of power (Spivak 83). This is a question that has been taken up by the best Indian English writers and for this reason this approach is more serious than more complacent celebration of Indian cultural richness.

In one of the more sustained and formally complex attempts of recent Indian English Literature to grapple with just this question (how the literary imagination relates to the lives of those whom power makes invisible and inaudible), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) stands out. The novel follows the late 1960s events in the Syrian Christian community of Kerala, India, and the novel's child characters' fragmented, non-linear consciousness, as they watch the devastating consequences of caste transgression, the love affair between a Touchable woman and an Untouchable man. Roy's narrative device, alternating between past and present,

gradually unfolds the revelations in a series of formal enactments, which, thematically, is what the past, in the form of a trauma of the caste, gender and class, is: a not-linear return, a recursive haunting, an experience that underscores every moment in the present. The language of Roy's novels is one of the most unique and intentionally shaped in the entire history of Indian English writing is filled with Malayalam words, rhythms, and idioms, the sense of the landscape and the domestic scene of Kerala, and political jargon from Kerala's communist movements. Roy is not only the cultural specificity of her setting, but a recreation of it in language, an invitation to the English novel form to hold within itself means of feeling and knowing which it wasn't made for.

Diaspora, Displacement, and the Negotiation of Belonging

The third aspect of this analysis involves the myriad of Indian diasporic writings in English, which emerged from writers of Indian origin living in Britain, the United States, and Canada, as well as other countries. The third dimension that needs to be analysed is the relationship between the Indian diasporic writing in English and the issue of cultural identity and preservation. Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, and Bharati Mukherjee are a few writers who have extended and complicated the tradition of Indian English writing started by the founders, writing about the experience of displacement and of living between cultures. The psychological complexity of the conflicts between first generation immigrants who try to maintain cultural traditions and values from their origins and their children's inevitable assimilation into American life are explored in *The Namesake* (2003) and *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Lahiri's fiction avoids both the romanticization of the homeland and the triumphalism of assimilation, instead occupying a fraught, often comically unpredictable, always humanizing zone of cultural 'in-betweenness', in which identity is continually negotiated and not inherited. This diasporic awareness is extended into an international perspective in Kiran Desai's Man Booker Prize-winning 2006 novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*, where a Nepali hill station is

connected to New York restaurants, and the post-colonial histories of post-colonial migrations and colonialism that produced both (28). This insistence on the importance of the materiality of cultural identity in the present world, beyond the cultural analyses of identity provided by Bhabha and Spivak, is where Desai's novel draws its own material dimension.

Conclusion

After the above survey, it is quite clear to us that the writing from Narayan to Anand and Raja Rao to Roy to Ghosh, Rushdie, Lahiri and Desai, Indian English Literature is a dynamic, internally diverse, philosophically rich tradition which has not been subject to cultural submission, but rather a place of cultural production, negotiation, and, in its most ambitious, a place of cultural transformation via the English language as its medium. The authors analysed in this paper have not been those who have sought to preserve and safeguard the culture to protect it from the contamination of modernity or Western influence, or the past, but rather those that have addressed it as an ongoing dialogue between tradition and change, between the local and the global, between the remembered and the imagined. They have broadened the very definition of Indian culture and its representatives, voicing the concerns of those who have been excluded; dalits and women, those of partition survivors, Kashmiri militants, immigrants' children, who have a stake in both continents. In so doing, they have warped the English language, warped it, stretched it, hybridized it, to fit the sthala-purana and the chutnification of history, the Dickensian novel and Woolfian stream of consciousness. The outcome is a literature that is truly new, not quite Indian, not quite English, but something in-between that enriches the literary imagination of the world. Indian English Literature will remain one of the most relevant and essential literatures in the world as long as problems of identity, belonging, memory and justice will continue to be relevant and urgent.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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