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November is the Coolest Month. Flowers are Lilac and Memories are Green: English and the Subnational in Recent Indian Fiction in English

Abstract:

The paper discusses the ways in which the English language has undergone a prismatic transformation in the decades since Independence. The relevance of the language as an agency in the discourse of power and subnational engagement opens up interesting insights into the fissures that run through the ideology of the nation. The paper examines if English should even be seen as a foreign language and a colonial legacy or if the Indian melting pot has put forth a whole new language- English.

Keywords: English, Fiction, Indian Writing, Subnationalism

I. Introduction

The IN used to spell English is not a typographical error. It is a conscious decision based on recent reflections on the foreignness of English as a language. An advertisement for a popular brand of chocolate had a rather simple but significant scenario to offer. A young man goes for the college play auditions and speaks his peculiar lingo of English. He is thrown out. He then munches on the chocolate and celebrates his 'broken English', shattering all the staid conventions and elicits 'action', 'reaction', 'sensation' through his munchification.

Thus, the celebration of the Indianness of English presents a very potent picture of the comfort level that Indians now enjoy in the language and the ways the language is used to realise the means of their livelihood. The National Council of Educational Research and Training states that "The level of introduction of English is now a matter of political response to people's aspirations rather than an academic or feasibility issue." (NCERT 2005: 38)

II. Language and its location in the geopolitical discourse

The Indian political psyche is a very divided one. There are individual state legacies, linguistic legacies, localised myths and very particular and particulate histories that fragment

the idea of the Indian. The dichotomy of the State and the Centre and the peculiarities of caste have gone a long way in constructing this difference. The role that languages play as agencies of power in these economies is of great importance. It must be remembered that India was constructed along linguistic lines and therefore the language divide lies at the heart of all subnational debates. The local language served as the language of dissent and as a means of establishing superiority based on antiquity among the Indian languages. These cultural wars were often militant in nature as was witnessed in erstwhile Bombay and then in Tamil Nadu. English however, has had a very tenuous relationship with India. From being seen as the language of the oppressor, to a corridor of communication with the coloniser, the knowledge of English then went on to herald the arrival of the modern Indian. The Modern Indian was one who was steeped in the ethos of British modernity, and yet was able to understand and negotiate the ideals of Indian customs and modes of cultural economy. From there, the language went on to stand for the sound of progress. Newly independent India sent its voice out to the world in English. The midnight address of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, made in English, was more of a manifesto of the ethos of the new nation and was as much for the international community as it was for the Indians. Since then, English has come to be a status symbol and an indicator of the economic and cultural progress of Indians. Knowing the language was seen as a means of garnering a better life. This fixation with the language was never lost on the Indian imagination who came up with songs such as “My Name is Anthony Gonsalves” where the character engagingly sings about the contradictions of English. The effect is the same as that produced by the munchification done by the young man decades later in the advertisement. English then becomes a language of the masses. The conundrums, concords and complex grammatical and lexical codes suddenly no longer appear a problem as the use of Hinglish not only provides a campy version of the language. English then becomes uniquely Indian. The emphasis is not on correctness, but on creativity and in that instant, English is transformed into an agency that is well poised to convey the complexities of the Indian psyche and political landscape. The mastication of the English language thus becomes the by word for a very strong subnational movement that is seen in literature and the arts these past few years.

English is no longer a foreign language. It's altered cadences, nuances and unique expressions have made it a very Indian language. That too a language that lends itself to the subversive intonations. The politics of language as a part of colonisation has been well documented. The adopt, adapt and adept phases have been documented in great detail. Being fluent in English in India gives the speaker a peculiarly privileged position. Most parents

inevitably want an 'English' education for their children so as to ensure their success in the world. The 'properness' of English has come to become a major factor in deciding the 'quality' of the individual. The vernacular has struggled to hold its own under these in schools. States such as Kerala now ask for competency in the regional language to apply for government jobs.

Thus India as a country is at a very crucial juncture of its identity crisis. That there has been a linguistic consciousness at the heart of this nation is very apparent from the fact that the states were divided on the basis of language. The declaration of Hindi as the national language faced stiff opposition from a number of states, especially Tamil Nadu.

III. Language as an agency of subnational discourse

The works of Salman Rushdie, especially *Midnight's Children*, opened possibilities of a lot that could happen with English in India. The unapologetic wantonness or liberties that he took with the language went beyond the adept. The chutnification process was equally applicable to English just as it lent an effective hand in subverting history and the idea of the nation.

This possibility that Indian writing in English presented was magnified with Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Roy's language served as a separate entity that prided itself on its un-Englishness. The power of these writings enabled a new bold identity to establish itself; that of the fearless Indian who wrote not to appease but to clearly emphasise the difference in the psyche of the nation. The post-liberalisation era and the emergence of the brash Indian coincided with parallel movements in literature and the arts. The confident India now chose to speak in its own cadences. This was indeed the Empire writing back- the narratives had an inclusive 'Us'- the wide west just took an active interest in this new and refreshing topology of Indianness.

Indian Writing in English has come a long way from the then 'chutnification' to the now 'munchification'. The slew of promising books- both fiction and non-fiction seem to have the guns trained on the idea of India as a homogenized whole. The introspective, unidirectional narrative of personal grief, stereotyped frustrated women, spiritually bereft men have all given way to a polyphony. The new writing is intensely conscious of the fractures and fissures of India's sociological, political, cultural and gendered systems. The writings are driven by these concerns and defiantly exhort the readers to not treat these works as mere fiction. Examples abound- Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger*, Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins*, Srividya Natarajan's *No Onions nor Garlic*, Jeet Thayyil's *Narcopolis* and *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous*, Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*, Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*,

The Blind Lady's Descendants. These are works that have escaped classification based on the caste affiliations of the writers- something that is the wont in India. Apart from these works written in English, there is a huge corpus of regional language translations that are leaving indelible marks on the reader's consciousness.

The subnational movement, as mentioned before is a politically charged and creative space that employs subversion and carnivalesque to be taken as a viable opponent to the mega narrative. In the case of India, there have been massive subnational movements along regional, linguistic, pre-colonial, economic and legislative lines. Some of these movements led to the creation of new states such as Chattisgarh, Telengana,, Uttarakhand etc., while others such as the Bodoland conflicts, the Assam and the North-East and above all, Kashmir continue to occupy our collective unconscious as very vital issues that have not found comfort in the usual slogan of 'Unity in Diversity'. The concept of India as a united, homogenous country is thus defamiliarised and in its place, the image of a multitude of people carving out protest spaces against as occupying power is created.

The subnational is ever present today. The devolution of power through the complex economic channels has seen to it that little diverse movements towards alternate expressions find their space in the sun. The grand narratives are being shed for mobile, adaptable ones. Case in point is our concept of museums as sombre spaces that occupy designated spaces and are to carry the weight of history in dismal perpetuating spaces. The Kiran Nadar museum is located in a shopping mall and has a very mobile artefact base. The idea of what can and could be accommodated in a museum is also swiftly changing thanks to this minor but progressive rewriting.

The appreciation of public spaces, theatre groups, decalcification of the government communication machinery, the advent of the selfie as a viable foreign policy document show that there is a very strong subculture at work-one that accommodates alternatives. The drive of the subculture movements has been such that there has been a clamour to look beyond the usual 'national' icons towards a more inclusive image base. Though governments use this to further their political and ideological agenda and there is a very colour coded rewriting of history textbooks-such that history is being pulped and reprinted, there is at least a search for alternate heroes. The increasing recognition of Ayyan Kali as a spokesperson of the oppressed classes and calls for his legacy to be disseminated validates this point.

K. Satchidanandan writes,

It has been some time since the subcontinental English fiction came of age and began to grapple with Indian history and reality with a confidence an artistry one seldom

comes across in its early practitioners. This new confidence that one first found in writers such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and Amitav Ghosh marks many of the new writers who do not mind taking the risks involved in portraying Indian rural reality in English:And looking at the result, one can well say it has not been a vain adventure: we now have a corpus of such fiction that can legitimately claim to be as much Indian as fiction written in the languages whose losses in texture are compensated to a great extent by the intimate insight into the lives and minds of the men and women who people their ably painted landscapes.

The very idea that English is better equipped to voice the concerns of Indian modernity when compared to the vernacular, establishes its Indianness.

If looking alike is a crime,

Half of China would have been in prison.

- Adv. Fakir Ansari (1957-) (158)

Those who do not love me do not deserve to live

- Colonel Gaddafi (1942-2011) (207)

These two statements appear in Anees Salim's *Vanity Bagh*. The second statement is by a well-known dictator while the first is made by a character in the novel. The book is structured such that at critical points in the narrative, there are epigrammatic statements like these- as though they are nuggets of profound wisdom made by very wise men. The narrative centres around an accused of the 11/11 Mumbai blasts and the subsequent court proceedings, comments made by film stars, dialogues from English films, musings of a poetry club, the members of which are not even characters are thrown in to create a polyphony of disjointed voices that seek to upset the linearity of the novel's structure. These voices seek to be heard in a scenario where they could have been left out for the sake of homogeneity.

On the day of the blast, Imran Jabbari was with me the whole day. Where? Wherever he claimed to be.

- Haji Masood (1929-) (128)

It is never mentioned where such statements are made but one can assume that many are made in the courthouse during the trial of the accused. The utter hopelessness of the situation induces both laughter and pity, not just for the under trial but also for the legal system that is a monolithic institution. One cannot help but think of Chaitanya Tamhane's Marathi film *Court*- about the trial of a folk singer whose songs on oppression and exploitation so moved a municipal worker that he committed suicide. The singer was on trial for inspiring suicide.

The technique of juxtaposition enables Salim to showcase the lives of the other India- one that is defiant and angry and draws its icons from across the borders. The characters hail from a part of Bombay called Little Pakistan- this could just as easily be Mumbra in Mumbai which was once called mini Pakistan. The protagonist's friends all have names of significance in Pakistan – Jinnah, Zia, Wasim, Imran, Inzamam ul Haq, Navaz Sharif, Zulfikar, Yahya. Their knowledge of history is so skewed that the poster containing the following message was thought to be an advertisement for an SMS offer –

My life is my message.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) (117)

Young Imran Jabbari thought that Independence Day was on August 14 and was made to write August 15, two hundred and fifty times by his Hindu teacher and further, he was asked to get his father's signature on the document. The rivals of Vanity Bagh were the Hindu majoritarian colony of Mehendi and these two colonies seem to be microcosms of communal tensions that India has often witnessed.

This failure to recognise the iconic images of India's 'Indian' ideology is something that one can find in Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* where the Dalit Peon, Ayyan Mani routinely writes the Thought for the Day- generally scathing remarks on the caste system and attributes them to famous people.

If you want to understand India, don't talk to Indians who speak in English

- Salman Rushdie (377)

It's a myth that Sanskrit is the best language for writing computer code. Patriotic Indians have spread this lie for many years

- Bill Gates (30)

Ayyan Mani, with an IQ of 148, is a peon at the Institute of Theory and Research and chafes at the thought of Brahmin scientists earning huge sums of money for pondering over very abstract problems for decades at a time. The frustrations of the caste system are placed under a spotlight through the subversive writings of this peon. He inserts a phoney quote once a week so as to not attract too much attention and this subversive act gives him the sustenance to get by. Manu Joseph uses the subversive interplay of language and the absurdity of the one credited with saying the quote to drive home the extreme ridiculousness of the caste system. The miscredited, never uttered quotes serve to show the anger simmering with Mani and also underline the moral responsibility that everyone, including the reader must take for not dismantling this crippling discrimination. That the indictment comes from

world famous people- who would be bewildered to know they are rumoured to have said this- makes it even more acerbic.

Joseph does not launch into a diatribe about the caste system and its evils. Instead, he lets the idea take root in a quiet manner. Through the quotes of Mani, the casual derision of the upper caste scientists, the debilitating effects of alcoholism and lack of opportunities for the other Dalits in Mani's colony, Joseph lets the picture unfold. The retaliation, when it comes starts mildly with contamination of the food of the scientists, and is brought to a culmination later with a violent display of solidarity.

Throughout the novel, Joseph subtly uses English in its subversive capacity to draw focus on India's exploitative caste system. He uses the language of the invaders to launch an attack on 'Indian culture' - something that is understood as synonymous with upper caste Hindu culture.

Reservations for the low castes in colleges is a very unfair system. To compensate, let us offer the Brahmins the right to be treated as animals for 3000 years and at the end of it let's give them a 15 per cent reservation. – Vallumpuri John (120)

The impossibility of the personalities attributed to the quotes or in some cases, their obscurity, lends the Notice Board the various possibilities generally available to graffiti sites. The attendant risks, pleasures and the freedom that these sites present are available to Mani. The language of choice -English- is one that was once the language of power, of opportunities and later in 'cultural India' stood as the anti-thesis of sacred and hallowed languages. In this manner, English is the munchified language, as it undergoes a rigorous ingestion that extracts every ounce of power play possibilities.

The quotes by Anees Salim, too are graffiti as they paint a polyphonic landscape where icons are broken and remade. Language thus, takes on the role of graffiti, revelling in the possibilities of providing interludes of disjointed discourses.

IV. Conclusion

There is immense creativity and vitality in the way in which language is used in these works. The usual format of infusing the text with staccato references in the vernacular, with or without a glossary was seen as an act of defiance. The writers such as Salim and Joseph have taken this a step further by deploying their language to dismantle the idea of political monolithic and monotheistic narratives. Their worlds speak a language that is iconoclast and psychedelic.

A greater crime than the Holocaust was untouchability. Nazis have paid the price, but the Brahmins are still reaping the rewards for torturing others.

- Albert Einstein (351)

In view of the literary movements, where Dalit experiences are supposedly best expressed by those who underwent these experiences, where the vernacular was the best medium of expressing the rage, pain and protest, Ayyan Mani's wordings, in a mainstream language destabilises the upper class bastions of privileged knowledge. In the process, sense of entitlement that the knowledge of English brings with it is also dismantled. For those that write out of India today, English is possibly English.

To conclude, it is fitting to quote from Manu Joseph.

English is indisputable Indian now, and the most useful language in India. But it is not the most beloved, nor the medium of abuse during road rage. That special place Indians will always grant only to their mother tongues.

Notes

¹Title from Vanity Bagh (176)

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