

Can a Spirit of Our Own be Expressed in the Language of Our Coloniser?¹

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between the concept of Indian identity and the English language as reflected in Indian literature. Questions of identity in this literature are inextricably connected with the issue of using English, the language of the erstwhile colonisers, to portray the non-English, multilingual socio-cultural and political experience of the Indian space. I argue that English is today an Indian language and even functions as a vernacular Indian language. An attempt to dismiss English as the language of the coloniser is endeavouring to reverse the wheels of history, because the Indian nation itself is a product of colonialism. Literature written in this language is not antithetical to or removed in its concerns from literature written in the different regional Indian languages. Rather, like literature in any other Indian language, not only is Indian-English literature credible Indian literature, but often it expresses a sensibility associated with the vernacular and can be meant primarily for an Indian audience. The vernacularisation of English is not based on any linguistic peculiarities of Indian English, but is achieved through the socio-political aspects of the language and the literary articulations of English in a mutually constitutive manner alongside various Indian regional languages.

Keywords

Vernacular, English, Indian-English, Indian writings in English, regional literature, metropolitan/nativist

I

This study explores the relationship between the concept of Indian identity and the English language as reflected in Indian literature. Questions of identity in this literature are inextricably connected with the issue of using English, the language of the erstwhile colonisers, to portray the non-English, multilingual socio-cultural and political experience of the Indian space. I argue that English

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is today an Indian language and even functions as a vernacular Indian language. It is a co-official language in the country and a pan-Indian “link” language between the different linguistic communities; India is at present the country with the second largest English speaking population in the world (Times News Network). Like any regional Indian language, English is now the first language of a cross-section of the Indian population, who are educated in this language, who use it on a daily basis not only in the outside world but also in their private spheres, and who are capable of literary production only in this language.³ An attempt to dismiss English as the language of the coloniser, unsuitable for representing the Indian experience, is endeavouring to reverse the wheels of history, because the Indian nation itself is a product of colonialism. Literature written in this language is not antithetical to or removed in its concerns from literature written in the different regional Indian languages. Rather, like literature in any other Indian language, not only is Indian-English literature credible Indian literature, but often it expresses a sensibility associated with the vernacular and can be meant primarily for an Indian audience. The vernacularisation of English is not based on any linguistic peculiarities of Indian English (as seen in arguments made about creole/pidgin English); instead, it is achieved through the socio-political aspects of the language, and the literary articulations of English in a mutually constitutive manner alongside various Indian regional languages.

II

The difficulty of representing the Indian experience through the medium of English was highlighted by Raja Rao, the author of one of the first successful Indian novels ever written in English. In the foreword to his 1938 novel *Kanthapura*, he remarked:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and emotions of certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word “alien,” yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up, like Sanskrit or Persian was before, but not of our emotional make-up.

Indian literary history seems to substantiate the validity of Rao's claim. The famous Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's first novel *Raj Mohan's Wife*, published in 1864, was written in English. The work is devoid of the

³ I use the term first language to denote the language that one uses most proficiently for reading, writing, as well as speaking.

merits of Bankim's later novels in Bengali. Realising the inadequacy of his medium, he resorted to Bengali and came to be acclaimed as "Shahitya Samrat," i.e. the emperor of literature. The noted Bengali poet and playwright Michael Madhusudan Dutt began his career with "The Captive Lady" (1849) and other poems written in English. Thereafter, he began writing in Bengali and is credited with modernising Bengali verse. In the late nineteen twenties Mahatma Gandhi had remarked to Mulk Raj Anand, after reading a draft of his novel *Untouchables*, that his harijans sounded like Bloomsbury intellectuals.

The issue which Rao drew attention to came under the limelight in 1997, following a comment made by Salman Rushdie in his introduction to an anthology of Indian writings published on the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence. In sharp contrast to Rao, who emphasised the problematic aspects of creating Indian literature in the language acquired from British colonisers, Rushdie claimed Indian-English literature to be the most superior variety of Indian literature produced since independence. He declared, "prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period [the first fifty years of Indian independence] by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a more interesting body of work than most of what has been produced in the 'sixteen official languages' of India, the so called 'vernacular languages,' during the same time" ("Damme"160). Rushdie's comment initiated a series of anti-Rushdie criticisms, ranging from attacks on Rushdie's linguistic limitations to a dismissal of Indian-English literature as limited bourgeois art. However, neither Rushdie nor his critics, either those who have asserted the superiority of regional Indian literature over Indian writing in English or those who have viewed Indian writing in English and regional language literature of India as equally meritorious but different products of a multilingual society, have recognised the function of English as a vernacular Indian language and the status of Indian-English literature as vernacular Indian literature. Just as it is necessary to contest any attempt of discrediting regional language Indian literature, this recognition is also essential given the current status of English in India and the fact that even the aesthetic and poetic sensibilities that are traditionally associated with the vernacular can now be found in much English language literature of India.

Although it is not a regional Indian language, today English certainly does operate as a vernacular Indian language. A vernacular language is a language that is inextricably connected with a culture and effectively articulates the nuances, the specificities and the peculiarities which distinguish that culture from others. The sensibilities that are associated with a culture and the concerns that a culture has find appropriate expression through its vernacular language/s. Today English belongs to the ranks of Indian vernacular. Indians have "appropriated" this erstwhile colonial language, and it can now function as an Indian vernacular language like the various regional Indian languages. In *The*

Empire Writes Back, appropriation is defined as “the process by which... [a] language is taken and made to ‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience” (38). English can be used to successfully evoke the specific nuances and concerns of the different local cultures of India and the sensibilities that result from those cultural experiences. In other words, the English language can now convey appropriately the Indian spirit.

The function of English as an Indian vernacular, which critical discourse has overlooked, is manifested in the daily usages of English in India and in the literature written in this language. The status of English as an Indian vernacular is apparent from the fact that in most regional languages of the country English words have made a permanent place for themselves. For example, words like chair, table, glass, cup, dish, plate, train, bus, rail, tram, station, pants, radio, pencil, cigarette, bank, tomato, and several others have become an integral part of the Bengali vocabulary.⁴ Most of these words either do not have a Bengali equivalent, or, even if they do, their Bengali counterparts are hardly ever used in spoken or written Bengali. As a result most users of Bengali remain unaware of the Bengali equivalents of these words. Certain Indian-English coinages like cousin-brother, cousin-sister, pin-drop silence, duster, eve-teasing, mixy, goondaism, upanishadic etc. are frequently used. The use of English words in regional language conversations, code switching, i.e. changing from a regional language to English or vice versa in the same conversation, and often using sentences that combine English and a regional language are common practices. For example, a recent Bengali advertisement of a mobile phone combined Bengali and English words in the following manner, “Friends der sathe connected rakhe Airtel” i.e. Airtel keeps you connected with friends (“Airtel Ad Bengali”). Such a combination is common in everyday conversations and in advertisements. These practices suggest that various shades and emotions of Indian thought movement can be properly encapsulated in English.

That English is an Indian vernacular is further established by Indian-English literature, in which the lived material experience of Indian culture and a vernacular Indian sensibility find successful representation. A vernacular language is more than just a language; it is the language used by cultural insiders. Indian-English literature highlights the fact that English is one of the languages used by the insiders of the Indian culture. S. Shankar states that vernacular sensibility suggests an orientation towards rootedness, cultural autonomy and specific locality (85). Indian vernacular literature reflects an investment in the indigenous; this literature primarily engages in an investigation of the concerns of the society from which it emerges. It thus attempts to reproduce local specificities and explores issues pertaining to a particular Indian space, culture and time in Indian history. Pankaj Mishra, therefore, defines Indian vernacular

⁴ Bengali is used as the representative of Indian regional languages.

literature as “literature that attempts to figure out the society from which it issues” (“Little Inking?”). Understanding this literature mandates a thorough awareness of the background and the current and future implications of the issues it explores. The dimensions evoked in vernacular literature are, however, usually relevant either in terms of the Indian experience of a period as a whole or the experience of a region or sect of the country, and may not seem significant when viewed in a larger international context. This literature is thus essentially meant for an internal audience for whom the concerns that this literature delves into are realities integral to their day to day Indian experience.

Indian vernacular writers are like the intended audience of their works insiders of the community they depict, and thus are affected like their audience by the situations prevailing in the community. They often function as voices of protest or dissent within the community, but continue to be members of the community. An author’s own concern for and perspective on the issues he/she examines in his/her works is usually clearly apparent. For example, the Bengali novel *The Home and the World* bears evidence of Rabindranath Tagore’s dissatisfaction with one of the most successful anti-British movements in Indian history and amplifies the causes for such a stance. The Tamil play *Water* tells the story of the abysmal condition of a drought stricken village in South India and the failures of all attempts by the villagers to redress their grievances. The play is a prominent illustration of the playwright Komal Swaminathan’s disappointment with the state of affairs in independent India. The sensibility expressed in Indian vernacular literature is strongly rooted in the cultures and the societies of the different regions of India.

Indian-English literature does display these characteristics. The English-language works of R.K Narayan reflect a very vernacular sensibility. Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* has been translated into Hindi. Seth in his preface to the Hindi edition has remarked that *Koi Achcha-sa Ladka*, the Hindi version of *A Suitable Boy*, has returned the novel “to its source milieu and medium, so that now even some of the characters in it would finally be able to read it” (qtd. in *Bombay* 74). Why nothing is lost in the process of translation from English to Hindi, and why the Hindi version of the novel is so unquestioningly acceptable can be explained in terms of Amitava Kumar’s observation about *A Suitable Boy*. Kumar has observed that Seth’s novel “is filled with a deep feeling for vernacular culture,” and it articulates in English sensibilities that can be expressed in regional Indian languages (*Bombay* 71). Such an observation can also be correctly made about Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* and *The Hungry Tide*, Pankaj Mishra’s *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana* and *The Romantics*, Manil Suri’s *Death of Vishnu*, Amit Chaudhuri’s *A Strange and Sublime Address* and several other Indian-English works. In all these works, as in *A Suitable Boy* and the writings of Narayan, the writers come across as insiders of the community they are writing about and aiming at an internal Indian audience.

The status of Indian-English literature as vernacular Indian literature is, however, most prominently apparent in Indian-English women's writings, a fact that critical discourse has not paid attention to. Indian-English women's writings are often invested in the question of Indian women's subalternity, which has for a considerable period of time been a significant socio-political concern in India. As vernacular Indian literature focuses on particular Indian situations, both male and female writers writing in the regional Indian languages like Bengali have persistently highlighted the anomalies of the subordinate social standing of women. In fact, in an interview, Rushdie while elaborating on his dismissal of vernacular literature as parochial has identified bad treatment of women as, what he biasedly estimates, one among the limited range of subjects of this literature ("Interview" 36). Indian-English women writers like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur and others are like Bengali women writers, such as Ashapura Devi, Bani Basu and Suchitra Bhattacharya to name a few, insiders of the Indian society. Like Bengali women writers they also attempt to figure out how women's empowerment can be achieved in spite of the prevailing adverse circumstances. These writers, like their Bengali counterparts, attribute women's sufferings to certain conditions prevalent in Indian society, and suggest ways of redressing women's grievances that are explored by Bengali women writers as well. The fact that Indian-English women's writing is not an isolated category, but, by virtue of sharing feminist concerns with regional language literature, can be classified as belonging to the general group of Indian women's literature, suggests that Indian-English literature can be as much invested in the socio-cultural and political concerns of the Indian space as writings in the regional Indian languages. This orientation towards the local does claim for it the status of vernacular Indian literature. It also establishes that English is an Indian vernacular language that can be used, like any other Indian language, to effectively probe specific Indian concerns.

The lack of recognition of the function of English as a vernacular Indian language and the status of Indian-English literature as vernacular Indian literature has resulted in distinguishing regional language Indian literature and Indian writings in English either in terms of the parochial/bourgeois art or the cosmopolitan/local binary. Rushdie has argued, "parochialism is perhaps the main vice of vernacular literatures" ("Damme" 165). Anti-Rushdie critics Pankaj Mishra, Tabish Khair and Aijaz Ahmad have claimed that Indian writing in English is bourgeois literature produced by the Indian upper and middle-classes and is meant to cater to these classes and the West. Mishra argues, "In a globalised world, the writers belong to themselves alone; and literature that attempts to figure out the society from which it issues is likely to be accused of being 'parochial' and considered inferior to literature that can hold 'a conversation with the world,' as a recent anthologist of expatriate writing put it" ("Little Inking"). He further claims that this literature is "a curiously serene, if

limited, deployment of the special advantages provided by a privileged education: fluency in English and an abstract knowledge of the world” (“Little Inkling”). In the opinion of Khair, Indian-English fiction is “Babu fiction.” It is written by the most privileged section of the Indian population, who share class loyalties and a position “dramatically” and “consciously” located between India and the West, and are hugely exposed to discourses emanating from western cultural and socio-political locations (21). Ahmad maintains that in independent India, English has acquired more power as a centralising force in a mosaic of cultures, languages and ethnicities than it commanded in colonial India. He attributes this phenomenon to the “consolidation, expansion, increased self-confidence, and increased leisure” of the country’s bourgeois class, “especially the petty bourgeoisie located in the professions and in the state apparatuses” (75). He claims that this class is “fully consolidated as a distinct social entity and [is] sophisticated enough in its claim to English culture for it to aspire to have its own writers, publishing houses, and a full-fledged market for English books”(75).

The arguments of Mishra, Khair and Ahmad are reminiscent of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s handling of the language question in his discussions about African Literature. According to Ngugi, writing in English and writing in the other African languages are antithetical enterprises. The latter displays a commitment to African cultural values, while the former is marked by a betrayal of those values. He advocates a theory of language as identity and claims that the intimacy of creative writing is permitted only in one’s mother tongue. Thus, in his opinion, the use of a language which has come from the Englishman to the African can only serve to alienate the latter from his lived reality. Ngugi views African writing in the European languages as the neo-colonial residue of cultural imperialism that aims to dominate “the mental universe of the colonised” (16). According to him, such literature is the creation of a comprador bourgeois class, which is alienated from the larger masses of the African people by virtue of its colonial education, and remains restricted to this class because of its linguistic medium. Mishra, Ahmed, Khair and Ngugi argue against prioritising literature written in English over the vast gamut of writings in the regional languages.

Shankar, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Meenakshi Mukherjee distinguish regional language Indian literature and Indian-English writings in terms of the cosmopolitan/local binary. In fact, these anti-Rushdie critics also tend to perpetuate the distinction created by Rushdie between literature written in the regional languages and Indian writing in English. Like Rushdie, these critics too suggest that while regional language literature concentrates on the local and articulates a vernacular sensibility, India-English literature concerns itself with having a conversation with the world and therefore gives expression to a transnational sensibility. Shankar argues that the basis for Rushdie’s biased

exclusion of vernacular writings from the canon of postcolonial Indian literature is the western academy's tendency of privileging transnational postcolonialism, which aims at a conversation with the world, over vernacular postcolonialism that concentrates on local concerns and issues (82). Sunder Rajan observes that while vernacular writers aim at a local audience familiar with the Indian circumstances, Indian writers writing in English "are positioned to look in two different directions, towards their Indian readers on one side and their readers in the west in another" ("Writing"). To this tendency has been attributed a significant drawback of Indian writing in English; the display in such writings of, what Meenakshi Mukherjee terms, "an anxiety of Indianess," i.e. an attempt on part of the Indian-English writers to explain India and establish in their writings the intimacy of their knowledge of Indian culture and geography, which contrasts sharply with the self-confidence of the writers in the other Indian languages ("The Anxiety"). Mukherjee argues that Indian regional literature of the highest quality, even when translated into English, does not merit adequate attention in the western academy or the publication/distribution system as it fails to meet their expectations ("The Anxiety" 180).

Compared to its English literary tradition, the literary traditions in the regional Indian languages are much older and richer. As Amitava Kumar correctly observes, "Even if we take the novels written, only in say Hindi or Urdu, around the singular event of the partition of India in 1947... very little that has been written in English in India ever approaches the eloquent expressions in those novels of the woes, the divided hopes, or the numb, demented silences of ten million uprooted lives" (*Passport* 221-22). The post-independence years too have yielded a rich harvest in the field of Bengali literature through the works of Buddhadeb Bose, Manik Bandopadhyay, Ashapura Devi, Mahasweta Devi, Nabaneeta Deb Sen, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Samaresh Basu, Samaresh Majumder, Shakti Chattopadhyay, Shubhash Mukhopadhyay, Joy Goswami, Bani Basu, Suchitra Bhattacharya and several others. Yet, as Ahmad points out, whereas it is rare to find an African or an Asian intellectual who does not command at least one European language, it is equally rare to find "a major literary theorist in Europe or United States who has ever bothered with an Asian or an African language" (97). As a result, as he suggests, even the major regional literary traditions of these countries remain virtually unknown to the Western literary theorists. Hence, Third World writers who write in English are "elevated to the lonely splendour of a representative – of a race, a continent, a civilisation, and even the third world" (98). Thus the publication of *Midnight's Children* was characterised by the *New York Times* as "a Continent finding its voice" (ad. in *Passport* 221). Then again, years of Indian writing in a variety of languages and contexts was reduced to one single event, the publication of *Midnight's Children*. This was when Bill Buford in his editorial introduction to the special issue of the *New Yorker*, commemorating the fiftieth

anniversary of Indian independence, commented, “To be an Indian novelist is to be something that has been changing, utterly, especially since 1981. That was the year when Salman Rushdie published *Midnight’s Children*, a book that, most authors... would grudgingly acknowledge, made everything possible” (qtd. in *Passport* 221). Ironically, even Rushdie, despite protests over years, remains disdainfully dismissive of regional language Indian literature. This is apparent from the following footnote to his earlier inflammatory comment in a later published anthology of his essays:

When first published in two slightly different versions, this essay caused howls of protest and condemnation. Almost all Indian critics and most Indian writers disagreed with its central assertion. Readers are accordingly warned that mine is an improper view. Which does not necessarily mean it’s wrong. (“Damme” 161)

It is thus necessary to contest, as the different critics are doing, the attempt of representing Indian-English writings as the most valuable Indian literature, and assert the need for recognising the credibility and the validity of literature written in the regional languages of the country. However, at the same time, it is also extremely important to acknowledge that Indian literature written in English can function as vernacular Indian literature, and investigate, like literature in any other Indian language, the Indian questions. It must be recognised that the cosmopolitan/local dichotomy distinguishing Indian-English literature and regional language Indian writings operates only occasionally. Several Indian-English novels do concentrate on the local, and aesthetic and poetic sensibilities oriented towards the indigenous that Ngugi, Shankar and others associate with the vernacular are now present in Indian writing in English.

The evolution of English into a vernacular Indian language is the culmination of a process that began with the introduction of the language into the country by the British rulers. The British policy behind the introduction of English in India was underlined in Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Indian Education” of February 1835. Macaulay had argued that the purpose of British educational policy in India should be “to form a class who may be interpreters between us [the British] and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (qtd. in Viswanathan 16). Although the British administrators intended to use English as a measure of imperial domination, from the very beginning the Indians displayed a tendency to regard the language as a tool that would further their own interests. Thus the demands of a group of Calcutta citizens, who wanted instruction not only in their own languages and sciences but also in the language and literature of England, had led to the founding of Hindu College in 1816 in Calcutta. Calcutta’s eminent religious and

social reformer Raja Rammohan Roy declared English to be “the key to all knowledge – all the really useful knowledge which the world contains” (qtd. in Bailey 136).

While initially successful in achieving its purpose, the instrument of British administrative convenience eventually proved to be detrimental to British interests. The English educated Indians became acutely aware of the evils of imperialism. They began to use the resources gathered from English education to initiate protest against the foreign rulers. The exposure to western literature taught the Indian intellectuals, as the Utilitarian writer Monier Monier-Williams has observed, “the modern trick of constructing by means of fiction an imaginary past out of the present, taking from the past its externals but building in the susceptibilities of the present” (qtd. in Viswanathan 157). Indian nationalist writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, many of whom were educated in the best Western literary establishments, revived in their works myths and tales of a golden past and fostered anti-British sentiments by creating a longing for that past.⁵ Later, when the anti-British protests developed into a full-fledged independence movement, English was often used as a medium for communication among the different parts of the country and different linguistic communities. The history of English language in colonial India indicates that even as absolutely the coloniser’s language English proved to be an instrument facilitating the empowerment of Indians.

In independent India, when language became a major and divisive issue in the multilingual nation with the Southern states in particular resisting the imposition of the North Indian language Hindi as the official language, English, which is a pan-Indian link language, established its position as co-official language (Sunder Rajan). The language controversy continues even to this day. Proponents of Hindi assert that English being a foreign language is used fluently only by a small and privileged segment of the population, and, hence, the importance of English in public life and governmental affairs causes hindrance to social mobility and further democratisation. This group is opposed by the non-Hindi speaking communities, particularly South Indians, who argue that a switch to Hindi in the nationwide bureaucracies would give northerners an unfair advantage. They claim that if learning English is burdensome then at least that burden weighs equally on Indians from all parts of the country. Despite controversies, English continues to strengthen its position in India.⁶ Today English is as much an Indian language as it is a language of England or the United States; it is the only language held in common between the different

⁵ Information regarding English usage in British India presented here has been taken from Viswanathan, Bailey and Hohenthal.

⁶ Information regarding the use of English in independent India presented here has been taken from Hohenthal. This has been combined with my own observations and experiences.

linguistic communities of the country. Chinua Achebe's remark that "[t]here are not many countries in Africa today where you could abolish the language of the erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility of mutual communication" (430) holds true for India as well.

In 1983 in the state of West Bengal the ruling communist Left Front Government abolished the teaching of English at the primary level,⁷ with the declared objective of making education more accessible to the general masses. There was hardly any positive impact of this reform. The terrifying prospect of a lessening of job opportunities created a rush for private schools, not regulated by this government directive, both in the urban and the rural areas of the state. There was also a considerable increase in the attempts to supplement school education with private tutoring. Public outrage and protest against this policy was prolonged and widespread. A well-known graffiti on Calcutta walls complained, "My son won't learn English. Your son won't learn English, but Jyoti Basu [the Chief Minister] will send his son abroad to learn English" (qtd. in "Damme" 163). Faced with sustained public dissatisfaction over the years, the Left Front government was compelled to reconsider its English teaching policy in the late nineties. In 1999 English was reintroduced from grade three.⁸ The debate was still not over. In 2002 the US consultancy firm McKinsey & Company presented a report on the industrial prospects in the state, which noted that the state is poor at creating a pool of people proficient in spoken English. The report stated that this was a crucial disadvantage for industries like the information sector. On the other hand, a School Education Committee recommended a return to the earlier no-English policy. The government decided to reinstate English from grade one from the academic year 2004-2005 (Mitra 18). In an interview Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the Left Front Chief Minister during whose tenure the change took place, remarked, "We made a mistake in the past by removing English from the primary level and now we are trying to repair that damage" (Chattopadhyay).

It has been argued, not incorrectly, that in India even to this day English is largely the language of the work place, and the language of power and social mobility. Moreover, since in India English is not used by the entire population as it is in United States, England, Australia, or the Caribbean, the English spoken in India is, as Sunder Rajan points out, less idiosyncratically "indigenous" than the varieties of patois that one finds among the speakers in these countries ("Writing"). Nevertheless, today English is the first language as well as the language of literary sensibility of a cross-section of Indians, no

⁷ Primary schooling in India typically encompasses grades 1-5. Thus according to the new policy English would henceforth be taught only from grade 6.

⁸ The general facts concerning the West Bengal Government's no-English policy presented here have been taken from Joydeep Roy. The information provided by Roy has been combined with what I had seen, heard, and read during the phase.

matter what their regional language mother tongues are. The Indian-English writers belong to this section of the population. Therefore, I find unacceptable Ngugi's argument that writers who write in the erstwhile colonial language English have abandoned their mother tongues. I also do not agree with Mukherjee's claim that it is more useful to understand "the circumstances that lead to the loss of the mother tongue than to charge these writers for capitalising on their loss." In her analysis, the loss of Indian languages is a result of economic and cultural changes ("The Anxiety" 169).

Changes, both economic and socio-cultural, brought about by the liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 have increased English usage in India, but the Indian writers writing in English have neither abandoned their mother tongues nor have they lost it and thus resorted to English for literary expression. They are a part of that section of the Indian population for whom English is the first language and the language of literary sensibility, irrespective of their regional affiliation and their regional language mother tongue. The language a writer writes in is not for him/her a matter of conscious choice. A writer writing in a particular language is capable of literary production only in that specific language. This phenomenon is poignantly highlighted in an episode in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. Here after the writer Amit Chatterjee, a Bengali, has finished his reading at a literary meeting a challenging voice questions him, "Why is it that you do not write in Bengali, your mother tongue?" Amit answers that it is not for him a question of choice. Someone who has been trained all his life to play the sitar cannot become a sarangi player because his ideology or conscience tells him to. He further adds, "we are all accidents of history and must do what we are best at without fretting too much about it. Even Sanskrit came to India from outside" (711). A real life example is Indian-English novelist Pankaj Mishra. Prior to writing fiction, he had been a staunch critic of Indian writing in English, who had argued that the English language is an inappropriate medium for describing ordinary Indian lives.

Sunder Rajan contends that the question is not if Indians should write in English but how well they write in this language ("Writing"). The works of contemporary Indian-English writers are by no means aesthetically inferior to the works in the regional Indian languages. The total gamut of Indian writing in English may not equal the rich literary traditions of the regional languages, but that is because the regional literary traditions are much older than this literature. The earliest Indian-English fiction written in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century, like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), Soshee Chunder Dutt's *Shunker* (1885) or K.K. Sinha's *Sanjogita or the Princess of Aryavarta* (1903), failed to make its mark. English was then by no means the preferred language for literary recognition regionally or nationally. Indian-

English literature initially failed to evolve and came to a dead end.⁹ It was only in the nineteen-thirties with the publication of the works of Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K Narayan that the Indian-English novel became a viable entity. The problem that these writers were confronted with was, as Rao has highlighted in his forward, the dichotomy between the languages of their intellectual and emotional make-up. English was for them the language of the intellect acquired from outsiders. They found it difficult to successfully encapsulate in this language Indian moods, situations and expressions in their myriad complexities and nuances. This was coupled with the fact that there was a complete lack of tradition to draw support from for their endeavours. Today the emergence of prominent writers and a considerable increase in the number of qualitative works being written in English is helping to establish a rich tradition of Indian-English literature. Furthermore, what had proved problematic for Rao writing in the nineteen-thirties is no longer a concern for the contemporary Indian-English writer, because English is at once the language of his/her emotional and intellectual make-up.

The English language is now integral to the vision and theme of the Indian-English writers. Contemporary Indian literature written in English can thus effectively convey the Indian experience. Critics have drawn attention to, what they term as, the problem of credible dialogue creation in Indian-English literature.¹⁰ They seem to suggest that dialogues in Indian-English writings can be credible only if this literature confines itself exclusively to the representation of the English speaking population of India. However, it must be noted that the North Indian languages and the South Indian languages are as removed from each other as they are from English. Thus the problem of credible dialogue creation that plagues Indian writing in English should also plague regional language Indian literature, unless literature in a particular regional language concerns itself only with people who speak that regional language. Yet, in a work like Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay's Bengali novel *Chander Pabar* (Mountain of the Moon) conversations which, as the situations in the text suggest, must have been carried out in English between Alvarez, a Portuguese explorer, and the Bengali protagonist Shankar do not seem artificial when presented in Bengali. Similarly, the quoted dialogues from Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, between the narrator's father and grandmother about the Indo-Bangladesh border, which as is implied in the text must have been spoken in Bengali, do not appear to lack credibility when they are recorded in English:

⁹ For further discussion on earliest Indian-English fiction and the causes of its failure, see *The Twice Born Fiction*.

¹⁰ For further discussion on the problems of credible dialogue creation in Indian-English literature, see Ahmad, Khair and *The Twice Born Fiction*.

My grandmother thought this over for a while, and then she said: But if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before, when we used to catch a train in Dhaka and get off in Calcutta the next day without anybody stopping us. What was it all then – partition and all the killing and everything – if there isn't something in between?

I don't know what you expect Ma, my father retorted in exasperation. It's not as though you are flying over the Himalayas into China. This is the modern world. The border isn't on the frontier: its right inside the airport. You'll see. You'll cross it when you have to fill in all those disembarkation cards and things.

... What forms? she said. What do they want to know about on those forms?

... Let me see, he said. They want your nationality, your place of birth, that kind of thing.

My grandmother's eyes widened and she slumped back in her chair.

What's the matter? My father said in alarm.

... Nothing, she said, shaking her head. Nothing at all. (Ghosh 151-52)

In the two examples that I have cited, what makes non-Bengali dialogues recorded in Bengali and non-English dialogues rendered into English perfectly credible are that they are honest records of the responses of convincing characters in acceptable situations. Most of the contemporary Indian-English fiction has been successful like *The Shadow Lines* in achieving this credibility in terms of dialogue creation.

There is no doubting the fact that English is limited to certain sections of the Indian population, but so are the regional Indian languages. A regional language is limited to a particular region of the country. For instance, Bengali is not usually spoken or read outside Bengal, and thus often it has been seen that the second and subsequent generations of Bengalis living outside Bengal lack the ability to read and write the language, even when they can speak it fluently. English, on the other hand, is limited to certain classes, the upper and the middle classes, which are the groups mostly acquainted with this language. Mishra remarks, "It is indeed difficult to speak of a heterogeneous entity as Indian literature, which refers – when Indianess itself is very strictly defined – to a bewildering continent-wide range of oral and literary works in languages of which few are connected to any of the other except through a broad notion of a unified civilisation" ("A Spirit"). If literature in a regional Indian language cannot be deemed as less worthy because of regional limitation, then Indian-English literature must not also be denied due credit for class limitation. The readership of even regional Indian literature is largely based on the middle and the upper classes (the classes which are well educated and earn a steady and

comfortable living that makes possible the pursuit of activities like reading), and a considerable section of this readership is acquainted with English. The majority of the regional language writers, like Bengali writers from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore to most of the contemporary practitioners of Bengali literature like Joy Goswami and Mahasweta Devi, belong, like the Indian writers in English, to the upper and the middle classes. Moreover, since Indians for whom English is the language of literary sensibility cannot be denied an Indian identity due to their linguistic orientation, Indian-English literature also cannot be dismissed as lacking credibility because of its linguistic medium. Rather, today Indian-English literature is credible Indian literature, and, contrary to critical opinion, does function as vernacular literature be it by the writers speaking to an “insider” audience as a member of the community, or articulating feminist concerns that emerge specifically from the context of Indian patriarchies. English, the language through which this is achieved, attains through this literature the status of an Indian vernacular.

III

Today English is inseparably associated with Indian existence. If English has to be discarded for being the language of the coloniser, then the concept that India is a nation state must also be discarded, because it was the British who conquered the independent princely states of Hindustan and welded them together into India, a country that they could effectively govern. The colonised have made the language of the coloniser their own. This language is now effectively used by Indian-English writers to credibly represent the Indian experience and create a literature that can be meant primarily for an Indian audience and function as vernacular Indian-literature.

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