

Ramlal Agarwal

Indian Response to Indo-English Literature

During my undergraduate and postgraduate days in the early 1960s, Indian writing in English was not a subject of academic discussions and seminars as it was in the 1970s and 1980s. Individual writers like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao were discussed, but the high brows in the department of English showed utter disregard and distrust towards them. In fact, Indian writing in English has been plagued with disregard and distrust ever since it began to take root in this country. Indians started writing in English around 1857. This coincided with the setting up of three Indian universities in the country. 1857 was also the year of the Indian Mutiny and the revival of interest in Indian languages. A minuscule section of Indian society was getting more and more anglicized, whereas the overwhelming majority was getting fired up with patriotic feelings. Madhusudan Dutt, Rameshchandra Dutt, and his poet cousins Tom and Bankimchandra were among the earliest Indians to start using English for creative purposes.

Madhusudan Dutt published *The Captive Ladlie* in 1849 and *Visions of the Past* in 1848. Bankimchandra also wrote poems and also wrote a novel called *Rajmohan's Wife*, supposedly the first Indian novel in English, in 1864. The British response to the first endeavour of an Indian to write a novel in English is not known. But the Indian response to the poems and the novel was far from favorable. On the contrary, the attempts were construed as "false starts." Later on, Bankim Chandra turned against using English for creative expression and advised his contemporaries to do so. A general opinion in favour of using the mother tongue for creative expression began to settle. Aurobindo Ghosh held that being original in an acquired language is hardly feasible. An Indian enterprise of writing in English had something unnatural and spurious about it-like speaking with a stone in the mouth or walking with stilts. Yet, English continued to fascinate creative talents, and a few creative talents persisted in their endeavours to write in English.

But their work remained mostly unnoticed. Meenakshi Mukherjee retrieves them from the archives and discusses them at length in *The Perishable Empire*, published by Oxford. Indian writing in English really struck roots in the thirties. The fiction of Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, and Mulk Raj Anand won approval abroad and at home. But it was a time when England was passing through a phase of modernism. Literary giants such as Joyce, Woolf, Lawrence, and Eliot dominated the literary scene, and as a result, R. K. Narayan's quiet traditional novels received acknowledgement but not enough critical attention to impress the Indian literati into taking them seriously.

Still, the writers did inspire some laudatory critical responses from Indian readers as well. But their success again coincided with national fervor, and once again questions such as "Should Indians write in English?" or "Can Indians write in English?" began to be raised. A Bengali poet and critic, Buddhadev Bose, observed as late as 1963 that "Indo-Anglian poetry is a blind alley, lined with curio shops, leading nowhere." Ten years later, in a lecture at the India International Centre, Dom Moraes observed,

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

"English is the language of colonists; Indian literature in English is colonial literature, and colonial literature is always provincial literature."

He also quoted W.B. Yeats' letter to William Rothstein about Tagore. Yeats wrote, "Damn Tagore. Sturge Moor and I got out three good books, and then, because he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English. "No Indian knows English." "Nobody can write music and style in a language not learned in childhood and ever since the language of his thought." Perhaps Yeats was right. Madhusudan Dutta wrote in English and Bengali. Today, his writings in English are hardly known, but his writings in Bengali survive. One wonders whether Bankim Chandra could have emerged as a major voice in Indian literature if he had chosen to continue writing in English and whether he could have written the songs that millions of Indians have been singing, like a mantra from the Vedas or hymns from the Bible. And yet, whether one should write in English or not is a matter of individual choice. The question that is more important is, "Can Indians write in English?" This question is related to the adaptability and acceptability of a language to a culture of which it is not an integral part.

It is also related to the individual talent of the writer who uses it and the historical situation in which he is doing so. During the thirties and forties, Queen's English could not be tampered with. As such, critics objected to Mulk-Raj Anand's literal translation of Punjabi expressions into English. Some writers found themselves hamstrung because they could not find words to describe Indian customs and rituals, and the words they chose to do so were dissatisfactory and could not evoke empathy. The restrictions under which an Indian writer in English has to operate are summed up by Raja Rao in his introduction to *Kantha Pura*. He says, "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 omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I used the word 'alien', yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up.

Some writers and poets disregarded these obstacles and continued using English for creative expression, but such writers and poets have been very small in number, and as such, the corpus of Indian writing in English has been meagre and beset with problems.

Then, in 1981, came Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children*, and the scenario changed. Rushdie's novel appeared at a time when, in England, the stable entities of realism began to dissolve and narrative methods multiplied. The fictionality of fiction permeated descriptive and documentary forms--journalism, history-writing, autobiography, or any other narrative form.

Rushdie bequeathed new fictional freedom to the novelists of the 80s, who show a far stronger impulse toward fantasy and imaginative use of historical forms. It was a time when David Lodge suggested an "Aesthetics of Compromise" in which the distinctions between "realism" and "experiment" disappeared. It was a time when a supermarket of style seemed freely on offer. It is in this context that various compound terms like "magical-realism," "hyper-realism," and "dirty-realism" have become common.

Commenting on the fiction of the time, David Lodge called it "Crossover fiction". Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* suited the mood of the eighties, and hence it received a bear hug from English and American critics.

Rushdie's novel has all the attributes of what David Lodge calls "cross-over fiction" and Martin Amis calls "postmodern trickiness." It deals with the grotesque and the fantastic, and it is written in a style of stylistic promiscuity that results from mixing and merging various styles, genres, and cultural levels. The most appropriate word, and the one Rushdie himself uses to illustrate postmodern trickiness in Indian English, is "Chutnification." *Midnight's Children* is a model of the process of chutnification. In this novel, Rushdie takes bits of realism, bits of surrealism, bits of fantasy, bits of history, bits of psychology, bits of sociology, bits of narrative techniques of the West and the East, and seasons these with hyperbole. The literary climate of the eighties welcomed the experiment and canonised it. The welcome accorded to Rushdie unleashed a spree of experimentation in India.

Shashi Tharoor made a paste of an ancient Indian epic and post-Independence political history and called it *The Great Indian Novel*. Rushdie's "Chutnification" is an apt example of Rushdie's "Chutnification". Shashi tried another trick in another novel, *The Show Business*. He presents the novel as a scenario for a film shooting. One of the bulkiest novels in Indo-English literature is Vikram Seth's "A Suitable Boy." Seth turns the novel into a show window for the vulgar display of wealth and inanities. In another bulky novel, *Sacred Games*, Vikram Chandra yokes English and vernacular slang to carry his story of crime and corruption and the cat and mouse game. Another voluminous novel by Tarun Tejpal, *The Alchemy of Desire*, was praised by none other than V.S. Naipaul, usually acerbic about Indian performance. He said, "At last a new and brilliantly original novel from India." The originality of the novel consists of blurring the thin line between pornography and art.

The much praised and Booker Prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things*, is about an orthodox Syrian Christian family from Kerala, buffeted by accidents, misfortune, class struggle, political and economic upheavals, and unbridled psychological urges. Roy packs it all in one travelers' bag.

Notwithstanding the liberties taken with the established form of the novel, these novels received rave reviews and Indian writing in English began to find a market in the West never dreamt of before. The Indian writers in English also began to get advances and royalties, which flabbergasted everyone. It was said that Manil Suri got an advance of a staggering five million dollars for his novel, *The Death of Vishnu*. Amit Chaudhuri deals with this phenomenon in his book, *Clearing a Space*. The rave reviews, high voltage publicity, and the rain of dollars created a sense of euphoria in India, and everyone started talking about Indian writing in English, and Indian novels in English found their way into thousands of libraries.

It was for this reason that Rushdie affirmed that "the prose writing, both fiction and non-fiction, between 1947-1997 by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 "official languages" of India and that this new and still burgeoning "Indo-Anglian" literature

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books." (The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947–97). Rushdie's comment has triggered a hate campaign against Indian writers in English by Indian writers in Indian languages. "'Outlook' announced in bold letters on its cover that "Indian English writers are intellectual pygmies." Prof. B. Nemade said that "there was something suspicious about this business of overnight success." Other writers thought Indian writing in English lacked the power to enrich the Indian psyche and failed to provide emotional sustenance. It simply doesn't click with the readers. This is the reason the euphoria created by the Western blitzkrieg in the earlier decades has worn out even in the West, and, other than academic interest, there is apathy and indifference towards Indo-English writing.