



Indian Writing In English: Defining Territory

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ABSTRACT

The paper will make an endeavor to find out the position of Indian writing in English in the large domain of rich and variant streams of regional, National and International Literature and at the same time will also project women and her predicament as portrayed by the trajectory of Indian drama.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, a noted critic, while speaking of literary meeting held in London, in 1982 as a part of the Festival of India, said, "That this literary event should be limited to those few writers who have chosen to write in English and form a somewhat marginal section of the vast and complex literary scene does make one somewhat uneasy. Sitting in the seminar hall it was easy to form the impression that no other literature exists in India except what is written in English." Now when Mukherjee calls English writing a "somewhat Marginal section"; this is a point to ponder. Is this writing truly marginal? The answer to this question shall gradually evolve in this paper.

KEYWORDS :

As mentioned in the abstract this paper will make an endeavor to find out the position of Indian Writing in English and try to place it in one of three realms of Regional literature, National Literature or International literature as per the suitability. Initially, say a few decades back there were few writers in Indian English, and there were few readers and so were few publishers and that the publishers were mainly abroad, because the native publishers were not ready to take the risk of the acceptability and popularity of Indian writing in English in its own home ie India. The regional language writers and other domestic literatures completely ignored English writing and writers. The Indian English writers were accorded many names which apart from other intentions, intended to make it stand aloof and away from the other language literatures. The labels accord ranged from " Indo Anglain Writer", "Asian writer", "Indo English Writer", "the third world writer".

English writing is a part of the vast and complex literary scene of our country, one of the literatures that form the mosaic of what is called Indian Literature. Most of the writers who write in English pick up English as the medium of expression not as a deliberate choice or to stand apart but because it is the only language they know, and the language that they can express in. Looking at the political, Physical and geographical setting of India, we all know that our country is divided into states, a demarcation that not only divides the people geographically and politically but also linguistically. Each state has its own language and its own literature, but then where do we place Indian English writing in this scheme. Is it a no lands literature, as no geographical space can be allocated to it, no land that it can call its own. So this makes it stand again on a separate platform alone and aloof from the other literatures of the Indian family.

A major reason for this compartmentalization of Indian English literature is the fact that however hard we try to ignore, but the fact always remains that English is the language of the conquerors, the British, our enemies, who intruded, invaded and exploited our country and also gate crashed into the family of our native languages. So it automatically stands in the arena of an intruder. Other factors like Language chauvinism, political patronage for the state, vote banks, political correctness have led to a situation in which English is not just harmless it is the main enemy. To make the situation worse or what I guess follows as natural consequent of the situation is that English has no focal point, like other languages which enjoy privileges like having a literary centre like an akademi or a parishat that enjoys government patronage and grows and blossoms under the umbrella, English again stands alone to bear the heat and rain. The kind of cutting and pruning, nutrients and fertilizers that other language literatures get in our country aid in healthy development of their literatures and hence popularity and acceptance. Literary fests, sammelans,

theatre and criticism all work upon enhancing the quality and quantity of these literatures but again English is devoid of all these facilities and pleasures. Such fests and meets and sammelans provide a common platform where the writer can meet the reader and each gets to know a lot about the other, one writer can meet the other writers, the publishers come to know about the existing writers and their philosophy and as a result these books, this literature becomes a part of the life of its readers and hence popularity and acceptance are not a problem for these writers. But gain this leverage is denied to English, the vitality and vigor that a language gains as a result is again denied to the language and hence the literature remains undernourished. Writers of English rarely get a chance to meet and interact with one another, leave alone readers.

English language has been the language of the intellectuals, it has always enjoyed the status of belonging to a class, the upper class, so as result most of the writers also belong to this class from which they sprang and automatically the readers also belong to his class. But this old setting has witnessed a major change with the democratic system of our country, wherein now the language is accessible to the middle class and ordinary man because of the Education system, so there has been a considerable increase in the number of writers and readers in English. And this has again contributed in widening the gap between the literature in English and the literature in other languages in India, because today most of the people more than knowing their native language know English language. Talking of myself, I belong to Hariana, a majorly Hindi speaking belt, but I have rarely read hindi literature, the upnayas or poetry or drama and whatever I know about my culture is only through English and this again makes a big difference. This alienates us from the literature of this country. Not being able to read and appreciate the literature which is a part of one's history and culture is a big handicap for a writer. Our children today with wander in amazement if they ever heard the myths and tales that were so common and enjoyed by the preceding generations and which helped them to understand their culture, their philosophy better. But unfortunately today's educated youth is twice removed from this cultural affinity because even their parents are totally English educated. This is a cultural abyss created by English which is a loss for both readers and writers.

Another handicap is that the readers of Indian writing in English are geographically scattered among different states and abroad too. Now since, the writer and reader do not belong to a homogeneous group, they do not share a common code between them which again makes the understanding of the writing varied and different and it leads to difference in perspectives. As of now what we have seen is that since English does not belong to any region, so it is out of the realm of Re-

gional writing.

But then can it be called National? It can be seen like this—that since English is a language that breaks and transcends the barriers created by diversity of regional languages. It also helps in amalgamation of ideas of people from varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. English also enjoys a special advantage as it is the only language that is used in the international as well so Indian writing in English gets immediate attention on the International platform and also creates a misconception as if it is the only literature we have.

This factor leads to the ignorance of literatures in other regional languages of India. But still allocating the status of national literature to I.W.E is not politically correct. There are two reasons for this, firstly the number of readers for English language are almost the same as the number of readers for other regional languages in India. Secondly, English literature performs the role of translation literature as it carries literature beyond regional barriers. Vikram Seth had very aptly remarked about the translation of his novel "A Suitable Boy", that the book had gone back to its home, Shashi Deshpande felt the same when "That Long Silence" was translated into Marathi. So writers in I.W.E. are both regional and national. Regional here is not opposed to National.

Ritu Menon, speaks of the bitter sweet relationship between English writers and writers in other languages. The titles like "test tube baby", "intellectual pygmies", and "traitors" were flung at writers in English, speak volumes of the anger and heart burn of the regional writers towards these writers.

I.W.E have made themselves known throughout the world. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy and many more have established I.W.E as one of the best known and successful literatures in the world today.

The literature has travelled a full circle from being scarcely taken note of within the country of its birth to being the face of IWE abroad. Shashi Deshpande aptly remarks "After being an outsider in its own home, and a humble poor relation at the August table of English literature, how did it get to be the winner in the international arena?". A lot of factors like the advent of the post colonial theory, the increase in the number of and influence of academics of Indian origin in important Universities abroad, the greater the visibility of diasporic writers and globalization.

IWE has enjoyed the trajectory of growth and development with periods of sluggishness at times and spurts of growth the other times. Indian novel in English is in the lead followed by poetry and then drama. Today there are more publishers for all the genres of English writing, more readers and more buyers. The statistics show that even a novice, an amateur writer who gets his first book in the market is offered mind boggling amounts by foreign publishers only because the writer is successfully able to create the "other" in his works.

But a startling fact is that the writers in English are not writing as Indians, as nationals of a country, rather they are loyal to their roots, to the region to which they belong, to the regional language in which they have always expressed and thought. They write as tamilians, as Punjabis, as marathis. IWE is no longer situated in the "No man's land" but it is in Mumbai, in Puri, Coorg, in Manali, a definite region. So we are witnessing the Emergence of regional novel in English. Sonita Sarker, an academician calls it the power of "the local uniqueness" that appears so exotic to the west and so natural and real to the natives.

Despite all these achievements and developments of IWE we still somewhere feel that it is not something that is Indian, with its roots deep inside the Indian soil and this is what disturbs. Shashi Deshpande in her essay "Where Do We Belong" writes about an incident where she was supposed to give a presentation on the topic "Indianness in Indian writing in English" and the question that sprang up in her mind was, why is Indian Writing In English being singled out where as Tamil, Kannad, Hindi or Gujarati literature has never been attacked with such questions. So according to her Indian Writing In English was supposed to carry like the burden of the old man of "Indianness" which eventually did good to Indian writing in English.

Ashish Nandy say "stressing these parts of our culture which are unknown to the west and underplaying both these which we share with the west and those that remain undefined to the west." So emphasizing on the "otherness" makes our literature even more wanted abroad. If the earlier novella had Maharajas, sadhus and fakirs, the new ones concern themselves with national identity, national crisis, ancestral homes, big families etc, so success of IWE abroad comes with strings attached. Though the west is not much interested in the orient's life but then yes it is the art of our writers, the way they present it, the way they garnish the Indian dish which is already rich in nutrients and quality.

By writing in English, one automatically enters, whether one intends or not, the global world of English literature. The writings of diasporic writers has certainly had its share in making Indian Writing more visible through the world.

So IWE that took birth on the Indian soil, struggled for a national identity, made place in the international arena, strengthened its hold on the National platform with its more regional look than colonial, is today facing challenge of the divides. The regional languages pitted against English writers in India against writers abroad, diasporic writing against rooted writing.

Shashi Deshpande calls it: "a kind of caste system has come into being." The divide between English and other Languages is also a matter of concern. The world of English writers with its celebrity status, the huge royalties, the grand launch lunch parties are far removed from the humble world of language writing. And then the writers living in India and being published domestically and the ones getting published abroad. So "English literature is like a large family, half of which is not talking to the other half."

Another problem is the absence of constructive criticism or genuine criticism. The people who review this kind of literature, very few of them really have a fertile knowledge, taste and creative scale to mark or judge or evaluate a piece of art like this. And here again the writers who have won international accolades become the touchstone for evaluating other works. This is a big injustice to the ones who never ever reach the public platform domestically. The words of Marion Halligan would aptly apply to this situation if we wish to improve:

"We do our burgeoning literature a great disservice if we suggest that some kinds of writing are better than the other, provided it is good. Excellence shouldn't be contingent on genre."

So we can move towards concluding that Indian literature In English After undergoing the various litmus tests has entered and is accepted as very much a part of the family of the rich Indian literatures in various regional languages and has gone a step forward by providing Indian literature an International platform.

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