

Colonialist Nationalism in the Critical Practice of Indian Writing in English: A Critique

Author(s): G. N. Saibaba

Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, No. 23 (Jun. 7 - 13, 2008), pp. 61-68

Published by: [Economic and Political Weekly](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40277545>

Accessed: 31-07-2015 05:19 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Economic and Political Weekly is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Economic and Political Weekly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Colonialist Nationalism in the Critical Practice of Indian Writing in English: A Critique

G N SAIBABA

With the sub-disciplining of Indian writing in English as part of English literature, critical writings on such literature have frequently used the notions of "Indian tradition", and "Indian culture" as monolithic entities without paying any attention to the unproblematic nature of such notions. This is a study and critique to highlight how Indian writing in English has been privileged by a set of literary critics as the representative literature of "Indian nationalist sensibility" over other Indian language literature.

Indian writing in English has emerged as a sub-discipline of English literature. Despite being categorised under the rubric of "third world literature in English" that has hardly helped it escape the frames of its reference to Anglo-American literary tradition. It has been initially assembled and professionalised in the western universities.¹ A section of the Indian diaspora who studied and settled in the Anglo-American universities contributed largely to the process of constructing this discipline. Similarly, the emergence of nationalist and pan-Indian ideologies in colonial and "post-colonial" India has played a crucial role in shaping the discipline. But it is still a marginal discipline in western universities as well as in Indian universities. In the recent times it has gained importance in the Anglo-American academy, albeit its status of being part of English literature.

This paper presents an account of how the shaping of this new discipline of Indian English literature is structured around certain notions such as India, "Indian", "Indianness", "Indian nation", "Indian sensibility", "Indian national experience", etc, by examining the works of the literary critics of Indian writing in English of K R Srinivasa Iyengar, C D Narasimhaiah, M K Naik, V K Gokak and others. My argument here is that a large section of critical writing on Indian English literature has been a powerful enterprise towards constructing a kind of Indian nationalism mediated through the interpretation of the literary works in particular ways. There is a vast body of literary critical texts in this field, but I would confine myself to a few mentioned here to examine the nature of colonialist critical discourse in Indian writing in English.

Adopting Colonialist Constructions

The critical enterprise in Indian writing in English is a huge apparatus that functions not only at an all-India level but also internationally, funded and supported by the Indian state, imperial governments, and other major institutions and agencies. Yet, it suffers from several ambivalent positions, dilemmas and is caught in the web of colonialist and postcolonialist ambiguities. Some of the central questions addressed by this critical practice over the last 50 years or more are: finding a justification for the existence and continuation of literary expression in English by Indians including those who are involved in it through critical practice; trying to prioritise literary production in English over other Indian language literatures; defining a kind of nationalism – a pan-Indian literary and cultural tradition in Indian writing in English; and establishing the corpus body of literary production in English in India as a systematically conceived academic

I am thankful to Meenakshi Mukherjee and Sumanyu Satpathy for their valuable comments on this paper. I immensely benefited from their comments. I also thank Revathy Venkataraman for her constant encouragement and suggestions.

G N Saibaba (gnsaibaba@gmail.com) teaches English at Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi.

discipline. All these questions are interrelated and I shall examine here some of the problems involved in the way they are addressed by these critics.

Any attempt to address the above questions would invariably lead to the conclusion that these critics fall under the colonialist framework of defining India and her literature. These critics have not only accepted and adopted the colonialist readings, interpretations of ancient Indian texts but have endorsed, and reproduced the same projections. In this way there has been an astonishing continuity with the orientalist scholarship that had shaped the colonialist constructions of India and the literary and cultural production by these critics in post (neo)colonial India.

I have selected some of these literary historians and critics here, among others, to show how the critical practice in Indian writing in English is dominated by the colonialist constructions of Indian literature, as their work is seminal in establishing a canon of Indian writing in English. By selecting, processing and pruning the literary texts since the 19th century, these literary historians and critics had founded the literary discipline of a body of writings that emerged in the subcontinent. Thus the discipline of English literary studies was initiated for the first time in the world by the British colonialists.² These critics had also built up a strong academic support base to win over recognition for the literary works in English written by Indians.

We are familiar with the orientalist/colonialist constructions of India and Indian history and culture in the writings of colonial administrators, policymakers and scholars who translated, interpreted and reshaped the ancient Sanskrit and Persian texts through their dominant ways of readings. This had a profound influence in irreversibly shaping these texts in a colonialist mould.

We are also familiar with the critical and political readings of this colonial scholarship particularly after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. This was followed by literary critical studies based on the methodology evolved in *Orientalism*. Even more sophisticated interpretative/discursive studies on the grand orientalist projects undertaken by the empire have emerged in the last two decades using theoretical tools derived from the critical perspectives on *Orientalism*. In the last 15 years or so we have witnessed how literary critical studies in India have opened up new methods of inquiry in literary and cultural studies. These studies influenced a good number of young scholars in the field, who have been critiquing the racist and colonialist approach in the works of orientalist scholars in different ways.

Yet, the dominant colonial/imperialist constructions continue with the same frames of literary discourse influencing the academics of literature and culture, notwithstanding a few exceptions. In the case of literary critical practice in Indian writing in English, most of the major critics like K R Srinivasa Iyengar, M K Naik, C D Narasimhaiah, V K Gokak and a number of others wittingly or unwittingly replicated the orientalist/colonialist constructions of literary discourses. Their work has been influential in shaping the literary studies of Indian writing in English in the past half a century producing dominant structures of literary studies, pedagogical tools and methods of writing literary history in "postcolonial" India.

Most of the colonialist/orientalist approaches towards Indian literature recur in the critical writings on Indian English literature by these critics. For example, canonical figures from the literature of the empire like Rudyard Kipling and others have been time and again projected as the precursors of Indian writing in English. If we briefly look at some of these replications of orientalist/colonialist literary conceptions, we find it amazing to notice how exactly these constructions played a role in producing dominant discourses in our postcolonial literary studies of Indian writing in English.

I shall examine here two sets of critical writings to present my arguments. The first set is from a volume of essays entitled *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing* edited by M K Naik, S K Desai and S T Kallapur.³ The second set forms the critical and literary historical works by the major critics.

1

I will take four essays from *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing* for discussion here, which I think are symptomatic of the rest of the essays in the volume; a major collection of critical essays specially commissioned by the department of English of Karnataka University in 1969, for which, renowned critics contributed to the volume on western writing on India. This volume carried critical readings on colonial writers from Britain, America and Germany who wrote mainly fiction with Indian themes. According to the editors, the present volume was an attempt to bring into focus the various aspects of western response to India such as, "the glory that was Ind" which "always fired many a western imagination", "western regard for India as an exotic land of sadhus, snakes and suttee", "perennial appeal of Indian thought and philosophy", etc.

Rich Tribute to the British

G S Amur, professor and head of the department of English at Marathwada University, Aurangabad, in his essay⁴ 'Meadows Taylor and the Three Cultures' regrets the "bifurcation" that had taken place during the years around that time "between Indian writing in English and the Anglo-Indian literature of the earlier years" because of which, "a lot of harm" was done to writers like Captain Philip Meadows Taylor, who were "lost in the limbo of literary history". G S Amur praises Meadows Taylor as "the first major writer in Anglo-Indian literature who attempted the great theme of the cultural dialectic between the east and the west and laid down the tradition for writers like Kipling, Forster, Raja Rao and Kamala Markandaya". Amur refuses to see Meadows Taylor as one among those who represented the colonial enterprise in India through colonial frames of thought in order to justify British colonial rule and includes him in the tradition of Indian writing in English.

A number of other critics share the views of G S Amur. K R Srinivasa Iyengar and Mulk Raj Anand who are contributors to this volume do not see British writers as part of Indian writing in English. Notwithstanding their differences, Anand and Iyengar view the British colonial writers with great respect and pay rich tributes to them for their immense contribution towards forming a backdrop for the Indian writers who were to take to English as a

language of creative expression. All the critics in this volume are unanimous in their views on the British writers who wrote on India in the 19th and early 20th centuries while performing their administrative or academic duties in India. They refuse to see the colonialist and racist representations in their writings. At the same time, these critics focus their attention on certain characteristics of their writings like, “artistic beauty”, “innovative fictional forms and techniques”, etc.

G S Amur presents Meadows Taylor as a “distinguished administrator and a soldier” who won “the love of the people who called him Mahadeva Baba and worshipped him when they lighted their lamps in the evenings”. Amur talks of Taylor’s constant desire for returning to his homeland. In Taylor’s own words it is “renewing his connection with civilisation” which implies India, where he worked, lacked in culture and civilisation. G S Amur justifies this concept of Taylor: “[B]ut, in spite of these natural limitations from which no Englishman of the time was free, Meadows Taylor succeeded in effecting a cultural breakthrough and interpreting India and her people to his own country”. Amur projects Taylor as an idealist, liberal thinker whose “creative work was a determination to forge new and lasting relationship between his own people and the people of India”. Further Taylor’s “belief in the superiority of the western civilisation and Christian faith was strong and uncompromising”. Moreover, “[T]he British encounter in India was for him a momentous clash between the forces of civilisation and the forces of savagery”. Amur presents a rabid racist and colonialist passage from Taylor’s writing wherein he describes the anti-colonial struggle of 1857 as a war between “Heathenism” and “Christianity” and “a great struggle between light and darkness, civilisation and savagery...”. Despite this rhetorical colonialist and racist discourse in Taylor, for Amur, “Taylor made his discovery of India and it was but natural that he should look at her through western eyes and judge her in the light of western values”.

G S Amur tries to find many ways of justifying Meadows Taylor’s writings while representing him as a pioneering writer who started a great tradition of writing about India in literary fashion though he had an “implicit belief in the inevitability of the British presence in India”. Finally, G S Amur regrets that “India seems to have forgotten him”, but he expresses satisfaction for naming a street after Meadows Taylor in Aurangabad.

S K Desai in his essay⁵ ‘A Happy Encounter: A Critical Note on Rumer Godden’s Indian Novels’, presents Kipling and Forster as the figures who “stand at the head of the entire band of English writers on India”. According to S K Desai, the works of these writers “help us in defining the virtues and limitations of any writer on India”. He sees in the novels of Rumer Godden “the central drama” that arises out of the “juxtaposition of the European culture and the Indian, though the focus of interest changes from novel to novel”. For S K Desai, the encounter between the east and the west is a happy one in Rumer Godden’s writings on India. In *Black Narcissus* (1939), “there is a highly colourful conjunction of the European Christianity and Indian primitivism”. According to S K Desai, “[T]here is a dramatic encounter of European and Indian cultures”, in Rumer Godden’s novels. Further he says, “[T]here is no ostensible clash between

the two cultures, since one, the Christian, is predatory and active, and the other, the Indian, is receptive, passive, capable of only a negative kind of reaction”. S K Desai’s argument is that the “Christian world”, though comes to conquer the “primitive world” could not do so because the former suffers “degeneration and defeat” as it is represented in the fiction of Rumer Godden and he uncritically accepts the basic framework of the benevolent aspect of the clash between “European Christianity and Indian primitivism”. The grand colonialist/racist paradigm of west versus east, white versus black, civilisation versus savagery, etc, does not only find its presence in the works of Rumer Godden, but one can see the endorsement of the same paradigm in S K Desai’s readings of Godden’s works.

On Kipling

K R Srinivasa Iyengar’s essay,⁶ ‘Kipling’s Indian Tales’, sets out to dismantle the idea that Kipling’s literary work in any way stands on the side of imperialists. He argues that “belittling Anglo-Indian fiction is easy”, though for him, if “Kipling cannot make Anglo-Indian literature something recognisably distinctive, it is doubtful if anybody else can”. To talk about “white man’s burden”, Iyengar thus argues, with regard to Kipling’s *Jungle Books* “in season and out of season is most disgusting”.

Iyengar refuses to read the stories from *Jungle Books* as allegorical narratives set in the context of the British colonial rule. He prefers to read them as having “universal themes” which explain the “primordial nature of human lives”. “If one were determined, one could certainly read many of these tales as strident imperialist affirmations”, says Iyengar. The protagonist of the stories in *Jungle Books*, Mowgli, according to Iyengar, should not be read as a “natural man caught between the beast in the jungle and the creature of civilisation”. Iyengar views this character as representing “a truth in the raw”, “a jungle truth” which can reach “the heart of the mystery of India” that makes us “terrified and fascinated” by turns.

Iyengar argues that “in *Jungle Books*, Kipling adroitly manages to fuse adventure, fable and primordial myth into stories for children that can often be profound enough for the maturest adults as well”. For Iyengar, “Mowgli is meant to signify much more than the British boy brought up in India among Indian children”. Iyengar refutes all possible interpretations of the stories of *Jungle Books*, which see the allegorical meanings involving colonialism. Mowgli should not be read as “a master of the jungle”, who could be “the first sketch of a Clive-like empire builder” or “the energetic and honourable English youth, ready at all times to defend the empire from its enemies”. According to Iyengar, “...generalisations with regard to situations and characters in imaginative literature must be dismissed as grossly misleading” and he further argues: “Kipling certainly talked of imperialism and progress, and of the white man’s burden; but he also saw the human situation as something that transcended these terms”.

Iyengar himself provides us with his own generalisations while refusing any in interpreting Kipling’s Indian tales with reference to colonialism. He sees Mowgli as one “rejected by man and beast alike, feels the weight of loneliness”. Even if one takes Mowgli as

an empire builder, who struggled among the Indian beasts while accomplishing his task, Iyengar argues that “the empire builder is also a man apart and alone; he is at once envied by his compeers at home and hated by the people he rules”. Iyengar further argues that among “all living creatures, man is himself a creature of harrowing loneliness”. For Iyengar, this feeling of loneliness constitutes the tragedy in Kipling’s writings, which transcends all historical trajectories like colonialism.

Thus Iyengar rejects any discussion on colonialism and allegorical meanings to be read into Kipling’s writings. He tries to mystify Kipling’s writings denying any attempt to historicise the colonialist and racist tendencies embedded in these works.

‘Indianness’ of India

V K Gokak tries to define Indian writing in English as “Indianness of India” in his essay⁷ ‘The Concept of Indianness with Reference to Indian Writing in English’. In other words, “the Indianness of Indian writing consists in the writer’s intense awareness of his entire culture”. He sounds like a pluralist who celebrates the plurality of Indian traditions and cultures to define “Indianness”, but finally reduces all these plural cultural aspects to a conflated idea of Indianness as a style, a diction, a theme, a world view, a mystic characteristic and even a lifeless history that cannot be recognisable in any shape or identity in terms of universalised mystic human being. This mystic characteristic of Indianness resurfaces in terms of Hindu religious aspects like S Radhakrishnan’s concepts of maya and karma or “Indianisation of style and diction as in Raja Rao’s writings or like in a “more gigantic grappling with Indianisation in style and diction as seen in Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*”. Towards the end of this essay, he argues that the Muslim writers in India have to learn about the Hindu religious scriptures in order that they become Indian. His argument is that Hindu writers always try to know about other cultures but Muslims do not. Unfortunately, he does not provide us with any evidence to show how aware Hindu writers are about the plurality of Indian culture. Neither does he have anything concrete to show when he laments the so-called ignorance of Muslim writers of the complex fabric of Indian culture. The concept of Indianness of Indian writing (in English) many a time slips into a revivalist position or a colonialist position in V K Gokak and many of the critics discussed here.

Colonialism and imperialism are seen by G S Amur, K R Srinivasa Iyengar, S K Desai, V K Gokak and others as essentially benevolent and inevitable processes of modernisation, emancipation and enlightenment of the non-western world. Further, these processes involving colonial projects have been hailed and celebrated by these critics as necessary agencies of change.

Anglo-Indian writing has been endorsed as the forerunner of Indian English literature. The orientalist, colonialist and racist writings of Rudyard Kipling, William Jones, Meadows Taylor, Edward Thompson, E M Forster, etc, have been praised as the founders of the tradition of English writing in India. The colonialist and racist ideology of these British administrators is either overlooked, sometimes passed off, at other times

interpreted as “Englishmen’s earlier understanding” in this volume of essays.

2

Now let us turn to the second set of critical writings I mentioned at the outset. K R Srinivasa Iyengar’s *Indian Writing in English* is a monumental survey of Indian English literature published in 1962.⁸ Critical works of the other two important scholars, C D Narasimhaiah and M K Naik, follow Iyengar’s work closely. They argued and fought with the western academy and in the Indian universities for a place of recognition for Indian literature in English. It is interesting to study their historical work spanning more than half a century which successfully institutionalises Indian English literature. They evolved particular ways of studying this body of literature to establish it as a respectable discipline.

It may be argued that what these literary critics have attempted is to accomplish a kind of subordinate position for Indian English literature within the domain of British English literature. For example, Iyengar says that “it is no less legitimate to look upon Indo-Anglian literature merely as a minor tributary of English literature”.⁹ Iyengar argues that Indian English literature is sought to be a junior partner to the British literature.¹⁰

Iyengar calls “Indo-Anglian literature” a product of an encounter between England and India. He chooses to describe this moment of “encounter” in such neutral terms so as to make it look a happy and natural outcome. This product or what he fondly calls the “offspring” is “a result of two great cultures incidentally coming into contact”. In his introduction to *Indian Writing in English* he says:

...[T]his literature is a product of Indo-English literary relations. England and India had come together, or had been accidentally thrown together; and out of their intimacy – whether legitimate or illegitimate – had come this singular offspring that is Anglo-Indian literature!¹¹

Though he and others continue with this metaphor of “offspring” while talking about Indian English literature, they refuse to see the colonial intervention and the unequal relations of power that existed. Thus, for Iyengar, Indian English literature is “...a tree that has sprung up on hospitable soil from a seed that a random breeze had brought from afar”.¹² The colonial enterprise is seen as an eventful historic moment by C D Narasimhaiah:

... [T]he Indians sought to marry the two mentalities – of the still-centre and the storm, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the *sattvik* and the *rajasik*, the swan and the eagle, and produce a conflagration.¹³

These literary critics celebrate the colonial encounter and the subsequent introduction of English education in 1835, which was, according to them, responsible to “accomplish creative self-expression through the English medium”. At that time “awakened and enlightened opinion in India wanted English education” as well as the “fusion of the best in our past with the best in Europe’s present”, argues Iyengar. In order for this to happen in a fruitful way, there was needed a “favourable climate of thought and opinion”. But then, the disruption came in 1857, which Iyengar contemptuously calls the “brief nightmare of the mutiny”. However, fortunately for Iyengar “the British power was

consolidated” as the “crown took over responsibility” after this brief nightmarish disruption. In almost a language of celebration, Iyengar says that “from 1857 to 1900 English education took rapid strides, and the climate was favourable for a new flowering of the creative Indian genius”.¹⁴ For M K Naik, the 1857 movement against the company’s rule was “a holocaust” because “the British rule came in almost like a divine gift for Indians”. He observes:

During this period, British rule in India was generally accepted by most Indians as a great boon divinely delivered. The holocaust of the revolt ushered in different ideas. Winds of change soon began to blow over the land, affecting accepted attitudes.¹⁵

This celebration of the colonial encounter by M K Naik who writes in the 1980s in his history of Indian English literature is representative of the various critics in the three decades between 1960 and 1990. In Naik’s words:

Finally, the East India Company which was to link India’s destiny firmly with Britain for almost two centuries was granted its first charter by queen Elizabeth I on the last day of the last month of the last year of the 16th century, as if to usher in a new era in the east-west relationship with the dawn of the new century.¹⁶

Celebration of the Colonial

For Naik, India was only a vacuum before the colonial encounter and his celebration of the encounter is not complete till he evokes a poem from Kipling, which is vacuous of the vast expansion of British raj in India. He further argues that “the East India Company, whose original aim was primarily commerce and not conquest, however, soon discovered its manifest destiny of filling the vacuum created in the eighteenth century India by the gradual disintegration of the Mughal empire”.¹⁷

This celebration of the colonial encounter culminates in an uncritical view of the Indian renaissance by all the three literary historians discussed here. The introduction of English Education by the colonial administration was seen as the sole agency for ushering in the great flowering of a new era of intellect. The colonial construction of India is celebrated further as these literary historians present the Indian renaissance as a direct result of the introduction of English education. Throughout their works of literary histories/critical studies they profusely thank William Bentinck, Macaulay and other British administrators for their firm resolve against the orientalist who argued for an education policy through Indian languages.

It is a conscious choice for these literary historians to uncritically endorse the colonial power structures as inevitable and useful. For example, see how Naik rejects any possible reading of British colonialism as a dominant structure of power:

Sir William Jones, who founded the Bengal Asiatic society as early as 1784, H T Colebrooke, the author of *Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Succession (1797-98)*, and James Prinsep, the discoverer of the clue to the Asokan inscriptions, were some of the representative white men in India then whose burden was certainly not imperial.¹⁸

Naik, further, endorses the civilising agency of colonialism and the white man’s burden:

With the tide running so strongly in favour of English, the coup de grace was delivered by Macaulay’s famous minute on Education of February 2, 1835, which clinched the issue. Macaulay who combined

in himself the spirit of staunch evangelism, messianic imperialism and whig liberalism, was richly endowed with a boundless courage of conviction, which admitted no possibility of there being another side to the question at all.¹⁹

M K Naik describes March 7, 1835 as “a red-letter day in the history of modern India” when Bentinck, the governor-general, “yielded” and the government resolution of March 7, 1835 unequivocally declared that “the great object of the British government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India, and all funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone”.²⁰ M K Naik not only uncritically accepts colonial modernity but also draws a map of Indian renaissance directly linking it up with the rise of Indian English literature:

But those engaged in shaking the ‘pagoda tree’ were also instrumental in planting the seeds of a modernisation process in the 18th century Indian wasteland – seeds which started burgeoning in the 19th century. The rise of Indian English literature was an aspect of this Indian renaissance.²¹

In the literary histories of these three critics, they particularly glorified a poet, Henry Derozio, who taught English literature at the Hindu college in Calcutta and “imparted the ruling ideas of French revolution” and “great poetry of English romantics”. “Soon these liberating ideas spread to other cities like Bombay, Madras, and the universities established there quickly became the nurseries of the resurgent Indian genius, which within hardly a generation thereafter ushered in a renaissance in the political, social, cultural and literary spheres of Indian life”.²²

Narasimhaiah in a footnote in his book *The Swan and the Eagle* ordains a mystic quality of vitality to English vis-à-vis Persian and Urdu:

The truth is that English has sent deep roots into our soil – it is interesting to consider why Sanskrit then, and English now, both of them rulers’ languages, took root in the Indian soil while Arabic and Persian also languages of (Muslim) rulers and state languages for a longer period than English, did not; and even Urdu, their offspring, is generally confined to the educationally backward Muslim community. A language cannot spread or take root unless it has vitality and serves the growing needs of a people.²³

For Srinivasa Iyengar, the Britisher’s gift of English to Indians is the sole agency for the development of India as a nation. Indian English literature is the authentic tool that can represent India as a nation more than any literature of the native language.

Literature produced in English becomes the real agency that constructs India as a nation, for Srinivasa Iyengar. He asserts: “people now continue to talk and write in English”.²⁴ He further celebrates English as the language of “higher administration and the law courts”, “the medium of teaching and examinations in most colleges and universities”. Thus “English is a tool, a cementing force, a key and a channel”²⁵ for building the modern Indian nation. For Iyengar, English language was not only serving the land, but had actually become a cementing force in building India:

Neither the conscientious Englishman nor the patriotic Indian need now be apologetic about the introduction and continuation of English education in India.²⁶

In Awe of English

Iyengar further mystifies the project of the English language when he proclaims that “there is one clearly understood body of laws for the whole country”, and the “intellectual world of India is recognisably one world, due to the role of English”; there is “an intelligentsia scattered all over India that already knows English”... English, then, is “one of our national languages and Indo-Anglian literature too is one of our national literatures”...²⁷

Srinivasa Iyengar fondly evokes Rajagopalchari’s polemics against Hindi in favour of English. In a rhetorical public speech Rajagopalchari says that “English is the gift of Saraswati to us”.²⁸ Similarly for C D Narasimhaiah, the regional languages and literature (including Hindi) stand for divisiveness, while English is the only language that keeps the country united.²⁹

Iyengar takes offence with the Indian critic who questions the very basis of Indo-Anglian literature, but meekly prays to the English critic to save his criticism against Indo-Anglian literature. He argues that all great leaders of Indian nationalist movement like Gokhale, Tilak, Gandhi, Malaviya, Aurobindo, etc (whose nationalist and patriotic credentials no one can question) wrote or reasoned in English and thus contributed to the creation of a new literature which one should refrain from questioning. This literature, “with all its limitations, still taught us to be a new nation and a new people”.³⁰

These literary critics lament the “Indian’s diffidence” and the “Englishmen’s indifference” in accepting Indian English literature. Continuing the metaphor of the offspring, Iyengar brings in a myth from classical Sanskrit literature not only to defend but also to promise a great future for Indian English literature:

According to the Indian legend, Menaka the heavenly nymph, appeared before Visvamitra as he sat in self-absorbed concentration; out of their subsequent union was born Sakuntala. But neither father nor mother would have anything to do with the daughter! The predicament of Indo-Anglian literature recalls Sakuntala’s fate, but has this literature Sakuntala’s charm too, and will it – or can it – give us a new Bharata for Bharat? It may be that Indo-Anglian literature holds in some small measure the key to the future.³¹

Along with this myth, he evokes the “prophetic” statement of Sri Aurobindo who maintained that “the future poetry will acquire a mantric or incantatory quality” which “will be first manifested in English, and perhaps in Indian writing in English”.

The future of English is indeed immense, and as the human mind of the future progressively acquires an international sweep, what is more likely than English rising to the highest heights and achieving a global comprehension, thereby ending the half-real half-mythical east-west dichotomy once and for all.³²

English Thrives and Prospers

Thousands of bright scholars who were trained in the imperial metropolitan universities funded by several international educational institutions and agencies as well as by the newly emerged Indian state after the British colonialists left India established university and college departments of English. In the background of the decision of Indian government to continue with English as the medium of instruction and expression for higher education, thousands of departments of English thrived and prospered. It became compulsory for every university, college or every institute

of higher education to establish a department of English where it is not only taught as a foreign/second language but invariably, British English literature was promoted as a subject of study and research. Trained in the tradition of British literary studies and teaching of English literature in the colonial period, these scholars disseminated the methods and techniques of literary interpretation and study well to the primary school level. Most of these methods include the colonialist/orientalist ways of looking at literature, and culture, approaches of practical criticism of F R Leavis or textual criticism, which ignores the socio-political and historical context of the reading/interpreting subject. It can also be said that irrespective of the methods employed by these critics in studying literature, a colonialist/ orientalist outlook pervaded their critical practice.

At the same time, one of the major points of internal contradictions of this critical practice is its deployment of Indian nationalist politics in general and Gandhian nationalism in particular as a major narrative undercurrent in the critical texts. Moreover, it ignored any analysis of colonial and imperial projects which impinged upon their inherited field of literary study from the colonialist scholars. Indian English literature has been viewed by these critics as a narrative which was “making an Indian nation”.³³ A narrative of Indian nationalism has been constructed in literary critical studies over the last five decades. The Indian nationalist movement has become useful material for the critic to shape and showcase Indian writing in English as a truly national literature of India. Thus the politics of critical practice in Indian writing in English revolves around the notions of India as a nation. In post-independent/postcolonial India, literary critical enterprise has become one of the important sites, like that of history, where the idea of India as a nation has been constructed.

SPECIAL ISSUE

Review of Labour

May 31, 2008

Class in Industrial Disputes: Case Studies from Bangalore –Supriya RoyChowdhury

Employee Voice and Collective Formation in Indian ITES-BPO Industry –Philip Taylor, Ernesto Noronha, Dora Scholarios, Premilla D’Cruz

The Growth Miracle, Institutional Reforms and Employment in China –Ajit K Ghose

Soccer Ball Production for Nike in Pakistan –Karin Astrid Siegmann

Labour Regulation and Employment Protection in Europe: Some Reflections for Developing Countries –AV Jose

Labour, Class and Economy: Rethinking Trade Union Struggle –Anjan Chakrabarti, Anup Kumar Dhar

For copies write to: Circulation Manager

Economic and Political Weekly,

320-321, A to Z Industrial Estate, Ganpatrao Kadam Marg,

Lower Parel, Mumbai 400 013.

email: circulation@epw.in

Prioritising English over Other Literature

The critical enterprise in Indian writing in English blithely and self-consciously tries to prioritise Indian English literature over the literatures from various languages in India which have rich literary and linguistic traditions of their own. The point here, however, is not to argue for lowering the supposed position of Indian literature in English, but to show that this established trend in the postcolonial literary critical practice in Indian English is a continuation of the legacy of the colonialist literary discourse constructed by the “orientalist” scholars of erstwhile British empire.

For example, notwithstanding their efforts to problematise the notion of Indian nation, Rushdie and authors of his genre like Naipaul et al cannot escape the overarching influence of the colonialist literary discourse. The legacy of the colonialist literary critical discourse continues unabated regardless of the plethora of perspectives beheld by individual critics and writers. Significantly, it is a powerful method of institutionalisation of literary texts written in English and Indian languages, while attributing a dominant role for Indian English literature in order to prioritise it over Indian languages literature thus seeking to make it represent India as a homogeneous nation for the outside world and for the domestic classes who benefit from India as a monolithic nation. For lack of space here I shall only briefly examine one such attempt that can be found in Salman Rushdie.

The influence of the colonialist literary discourse is visible in Salman Rushdie’s “introduction” to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, co-edited with Elizabeth West, an English critic, wherein he tries to contextualise selections of fiction and prose writings written by Indians in English in the 50 year period after the British imperialists ceremoniously ended their direct rule. Rushdie’s notorious introduction puts it in this way:

This is it: the prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period 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, the so-called ‘vernacular languages’, during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, ‘Indo-Anglian’ literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books.³⁴ (emphasis is Rushdie’s)

If Rushdie was serious in considering the non-availability of India language literary texts in translation in English, he would not have jumped to this kind of a conclusion he arrived at in his “introduction” to his selected volume of Indian writing. He should have conceded the fact that he was simply selecting from works written in English. He could find only one short story, *Toba Tek Singh* of Saadat Hasan Manto in translation worth including in this volume.

Rushdie’s sweeping judgment of writings in Indian languages and his visible ignorance of the rich repertoire of the same is evident from his observation in defence of the Indian writing in English:

It is interesting that so few of these criticisms are literary in the pure sense of the word. For the most part they do not deal with language, voice, psychological or social insight, imagination or talent. ...The

ironical proposition that India’s best writing since independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists is simply too much for some folks to bear.³⁵

In this “introduction”, Rushdie shares some of the comments expressed by V S Naipaul in his *An Area of Darkness* on Indian language writers, albeit, his disagreement with Naipaul on some minor issues. Naipaul’s view is that whatever he read of Indian writers in translation “did not encourage him to read more”. Premchand for Naipaul, “turned out to be a minor fabulist” and “other writers quickly fatigued him” and “many of the modern short stories were only refurbished folk tales”. Rushdie views these statements of Naipaul as expressed in an “emphatic” and “unafraid way”. Rushdie disagrees with Naipaul’s understanding that “the aftermath of the ‘abortive’ Indo-British encounter, the country’s artistic life has stagnated”, the “creative urge” has “failed”. Rushdie argues that *An Area of Darkness* was written in 1964, but by the time Rushdie’s collected volume of Indian writing was published “the growing quality of Indian writing in English might have changed” Naipaul’s view. Unmistakably, for Rushdie it could be only Indian English literature that stands for Indian creative urge and not literature in Indian languages. For Naipaul, whatever was Indian literature and culture was in ancient India.³⁶

Rushdie qualifies his anthology as “the best Indian writing of the half-century since the country’s independence”. Ironically, the lofty aim of the anthology was to represent Indian literature to the world outside particularly “50 years of work” “by four generations of writers”, that “hails from that huge crowd of a country”.

3

One of the most recurring arguments in these critical writings is that Indian literature in English reflects typical Indian experience that they call “national experience” in opposition to Indian language literatures which are seen as mainly regional and divisive. They argue that Indian writing in English “portrays” the social, political and cultural changes that have occurred in India in this century. In order to project the national characteristic/relevance of Indian writing in English, these critics construct their arguments around the ideas of “national experience”, “essence of national culture”, etc. The conflated notions of “Indian tradition”, “Indian culture” as homogeneous entities are used frequently, paying little attention to the unproblematic nature of such notions.

Critical discourses in Indian English seek to replace Sanskrit literature with Indian English literature. These literary critics have been trying to establish Indian English literature as “modern Indian national literature” in the place of Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit literature was supposed to be the literature produced and consumed all over “India”, once upon a time. Moreover, the critics in Indian English literature directly trace its lineage from ancient Sanskrit literature and the British literary tradition, ignoring any of its possible connections with Indian literature in various regional languages. These critics construct a literary tradition for the Indian nation where they conveniently link up ancient Sanskrit literature with the beginning of Indian writing in English leaving an enormous gap of many centuries in between.

And these critical practitioners argue that Indian writing in English is "an integral part of Indian literature". At the same time, they strive to get a place for it in Anglo-American literature.

The monolithic notion of Indian literature in English completely ignores all other literature in Indian languages, be it Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Telugu or Tamil. Only Sanskrit literature is taken for study along with Indian English literature. Also serious attempts were made to define, shape and professionalise a category of Indian literature solely from the point of view of writings in English by Indians without any mention of literature in other Indian languages.

It is important to contextualise Indian English literature within the larger body of literary enterprise called Indian literatures. In this connection one has to study the significance of the assertions of literature in Indian languages and literary traditions that strongly represent different national identities within a multinational country like India, problematising the monolithic notions such as Indian "national literature" which is supposedly truly representing India.

To conclude, Indian writing in English has created a new elite in India whose gateway to the world was English. Colonial writings on India had already constructed an image of the people of this subcontinent that was a justification for the need for colonialism to set root in this soil. The colonial project in that regard had completely ignored the various spoken tongues of the people. It had its counterpart in Sanskrit literature which as per

the critical writing in Indian English was the language of mass literary production and consumption. Hence the constructed and represented images of the subcontinent by the early British officers and scholars of the raj and the Indian writing in English during the pre- and post-(neo) colonial period was a celebration of the colonial encounter. As we have seen, this celebration was a justification in disguise of the colonial rule in India, its manifest dimensions of reducing the social reality in the region to the paradigms of racism, colonialism.

The colonial encounter that was celebrated in the critical writing of the Indian writing in English was also a meeting point for the educated elite in the subcontinent to come to terms with colonialism. On what terms this encounter would unfold determined the future of Indian writing in English. The trajectory of evolution of Indian writing in English and its criticism was overwhelmingly dependent on its acceptance with the authority whose written and spoken word was also in English. The possibilities of literary production in Indian English hence had to capture the social reality in such a way that firstly it was accepted as the authentic in the world of English language and literature. The dominant representations, as we have already seen of that we understand as India, got reduced to the conflated notions of "Indianness", "Indian nation" and the like without ever looking into the unproblematic nature of these constructs.

NOTES

- 1 See Aijaz Ahmad 'Disciplinary English: Third Worldism and Literature' in Svati Joshi, *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History*, Trianka, New Delhi, 1991, pp 206-63.
- 2 See Gauri Viswanathan, *The Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, Faber and Faber, London, 1990.
- 3 M K Naik, S K Desai and S T Kallapur (eds), *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing*, Karnataka University, Dharwar, 1970.
- 4 G S Amur, 'Meadows Taylor and three Cultures' in M K Naik, S K Desai and S T Kallapur (eds), *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing*, Karnataka University, Dharwar, 1970, pp 1-12.
- 5 S K Desai, 'A Happy Encounter: A Critical Note on Rumer Godden's Indian Novels' in M K Naik, S K Desai and S T Kallapur (eds), *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing*, Karnataka University, Dharwar, 1970, pp 61-71.
- 6 K R Srinivasa Iyengar, 'Kipling's Indian Tales', M K Naik, S K Desai and S T Kallapur (eds), *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing*, Karnataka University, Dharwar, 1970, pp 72-90.
- 7 V K Gokak, 'The Concept of Indianness with Reference to Indian Writing in English' in M K Naik, S K Desai and S T Kallapur (eds), *The Image of India in Western Creative Writing*, Karnataka University, Dharwar, 1970, pp 21-25.
- 8 K R Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, Sterling Publications, New Delhi, 1962. This work had been reprinted several times well into the 1990s. It has been continuing to enjoy the status of the canon in the study of Indian English literature. A long post-script was written to this text by Iyengar in 1980, which endorses the same views expressed by him earlier and in fact reiterates the same perspective more strongly in which he takes stock of the developments in Indian English literature after 1962.
- 9 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p.5.
- 10 Iyengar says "Indian writing in English (not in English alone, but all India writing) is greatly

- influenced by writing in England and we have had our own 'romantics', 'Victorians', 'Georgians' and 'modernists'. But in its own way Indo-Anglian literature too has contributed to the common pool of world writing in English – the major partners in the enterprise being no doubt British literature and American literature", Iyengar, p 5.
- 11 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 2.
- 12 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 15.
- 13 CD Narasimhaiah, *The Swan and the Eagle: Essays on Indian English Literature*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1968, rpt, 1987, introduction, p xiii.
- 14 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 10.
- 15 M K Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, 1982, New Delhi, p 25.
- 16 M K Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, p 7.
- 17 M K Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, p 7. Here he quotes Kipling's poem:
Once, two hundred years ago, the trader came/
Meek and tame./Where his timid foot halted,
there he stayed./Till mere trade/Grew to Empire./
And he sent his armies forth/South and North./
Till the country from Peshawur to Ceylon/Was his own, Naik p 8.
- 18 M K Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, p 8.
- 19 M K Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, p 12.
- 20 M K Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, p 13.
- 21 M K Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, p 8.
- 22 M K Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature*, p 13.
- 23 C D Narasimhaiah, *The Swan and the Eagle*, pp 15-16.
- 24 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 13.
- 25 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 13.
- 26 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, pp 13-14.
- 27 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 14.
- 28 See Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 12.
Rajaji has boldly asserted that English is the gift of Saraswati to us – Saraswati is the Hindu Goddess of Learning and the Arts – and we

- shall reject this light from the West only at peril to our sanity and security.
- 29 CD Narasimhaiah, *The Swan and the Eagle*, p 8.
Besides, English is no more, if any, less, foreign to the highly educated modern Indian than Sanskrit which is our *devabhasha* and its learning '*devajanavidya*' and which in the past signified the first flowering of Indian sensibility and, in the centuries, when it spread, represents the mainstream of Indian culture. Without comparing with the greatness of Sanskrit, it may not be wrong to say that English has in one respect at least an advantage over Sanskrit in that it is a powerful world language and is today the language of art, science, commerce, diplomacy and intellectual intercourse.
- 30 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 8.
Iyengar argues that "An accident of history brought us into contact with the English language: during the 150 years of our association with it, we marched to nationhood and independence..." p 12.
- 31 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 7.
- 32 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, p 7.
- 33 For example Meenakshi Mukherjee views Indian English Fiction as something that is making India a nation in her work *Twice Born Fiction* (1971), p 36.
"... this finding of a distinctly national experience and its legitimate expression in art is what distinguishes the literature of one nation from that of another. Difference in language is an incidental factor which is becoming less and less important".
In her later work she drastically shifted her position that is now well-known.
- 34 Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* Vintage, London, 1997, p x.
- 35 Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* (p xiv).
- 36 V S Naipaul quoted in 'Introduction', Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-97*, p xx and V S Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, 1964, Picador, London, 2002.