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INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH : A GROWINGLY SIGNIFICANT LITERATURE

Prema Nandakumar

BARELY A DECADE ago, few spoke of an 'Indo-Anglian literature.' Now it has already acquired an established place in the curricula of Indian universities. Compared to the fifties, a larger number of Indians are now writing and publishing in English. In spite of the move to introduce the regional languages as the media of instruction at the collegiate level, conferences and seminars continue to be held in English. The English language papers are among the most successful and weekly magazines are being published in English all over India. The value of the English medium for Indian culture was given due official recognition when Prof. P. Lal was awarded the Nehru Fellowship for his project of translating into English a difficult Sanskrit Upanishad. The Sahitya Akademi Award for 1968 went to Bhabani Bhattacharya for his English novel *Shadow from Ladakh*, underlining the fact that English remains one of the best instruments to project to the outer world the various problems, frustrations and spiritual triumphs that one comes across in the every day life of independent India.

If Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Shadow from Ladakh* was the most significant publication of Indo-Angliana in 1967, Mulk Raj Anand's *Morning Face* (Kutub Popular, Bombay) happens to be the most important publication for 1968. One of the stalwarts of Indo-Anglian fiction, Dr. Anand writes from personal experience, and hence his anger and sadness ring true. Besides, his rugged English has a charm of its own. *Morning Face* is the second part of his ambitious autobiographical series *Seven Ages of Man*. The first part published in 1951 under the title *Seven Summers* dealt with the childhood of Krishan. *Morning Face* is about Krishan's boyhood and his agonising entry into the world of adolescence. Krishan is churned in the vortex of family environments, ties of calf-love and genuine

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affection, and the birth of the Gandhian era. Dr. Anand writes some of his best prose when describing the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre that quickened the pulse of the nation with startling suddenness. It is a long novel and the canvas is overcrowded but even that is appropriate for the setting is India, teeming with people and problems. Out of this bewildering *kumbh mela* Krishan emerges as a rare being caught in a mundane atmosphere, a 'divine imbecile, who listened to the music and rhythms and evocations inside me'. And so Krishan joins the other famous Anand creations like Bakha the untouchable and Munnoo the Coolie.

From the robust *Morning Face* we now move over to Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay). The story with its few characters and fewer incidents zigzags between the present and the past. The past is about Babu Rao Khemka's steady disintegration and death in America where he, the son of a rich Indian industrialist, had gone for higher studies. The present is made up of Sindi Oberoi's convincing growth in self-confidence. Sindi, a Kenyan and a friend of Babu in America, comes to India for a change, and finally takes over the unsteady industrial empire built by Babu's father. The two girls in the novel are June and Sheila. The jerky novel is actually the tragedy of the American girl June who is one of the few westerners burdened by the 'white man's guilt'. To expiate that guilt she subjects herself to needless pain and frustration. Arun Joshi handles the English language with considerable caution which helps the ultra-modern characters seem credible even in rather artificially contrived situations.

Among other novels that appeared in 1968, K. A. Abbas's *When Night Falls* (Hind Pocket Books, Delhi) scorches the reader by its description of Indian slums. Though the characters are more like puppets moved by a propagandist's skilled fingers, the setting rings true. Truth hurts us, but how can we protest when the novel opens thus, re-creating a familiar scene ?

To get from one end of the shanty town to the other,

one had to cross a swampy lake of mud. It had been formed by accumulated rain-water, open drains, a refuse dump into which anything unwanted was thrown—old shoes, dead cats, vegetable peelings, rotten fruit, rusty tins and broken bottles.

It was also a convenient place to store the bottles of illicit brew, and only the bootleggers knew the spots where their liquid treasure was buried. The surrounding filth, they said, helped the quick fermentation of the snake-juice, as they called it. A week of burial in the gutter was equal to a year in a Scottish distillery. Or so it was said by the gangster who supplied the hootch. He was notoriously ill-tempered, quick in drawing his clasp-knife, and who dare contradict his sales-talk ?

Realistic portrayal of other facts of Indian society occur in novels such as *Keep the Story Secret* (Vidyapuri, Cuttack) by Manmath Nath Das and *A House Full of People* (Paragon Book Gallery) by Romen Basu. The latter deals with life in a Bengali joint family. While describing this peculiarly Indian situation, Basu has tried to translate the Bengali idiom as well, and this has resulted in some inchoate if original Indian English. Sita Rathnamal's *Beyond the Jungle* (William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh) is an autobiographical novel about Sita, a girl of the Irula tribe in the Nilgiri forests. Her entry into 'civilisation' is portrayed convincingly and the author's elegant style brings to life the Dodu forest region. Perin Bharucha's *The Fire-Worshippers* (Strand Book Club, Bombay) is about tensions in a Parsi family of Bombay. *The Sale of an Island* (Rupa & Co., Calcutta) by S. Menon Marath and *Monsoon* (Higginbothams, Madras) by Nirmal Jacob have the scenic background of Kerala, full of beauty, terror and tragedy. Meenakshi Puri's *Pay on the First* (Siddhartha Publications, Delhi) is a witty account of the grim struggle for survival waged by the low-paid government servants in Delhi. Ruskin Bond's *The Last Tiger* (*The Illustrated Weekly of India*, Bombay) is a short novel recalling

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Jim Corbett. B. S. Nirody's *Nandini* (Publications Division, Delhi) is a propaganda novel. But unlike *When Night Falls*, *Nandini* is a success story and promises hope for the struggling millions in India. 1968 fiction certainly did not lack in variety for there appeared a full fledged historical romance too. L. N. Birla's *Sultan Nihalde* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay) is a well written novel about the love of the Pratihara prince Sultan for Nihalde, the Kelagarh princess.

Translations from Indian languages into English also formed a significant portion of Indo-Anglian fiction during the year under review. Tarasankar Banerjee, the most popular Bengali novelist of today, saw two of his novels entering this field. *The Judge* (Orient Paperbacks, Delhi) was translated by Sudhanshu Mohan Banerjee and *Ganadevata* (Pearl Publications, Bombay) was rendered into English by Lila Ray. Two other famous novels also came over from Bengal to a wider audience. Bibhutibhushan Banerji's *Pather Panchali* (George Allen and Unwin, London), translated by T. W. Clark and Tarapada Mukherji, is a moving tale about two children living in an obscure Bengal village. *The Puppets' Tale* (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi) of Manik Bandyopadhyaya, translated by Sachindralal Ghosh, is also about the Bengal countryside. But this story of the ruthless Gopal Das and his idealist son Sashi is vastly different from the poetic recordation of a little girl's tragedy in *Pather Panchali*. As Ghosh writes while comparing these two novels :

Manik's book is, so to say, a naturalist's report on the behaviour of human ants, while Bibhuti Bhushan's is a romantic paean to the unconquerable spirit of man in the face of all odds. Not that the latter took less note of the stark realities of life around him than the former ; but while Manik looked levelly about the horizon and saw the dusty earth and people, the other looked up above the tree-line and beheld the stars.

While dealing with fiction translated from the regional

languages of India, mention may also be made of Krishan Chandar's satirical digs in *Mr. Ass Comes to Town* (Translated from Urdu by Helen H. Bouman, Hind Pocket Books, Delhi), Amrita Pritam's sentimental *Doctor Dev* (Translated from Hindi by Krishan Gujral, Orient Paperbacks, Delhi) and Takazhi Sivasankara Pillai's *Hidden Realities* translated from Malayalam by Bhasakaran. Pillai's novel is the poignant saga of Janaki Amma, the eternal feminine, trapped in the slush of a doubt-ridden society.

English magazines and Sunday papers in India continue to publish short stories in abundance. But collections of short stories are rare, and even such selected fare is often disappointingly pedestrian. There are exceptions of course. R. Prawer Jhabvala's *A Stronger Climate* (John Murray, London) is about different people from the West in search of something new to satisfy them. There are nine stories in this collection. The first group of six is centred on sex mostly; the latter group of three explores the deeper problem of soul's frustration and spiritual stagnation experienced by Westerners who have elected to remain in India. Among other short story writers Bhabani Bhattacharya scores with his mild humour and excellent character sketches in *Steel Hawk and Other Stories* (Hind Pocket Books, Delhi). Ruskin Bond's elfin touch is obvious in *My First Love and Other Stories* (Pearl Publications, Bombay). He has a keen eye for the Indian scene; a few of the stories are located in London too. Khushwant Singh provides caustic humour in *A Bride for the Sahib* (Hind Pocket Books, Delhi). The real-life stories of K. L. Gauba in *The Pakistani Spy and Other Famous Trials* (Orient Paperbacks, Delhi), the historical tales of Shamsuddin in *The Loves of Begum Sumroo and Other True Romances* (Orient Paperbacks, Delhi) and the mythological tales retold by Y. G. Krishnamurti in *Great Hindu Tales* (Ramesh Ram, Kathmandu) are all interesting volumes. Careful selection of the best from Indian short stories marks a few publications like *Call it a Day* (Siddhartha Publications, Delhi) edited by

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M. C. Gabriel and Gwen Gabriel, *Contemporary Indian Short Stories*, Volume II (Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi) edited by Bhabani Bhattacharya and *Modern Telugu Short Stories* (Jaico, Bombay), edited and rendered into English by V. Patanjali and A. Muralidhar.

Indo-Anglian poets have not been prolific during 1968. Some established poets have produced more poetry, but no outstanding work came to light, Srinivas Royaprol's *Bones and Distances* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta) and Kamala Das's *The Descendants* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta) may be mentioned in this connection. P. Lal himself, the tireless driving force behind the Writers Workshop, has moved over to the field of translation. The few original poems he published in 1968, however, retain his phrase-weaving vigour. *Creations and Transcreations* (Satyabrata Pal, Palm Avenue, Calcutta) contains three 'creations' of P. Lal. One of the poems is 'The Murderer' which contains lines such as

His last glimpse was of thick blood nosing

Catlike towards the drain, and the slow oozing

Matched the hourglass fading of his spirit's powers

pleads to a Dostoevskian effect. *The Eye of Autumn* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta) by Deb Kumar Das is sub-titled 'An Experiment in Poetry' where the poet had tried to be outlandish in creating word spirals. M. Krishna Kumar's *The Ruined Temple* (Shanta Vilas, Sekkalai, Karaikudi) seeks to receive faith through the symbol of a temple. R. P. Bholi's *Hills and Rills* (Lakhanpal Brothers, Amritsar) shows promise. The nine lyrics in Rakshat Puri's *Poems* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta) are critical enquiries into the modern civilisation. The mere effort of questioning makes him despair and where can he espy hope ?

I see cold tomorrows pass,

clouds tousled in a climbing storm,

And wait.....

Pritish Nandy, whose two volumes of poems, *On Either Side of Arrogance* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta) and *Early Poems* (Palm Avenue, Calcutta), are both modelled on e. e. cummings, is an exasperating poet. The unconventional printing and the wide liberties he takes with the reader's patience seem like the naïve mischief of an adolescent. But perhaps one should hope for the best in future as Nandy has the touch of a poet. Wide reading in modern British and American poetry have their good impact on lines such as

close your eyes love
before this loneliness
becomes unloving in the end
and the dolphins arrive
with unfinished waves
and in the island
we see the open wound
that leads to total dementia....

Among translations, the Writers Workshop has done good service to the cause of national understanding by publishing *Selected Poems of Parvez Shahedi* (translated from Urdu by Abu Asad Ghani), *The Mahabharata Volumes I & II* (translated by P. Lal) and *The Gita Govinda of Jayadeva* (translated by Monika Varma). *An Anthology of Marathi Poetry (1945-1965)* edited by Dilip Chitre (Nirmala Sadanand Publishers, Bombay) is an ambitious attempt and its importance lies in the fine introduction contributed by the editor. *Changdeopashti and Other Poems of Jnaneshwar* have been translated by K. R. Kulkarni (Congress Nagar, Nagpur). This is also a welcome volume because of the scholarly introduction to the great Marathi saint-poet provided by the translator.

Criticism, hitherto a weak part of Indo-Angliana, is fast piling up in the form of scholarly publications. Part of this enthusiasm is no doubt due to the generosity of the University Grants Commission and individual universities who help with the publication of critical works. There is a distinct change

in the choice of subjects selected by Indians for critical probing. Of course, there are still titles like *The Stream of Consciousness in the English Novel* by D. K. Lal (Lakshmi Narain Agarwal, Agra); *Byron's Don Juan: A Study* by D. V. Subba Reddy (Malico Publishers, Tirupati); and *Essays in Experience* by D. V. Subba Reddy (Prashanti Publishers, Hyderabad). But the critics of 1968 on the whole preferred to link their Western subjects with India. Hence we have a perceptive re-assessment of a great savant in *Sir William Jones: A Study in Eighteenth Century British Attitudes to India* by S. N. Mukherjee (Cambridge University Press, England) and an account of Yeats's association with India in Naresh Guha's *W. B. Yeats: An Indian Approach* (Jadavpur University, Calcutta). G. B. Mohan's *The Response to Poetry* (New Century Book House, Delhi) and Sisir Kumar Ghose's *Mystics and Society* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay) bring together Western and Indian attitudes to culture, aesthetics, religion and spiritual experience. More often the Indian critic these days takes up an Indian author for a thorough critical analysis. So we have V. Sitaramiah's *Mahakavi Pampa* (Popular Prakashan, Bombay), K. D. Sethna's *The Vision and Work of Sri Aurobindo* (Mother India Office, Pondicherry), H. Tipperudra Swamy's *The Virasaiva Saints: A Study* (Translated by S. M. Angadi, Rao & Raghavan, Mysore), B. B. Majumdar's *Heroines of Tagore* (Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta), L. S. Bhandare's *Imagery of Kalidas* (Popular Prakashan, Bombay), S. K. Banerjee's *Bankim Chandra: A Study of his Craft* (Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta) and S. Mokashi-Punekar's *P. Lal: An Appreciation* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta). As if to complete the triumph of the Indo-Anglian critic, 1968 saw the publication of two significant books. *Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* edited by M. K. Naik (Karnatak University, Dharwar) brought together for the first time a solid block of critical material on many Indo-Anglian writers including T. P. Kailasam, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Sri Aurobindo and Bharati Sarabhai. Again, the 'panoramic glimpse' afforded by Krishna Kripalani

in *Modern Indian Literature* (Nirmala Sadanand Publishers, Bombay) rests finally on the medium of English language in 'the linguistic complex of modern India'. The enthusiast for Indo-Anglian literature may well smile triumphantly when he reads Kripalani's statistics.

It might also be noted that of a little over 20,000 books published during 1965-66 in India, over 10,000 were in English, the rest distributed among the fourteen or more major national languages of the country. In some of them, like Assamese, the number was well below 100, and in Kashmiri not more than 10.

Apart from quantity, Indo-Anglian writing can well boast of fine quality in various branches of creativity. Even a minor subject like 'travelogue' can index a few good productions every year. Suresh Vaidya's *Islands of the Marigold Sun* (Orient Paperbacks, Delhi) is about the author's brief sojourn to Andaman and Nicobar islands as a tourist. It is fascinating to watch the stone age struggling to move over to the age of petrol. K. P. S. Menon's photographic descriptions of the Soviet Union make *The Lamp and the Lampstands* (Oxford University Press, London) entertaining as well as instructive. K. M. George watches the other side of the Iron Curtain in *American Life Through Indian Eyes* (Janatha Publishers, Bombay). He is naturally unhappy at the lack of energy displayed by Indians. Can India ever move forward briskly as America has done to reach the materialist's paradise? An agonising question, but George does not wait for an answer.

Three autobiographies were published by Indians in 1968. Kamala S. Dongerkery's *On the Wings of Time* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay) is a charming volume of reminiscences. Mrs. Dongerkery, a social worker and researcher into India's traditional arts and crafts, has led a busy life as the wife of the eminent educationist, S. R. Dongerkery. Her life has had its share of sorrows, but she has learnt to see the brighter side of the picture by a soulful dedication to her chosen work. We are indebted to her for the poetic evocation of India's many regions.

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There is Dharwar, 'a lovely little town.... set amidst purple hills and green fields'; Chowpatty Crescent where 'the heart of India throbs, and people of all creeds come together as one'; Kodaikanal, 'fresh, clear and crisp, like the Scottish Highlands'; and the writer becomes poetic when describing the old world beauty of a place like Aurangabad. This picture of a pleasant, hard-working, loving couple seeing good and beauty in everything and growing into old age with a classic grace is rudely shattered when we take up the other two autobiographies. Sasthi Brata of *My God Died Young* (Hutchinson, England) is one of the new breed, the angry young anglicised 'babu' from India's post-Independence generation. Having rejected the traditional values of India and unable to grasp the secret of Western traditions, he is an outsider everywhere. We see him squirm through traditional India, contemporary England and exasperating America, and watch his flirtations with cheap sex and undigested Marxism. What saves Dom Moraes from producing an equally sordid autobiography is his unerring eye for selection. *My Son's Father* (Secker and Warburg, London) is also about a young Indian who cannot find in her a lovable Mother India. He too must travel hither and thither, pass through the agnoies of self-doubt, self-criticism and adolescent sex and drunken orgies before setting down to the life of a 'respectable' householder in London. Dom Moraes can write beautiful English and the scenes of his childhood and the trauma of his mother's psychological disintegration are etched with poignancy in this volume. It is good to know that the journalist in Dom Moraes has not yet expelled the real poet.

Between three government organisations, we have been having an excellent and regular flow of biographies in the recent years. The National Book Trust has been bringing out biographical studies of eminent writers in Indian languages. Among recent names in this series are Hari Narayan Apte, Shankar Dev and Subramania Bharati. Political studies are published by the Publications Division. Among recent publications particular

mention ought to be made of Padmini Sengupta's *Deshpriya Jatindra Mohan Sen Gupta* and K. P. S. Menon's *C. Sankaran Nair*. Sahitya Akademi specialises in slim monographs on creative writers like Ilango Adigal, Keshavsut, Kabir and Veeresalingam. Biographical literature in English was further fortified by notable publications like *Sri Homi Mody, A Political Biography* by D. R. Mankekar (Popular Prakashan, Bombay) ; *Biographical Visitas* by C. P. Ramaswami Iyer (Asia Publishing House, Bombay) ; *Yogi Sri Krishnaprem* by Dilip Kumar Roy (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay) ; and *Gandhi : A Life* by Krishna Kripalani. *Mahatma Gandhi 100 Years* edited by S. Radhakrishnan (Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi) is another significant collection of essays on Gandhi and is a promising prelude to the centenary year which is sure to see a large addition to Gandhiana in English. Other prose publications during 1968 include *Shining Harvest* by M. P. Pandit (Ganesh & Co., Madras) which contains scholarly essays on yoga, philosophy and mysticism, and *Mainly Academic* by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar (Asia Publishing House, Bombay). The latter volume is a collection of the speeches delivered by the author during 1966-67 as the Vice-Chancellor of Andhra University and covers a wide variety of subjects.

1968 has proved that Indians are as fond as ever of the English language. It is not merely a tool for communication between the different states, but a medium to express their hopes and aspirations. With the new world-wide enthusiasm for 'Commonwealth literature' we can hope for new conquests and significant triumphs for these writers in the years to come.