

---

---

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 14:6 June 2014  
ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

C. Subburaman, Ph.D. (Economics)

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

---

---

## Who Is An Indian Writer? Issues of Language in Indian Writing in English

Monika Yadav, Ph.D. Research Scholar

---

### Indian English Literature

This paper takes up a debate that has grown steadily edgier since independence – the politics of language in Indian literary culture, specifically in relation to the respective claims of the Modern Indian language and English language, which must also be recognised as an Indian language. In the field of literature, Indian English literature refers to the body of work by Indian writers who write in English language and whose native or additional native language could be one of the numerous regional and indigenous languages of India. In the twentieth century, several Indian writers have distinguished themselves not only in traditional Indian languages, but also in English, a language inherited from the British. As a result of British colonisation, India has developed its own unique dialect of English known as Indian English.

### Place of English in India

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:6 June 2014

Monika Yadav, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Who Is An Indian Writer? Issues of Language in Indian Writing in English

In the early days of British rule, English drama, poetry and novels had tremendously attracted the attention of the native Indian masses. If it was the language of colonial domination, it was also the language of anti-colonial resistance; our national leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and B. R. Ambedkar, employed it in the service of the freedom struggle. It is the country's associate official language and the chief link language for not only international, but even inter-regional communication. Salman Rushdie's Aurora Zogoiby (in *The Moor's Last Sigh*) was not far wrong when he said, "Only English brings us together" (Litrarism, English writing 1).

### **New Breed of Writers – The Battle for Indian Writing in English**

In the early eighties the new breed of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitabh Ghosh, Manohar Malgaonkar, Nayantara Sehgal and Anita Desai started popping upon the international literary map and establish a distinct identity. One of the key issues raised in this context is the superiority/inferiority of Indian Writing in English as opposed to the literary production in the various languages of India. Key polar concepts bandied in this context are superficial/authentic, imitative/creative, critical/uncritical, shallow/deep, and so on. Dharwadker stated "During the 1950s, the difference between the indigenous tongues and English was routinely cast as a choice between integrity and corruption, wholeness and fragmentation, rootedness and rootlessness, decolonization and recolonization" (xxviii).

The views of Salman Rushdie and Amit Chaudhuri expressed through their books *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing* and *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, respectively, vitalise this battle. Rushdie's statement in his book – "the ironic 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" (wiki 1) - created a lot of resentment among many writers.

In his book, Amit Chaudhuri questions "Can it be true that Indian writing, that endlessly rich, complex and problematic entity, is to be represented by a handful of writers who write in English, who live in England or America and whom one might have met at a party?" (wiki 1). The debates could swing from amity to bitterness in a second, and then back again; the argument about English versus the rest of India has roots that go back almost two centuries.

### **Subtle and Not-So-Subtle Tensions**

The Sahitya Akademi held its own festival of writing, focusing on regional literature, even as Neemrana Conference at Patna (2003) was under way, in a subtle underlining of the tensions between Indian writers in English and the Rest of Indian Literature. In the conference, there was one burning question “Who is an Indian Writer?” (Roy1). In an interview, the famous Indian English Writer Kiran Nagarkar said:

At that Neemrana conference there were about 10 sessions, and all of them essentially became incarnations of the theme of Indianness. All they could think of was this question of being an Indian writer. And it pissed me off no end! For the simple reason that I am not setting out to be an Indian author. But at the same time I cannot for one moment forget that whatever I write comes from an Indian consciousness ( Roy 1).

### **Medium and the Identity of the Author**

Within the context of language debate in Indian literary circle, the identity of an author is often connected with the medium which he/she uses in representing the Indian reality. This is very much common in the case of English used by non-English speakers. Conversely, Indian-English writers such as Nissim Ezekiel, Arvind Krishana Mehrotra, and P. Lal, claim that “English was not a deliberately chosen or elitist medium, but simply natural expression of their private and social experience”. (Karnad xxviii)

By all accounts, this dialectic faithfully represents the impassioned charges that major authors across the spectrum of Indian languages, like U. R. Ananthamurthy, Rajendra Yadav, Gurdial Singh, B. Jayamohan have continued to level against English in public forums of all kinds. The Kannada writer U. R. Ananthamurthy is supposed to have burst out against English writers claiming that “English writers were like prostitutes since they wrote with an eye for money and global reach the language offers”. (Rukhaya 7)

The critics sought to establish how the literary representation and medium are used to construct and define one’s identity within the cultural and socio-political context. Salman

Rushdie, the famous Indian English writer, is pilloried for the disrespect to the Prophet's family, and there was a complaint that he shouldn't have written so openly, or so critically, of the Prophet's family, or community, or country.

### **Pros and Cons**

Apart from such issues, there is also a constant battle over authenticity and viewpoint. These perennial questions have perplexed the minds of those Indian writers who write both in vernacular and in English. Through the play *Broken Images*, Girish Karnad raises this issue that those who write in their mother tongue also do accept royalties and trade their creativity. He also points out that if one earns one's bread honestly, what is unethical if money comes from creativity?

If a writer wants to showcase his culture to the world through a widely spoken language, what is illegitimate in it? The truthfulness and honesty of the writers writing in English is often made them suspect in their own country and in other English-speaking countries; some may even claim that they are considered as 'marginal' to the mainstream of English literature. Sometimes Indian English writers are condemned of forsaking the national or regional language and writing in an 'alien' language.

### **Questions Relating to Linguistic Representation**

The question related to linguistic representation still seems to hold a debatable place in Indian literary circles. For instance, few historians and critics questioned the accuracy of V.S Naipaul's account of Indian history. "In the 1990s and the 2000s, discussions on that twinned-in-opposition pair, Naipaul and Rushdie, degenerated under the weight of gossip" (Roy 1) and Naipaul's view of history or Rushdie's perspective on India shimmered and disappeared somewhere.

In a sense, we have always been sensitive as a nation to what is written about us, often drawing as many reactions, fuelled equally by anxiety and vexation.

### **The Question of Missing Real India**

This debate surfaced again when Pankaj Mishra attacked Patrick French for missing the real India stories in his *Intimate Biography of India*. The broad thrust of Mishra's

argument was that the French had provided superficial accounts of the darker side of contemporary Indian history - the poverty, the real hungers and the tragedies. Through their argument it became clear that the real argument was over divergent views of India.

One of the most memorable battles in that short-lived war was the skirmish between the late professor Meenakshi Mukherjee and the writer Vikram Chandra. It began when Mukherjee questioned the choice of titles for Chandra's short stories in his collection *Love and Longing in Bombay*. To her, his titles—'Artha', 'Dharma', 'Kama'—were "necessary to signal Indianness in the West". Again the question which appears is - Who is writing about us? Do they have the right to tell our stories? And are they telling the right ones? James H. Cousins in 1918 says,

... if they (Indians) are compelled to an alternative to writing in their own mother tongue, let it be not Anglo-Indian, but Indo-Anglian, Indian in spirit, Indian in thought, Indian in emotion, Indian in imagery and English only in words ... let their ideals be the expression of themselves, but they must be quite sure that it is their self." ( Sarangi 1)

### **Stylistic Influence from the Local Languages**

If we talk about the style of Indian English writers, stylistic influence from the local languages appears to be an exceptional feature of much of the Indian literature in English. Another feature of Indian English writers is that they have not 'nativised' the British mother tongue in terms of stylistic features, but they have also acculturated English in terms of 'Indianized context'.

### **Creativity in Another Tongue**

A broad view that the mother tongue is the primary means of literary creativity is still generally held across cultural diversity. But creativity in another tongue is often measured as a deviation from this strict norm. The native language is considered pure; it is addressed as a standard model of comparison. This however, has caused difficulties for non-native writers of Indian English Literature. Indian language writing and English writing often share themes and belief systems, as is apparent in comparisons between Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Premchand's *Godan* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, or Vijayan's *The Legends of Khasak* and Narayan's *Malgudi Days*.

## **Literature in Global *Lingua Franca***

In Sahitya Akademi's Commonwealth Literary Seminar 2010, Sanyukta Sengupta said that English is a "Global Lingua-Franca", which has "evolved beyond Macaulay's students or Midnight's Children" and "defines our mature and adult identity". (Kumar 3) English language is always seen as a power symbol which sustains hegemonic differences and stands superior as compared to any other native language.

But on the other hand, in India, English language has always been blamed for its incompatibility and incapability of mutual communication with indigenous people. It is believed that its representations always perpetuate and replicate wide gaps of differences. It is considered to be devoid of any mutual connectivity with the native sensibility. In this context the Marathi critic, Bhalachandra V Nemade, in his lecture during Sahitya Akademi's Commonwealth Seminar 2010 said that he prefers mono-lingualism of natives instead of bi-lingualism. For him bi-lingualism does not allow either language to proliferate, and he asserts that those "who speak fluently in English are slaves of English". (Kumar 3) "He evokes the psychological effects of the language when he says 'writer and reader's relationship is direct' which could only be achieved through common linguistic signifiers and which the foreign language lacks and cannot achieve". (3) On the other hand Basavraj Naikar (the famous Indian English writer) considers bilingualism as a virtue. In an interview Jaydeep Sarangi asked Basavraj Naikar:

Sarangi: Do you consider your bilingualism as a virtue?

Naikar: All the Indian English writers should be bilingual so that they may give an authentic picture of Indian life and culture. The Anglicized writers of India cannot give an authentic picture of native Indian culture although they may write good English. A bilingual writer of India is able to absorb the essence of Indian culture available in Sanskrit or his regional language like Kannada and Marathi and so on and express it in his English writings" (Sarangi 1)

## **Reason for Fascination**

The late David McCutcheon, one of IWE's earliest and still one of its most pertinent critics, writes "The fascination of Indian writing in English lies ... in the phenomenon ... of

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 14:6 June 2014

Monika Yadav, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Who Is An Indian Writer? Issues of Language in Indian Writing in English

literary creativity in a language other than the surrounding mother tongue”. (Rollason 2) He highlights, the particular technical difficulties posed by the use of dialogue in IWE works. He states that “It would require very exceptional gifts and total bilingualism to express directly in English the lives of people who do not themselves speak English”. ( Rollason 3)

### **The Role of Genre**

This issue of language in Contemporary Indian Literature involves not only language but also genre. In the introduction of the book *Collected Plays*, Dharwadker stated that “a play in English, however successful its author, cannot compete with a novel in English, because of the qualitative differences between novels and plays as literary artifacts” (Karnad xxx).

Fiction in English by Indian and Indian Diaspora authors now commands a global readership, but Indian plays in English occupy a distinctly subservient position, not only in relation to the positions it holds against literary genres such as fiction, non-fiction, and criticism in English occupy, but also in relation to plays in Indian languages such as Hindi, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, Bengali and Manipuri.

The same is true of theatre professionals in the Indian diaspora who write and direct plays in English, such as Rahul Varma in Montreal and Jatinder Verma in London. Their works remain outside the cultural mainstream and command an audience infinitely smaller than the audiences for the fiction of Rushdie, Ghosh, Mistry, and others.

### **Three Developments Since 1980s**

Since 1980’s, three developments have been traced that have transformed the language issues in India.

First, after the ‘Rushdie revolution’ the quality and quantity of writing in English by Indians bears little relation to the traditions of ‘Indo-Anglian writing’ as “they had emerged before and after independence, so that a new theoretical and critical vocabulary is necessary to deal with the body of English works that counterpoints writing in the Indian languages” (Karnad xxix).

Second, the rapid growth of the global Indian diaspora has also repositioned many of the major Indian-English writers and absorbed them into the international literary establishment, so that India is no longer the primary context for their writing. Novelists like Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan, who live and publish in India, inhabit a qualitatively different literary landscape from novelist such as Vikram Seth, Amitra Ghosh, Bharati Mukherjee, and Rohiton Mistry. In this context Dharwadker stated:

Admittedly, regardless of location Indian writers in English reach much larger audiences than those who write in the regional Indian language or even in the majority language, Hindi and one may use this commonality of medium as a reason to reject them equally. But the differences between them still have to be recognized in a circumspect assessment of literary contexts: globalism has rapidly eroded the status of all stay-at-home writers, whatever their medium, although its effect on Indian-language authors has been especially dire. (Karnad xxix)

Third, through the phenomenon of translation into English and other languages, Indian language authors do inhabit a large and more dynamic literary world than their predecessors. This issue would come up again and again; for years. But the real debate was the one that tore Indian writing in English apart about a decade ago: the issue of what makes a book about India the genuine article, and of who has the right to ‘represent’ the country. The argument of ‘authenticity’ was rapidly buried, and few readers, writers or critics wanted to police books to see how their Indianness rated on a scale of one to 10.

### **Indian Writing in English - View from the Western World**

Indian writing in the Western world is defined largely as Indian writing in English. Writing from the margins—Dalit writing, the resurgence in Indian poetry in English, writing from the Northeast—is rarely visible; when it is visible, it is exoticised, both here and abroad. And by its nature, Indian writing in English has been largely privileged writing. This paper does not aim to prove the superiority or inferiority of either English writings or regional writings. Rather, it aims to assimilate English writing into the mainstream of Indian writing with a status of Indian identity. As a literary language in India, English needs neither to be privileged nor to be de-privileged: it is just one of the several languages in which multilingual India creativity chooses to express itself.



---

---

### Works Cited

- Karnad, Girish. —Author's Introduction. *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana and Tughlaq*. New Delhi: OUP, 2007. Print.
- \_\_\_\_.ed. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker. *Collected Plays. Tale- Danda, The Fire and the Rain, The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, Two Monologues: Flowers, Broken Images*. New Delhi: OUP.2005. Print.
- Kumar, Shiv. *Body Politics and Language: Girish Karnad's Broken Images*. Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal. Vol. I. Issue.I. 2012. Print.
- Literarism< <http://literarism.blogspot.in/2012/01/indian-english-literature.html>>
- Roy, Nilanjanas. *How To Read In Indian: The long history of a literary argument that refuses to go away*. 2011.web,15nov 2013.
- Rollason, Christopher. *Indian Writing in English: Some Language Issues And Translation Problems*. 2006.web.23nov.2013.
- Rukhaya.M.K. Identity Crisis in Girish Karnad's "Broken Images" The Criterion: An International Journal in English, 2010.
- Sarang, Jaydeep.*Re-thinking Indian English Criticism*  
<<http://www.boloji.com/index.cfm?md=Content&sd=Articles&ArticleID=13390>>
- William, H. M. *Indo-Anglian Literature*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1976.
- Wikipedia <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_English\\_literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_English_literature)>

---

---

### Colophon:

My thanks are due to my supervisor Dr Gunjun Agarwal for help and guidance in writing this paper.



Monika Yadav, M. A., M. Phil.  
Research Scholar  
Maharishi Markandeshwar University, Mullana 133207 (Ambala), Haryana, India  
[monikayadav2186@gmail.com](mailto:monikayadav2186@gmail.com)

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 **14:6 June 2014**

Monika Yadav, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Who Is An Indian Writer? Issues of Language in Indian Writing in English

