

Ventriloquing the Vernacular: The Contexts to Indian English Writing

Swetha Antony¹⁺

¹ Dept: of English Literature The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad

Abstract. Indian English Writers tend to innovate upon the English language to communicate an innate sense of 'Indianess'. The 'Indian English' in subtle ways transposes the colloquial and the vernacular into the English. In effect we feel that the English used is coming from different context. In other words, when writing in English, Indian English Writers articulate through a ventriloquist's voice. There is a new language of articulation. At times we feel that the ventriloquist's voice is different from the 'real' voice. Why is this kind of ventriloquism preferred to the supposedly "real" voice? What is the need to transpose the real voice or to ventriloquize it? Is it the only means to articulate the ambivalence of a multicultural existence? These are the questions that the article attempts to respond to.

Keywords: Indian English, vernacular, colloquial, voice, ambivalence

1. Introduction: Is there a crisis in Indian English Writing?

Indian English Literature reverberates with many voices trying to articulate the essence of Indianess. However, there has been an evident change in its speech since independence. In the beginning, though in an experimental phase, the writers tended to be realistic with tinges of pessimism surfacing in between. The urge then was to hold on to English literary traditions. However, the post independent writing catered to modernist and post modernist tendencies as literature especially poetry became experimental. The aim here was to cope with changing times. The influence of globalization and questions of language and identity that it evoked were evident in the creative output. Indian Writing in English in its many avatars like poetry, fiction and drama today explores the self in an attempt towards discovery linking it to childhood, memories and history. Even then the debate is still on if Indian English is something Indian or outside the parameters of being Indian.

The words of Makarand Paranjape^[1] are relevant here: "In other words, a question like "Can Indians write in English?" need not be taken literally. The question, in fact, is tantamount to asking, "What is the nature of such writing"? What are its possibilities and limits? How good is it? Where does it fit in in the larger spectrum of Indian literature and culture? What is its relationship with mainstream literatures in English on the one hand and with various "vernacular" Indian literatures on the other? In short, what is the identity of IEL? What sort of creature is it? How do we best understand it?"

The debates and questions around IEL will continue. However the metaphor of ventriloquing can be used to figure out some aspect of this contested area. Ventriloquism is the art of producing vocal sounds that appear to come from another source. The ventriloquist manipulates his or her voice so that it appears as if the voice is coming from elsewhere. An Indian writer writing in English is also using a similar technique. However, the irony is that we are not sure which is more important: the ventriloquist's voice or the ventriloquist dummy's voice. Evidently there is no other way in which the ambivalence of a modern Indian could be properly communicated.

⁺ Corresponding author.
E-mail address: whitesorrow07@gmail.com.

2. The *Perpetrators*: The colonial legacy

The ambivalence that can be traced in Indian English Writing is a direct result of the colonial legacy. English was planted onto the Indian soil by colonial rule with a vast number of educational institutions that were established throughout the country. The vernacular was clearly sidelined during the rule of the raj. Though there were movements to bring back or usher in the vernacular languages, it was always kept aside. Even when the British rule ended, it left behind the language. So what happened to the English? The colonized became the colonizer. The inevitable result – an hyphenated English.

3. Theoretical inroads to Indian English

English as a language is under a process of metamorphosis. After the historical processes of colonization, de – colonization and the resulting globalization the use of ‘English’es has gained momentum. The theories that try to explain the process are also many.

3.1. Post Colonial Theory

Much impact on the question of the use of the language was made possible with Post Colonial theory. It traces three main stages in the acquisition of colonial language. As Peter Barry^[2] says in *Beginning Theory*, “All Post colonial literatures, it might be said, seem to make this transition. They begin with an unquestioning acceptance of the authority of European models ... with the ambition of writing works, that will be masterpieces entirely in this tradition. This can be called the ‘*Adopt*’ phase of colonial literature, since the writer’s ambition is to adopt the form as it stands, the assumption being that it has universal validity. The second stage can be called the ‘*Adapt*’ since it aims to adapt the European form to ...subject matter, thus assuming partial rights of intervention in the genre. In the final phase there is, so to speak, a declaration of cultural independence whereby ... writers remake the form to their own specification, without reference to European norms. This might be called the ‘*Adept*’ phase, since its characteristic is the assumption that the colonial writer is an independent adept in the form, not a humble apprentice. This *new* (italics mine) stress on ‘cross- cultural’ interactions is the fourth characteristic of post colonialist criticism”

The fourth stage does open up immense possibilities for the language and the literature – both the form and the matter. Nevertheless, the crucial matter when it comes to using this language is that it has no geographical base in this country. To bring back the ventriloquist image again when he/she throws his/her voice it seems to be coming from somewhere else, an altogether different terrain. So what does it mean to throw one’s voice? Why is it necessary to do this? The real voice is often transposed into another source only because of the urgent need to be heard. If you speak in your own voice, nobody hears it. So the voice is always thrown and it seems as if it is coming from elsewhere while in truth it is coming from somewhere deep within.

3.2. Terry Eagleton: Nationalism: Irony and Commitment

The ideas that create the discourse of postcolonial literature are given an in-depth analysis by Terry Eagleton in the essay titled *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment* where he discusses the impact of colonialism in the formation of a national identity and its gradual impact on the literature of a particular region. Though Eagleton focuses on the Irish situation in his essay, it is possible to draw parallels with Indian English Literature. The ambivalence of existence – an evident outcome of colonialism- is a prominent theme when it comes to commonwealth literature, especially Indian English Literature. The questions in its wake are many: the use of English - a language other than the native tongue for articulation of conflicts inherent in the self, the dilemma of alienation in one’s own land and culture caused by the differences between the old and the new etc. Ironically, these are the aspects that make such a literature stand out.

At this juncture, some key ideas from Terry Eagleton’s essay *Nationalism: Irony and Commitment* will aid in understanding the deep roots of such a creative output. He says ^[3]: “Nobody can live in perpetual deferment of their sense of selfhood, or free themselves from bondage without a strongly affirmative consciousness of who they are. Without such self-consciousness, one would not even know what one lacked;

and a subject that thinks itself complete feels no need to revolt. In this sense, the "negativity" of an oppressed people—its sense of itself as dislocated and depleted—already implies a more positive style of being.”

An inherent sense of loss or a lack plagues an individual who has been part of a heritage tinged by colonialism. India with its chequered history has much to boast of, in this regard. A direct result of this would be loss/replacement of our own native language in the desire for/ the constructed necessity to gain another language - hyphenated English- a subtle *mélange* that is not this or that. However, whatever was lost in translation was gained with the rise of the genre of Indian English Literature. It became a preferred medium capable of articulating the precarious situation of being neither here nor there, as Eagleton says^[4], “At once fighting on a terrain already mapped out by its antagonists and seeking even now to prefigure within that mundane strategy styles of being and identity for which we have as yet no proper names.” Paranjape^[5] also argues along the same lines when he says: “By its very definition, it is a hybrid, a sort of liaison literature, mediating between the contrary pulls of the metropolis and the nation, between a cosmopolitan modernity and ethnic traditionalism. Before Independence nationalism was the dominant ideology, while after independence a sort of Internationalism has replaced it. Never has this shift been as pronounced as in the 1980s and 1990s. IEL has long had to fight a battle to prove its validity and viability, to justify its existence and success. In addition, there has been a major battle within, . . . over the meaning of modernism/modernity the value of the past and of tradition, and the possibilities of the future.”

It has to be noticed that it is the poets who have played the ventriloquist’s dummy the most effectively when it comes to Indian English Literature. The peculiarity of the genre itself with its open-endedness and self- reflexivity has rendered the ventriloquists a strong voice to fall back upon. The word of Nila Shah and Pramod K Nayar in their introduction in *Modern Indian Poetry in English, Critical Studies* has to be noted here^[6] “ . . . perhaps the debate – now almost ancient - over the Indian poet’s use of English is resolved this way : they use it not only because they are comfortable with it, but because they are good with it.”

3.3. Deterritorialization of Language

From what we have looked so far, the position of an Indian English writer is mired with dilemma. Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari again highlight this aspect in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* and points to the ambivalent situation regarding the notion of a language of one’s own. How can we stake our claim over a particular language? How a language becomes one’s mother tongue? What is our claim over a language other than our mother tongue? Such points of departure are relevant in India where the postcolonial discourses still circulate especially in the case of Indian writing in English. Some keys points from their essay open up the issues^[7]: “How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language?”

In a typical multilingual literary scenario, the idea of the minor literature as explicated by Deleuze and Guattari in “What is a Minor Literature?” is a point to dwell on. According to them, a minor literature does not come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. However, the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. Is the deterritorialization of language an attempt at capturing the peculiar situation of being neither here nor there as is the case with Indian English? Here English is appropriated in a certain way for a strange and a minor use. It is a language in the making; it is something that is in the process of becoming. Thus, the minor literature cannot be dismissed as a refuge; it is something that is in the process of being created. The major language is being transformed in certain ways by a minority to induce a minority- becoming within the majority. In short, it is a revolutionary way of using the colonizer’s language to create a counter discourse. From this, it can be said that Indian English is a deterritorialised language. Ironically, there is no other way we could convey the ambivalence evident in our lives.

As Deleuze and Guattari say^[8]: “This language torn from sense, conquering sense, bringing about an active neutralization of sense, no longer finds its value in anything but an accenting of the word, an

inflection. . . . The sound or the word that traverses this new deterritorialization no longer belongs to a language of sense, even though it derives from it, nor is it an organized music or song, even though it might appear to be.”

4. The Ventriloquist or the Ventriloquist’s Dummy?: That is the Question

Undoubtedly the nuances of Indian English come out through the Ventriloquist’s Dummy. Without doubt there are immense possibilities inherent in such a language use. When the colloquial gets transposed into a mainstream language like English, it increases the visibility of the vernacular. However what we hear out of the Dummy is not a singular voice but pluralities of voices that seek articulation. It is perhaps the best way to voice dialectics inherent in the self stemming from the many conflicts. Ventriloquing is perhaps the best way to describe the ambivalence that shines through in the use of Indian English. But will there be a Ventriloquist’s Dummy without a Ventriloquist? That perhaps is the question.

5. References

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