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The Impact of desi pop-lit novels on English language in India

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Abstract

Language continues to be a tool of hegemony in postcolonial India. Indian English Novel begun as a colonial by-product but the Rushdie phenomenon evolved the entire milieu of the Post –independent, Postcolonial novel. English being a global language has left its imprint on the psyche of the average Indian. The hegemony of *English* not only as a language but also culture in Indian society cannot be ignored. An elite class of intellectuals and novelists has made their presence felt on the map of Indian literary scene. With unbridled globalization a plethora of young Indian men and women have been experimenting with the novel. This corpus of pop lit and chick lit novels has without doubt permeated the distinct oeuvre of the Indian English Novels. This paper explores the potential and variation English as a language has been influenced by the desi pop lit novels.

Keywords: Indian English Novelists, hegemony, colonialism, language, Hinglish

Introduction

Language, Culture and Identity are interconnected and cohesive as reflected in the case of our country India. Not one entity can be thought of in isolation. The origins of English in India could be traced back before Macaulay enforced the study of English language. There are a range of varied reasons as to why English has become the language of the elite and of governance in India, ignoring the original Macaulayism.

India being a multi-cultural, social, religious, linguistic country the pros and cons were and still are too many. In such a scenario the importance of English is only too obvious. In India, English serves two purposes- foremost is providing a linguistic tool for the administrative organization of the country, causing people who speak different languages to become united. Secondly, it serves as a language of wider communication, including a large variety of different people covering a vast area. It overlaps with local dialects and languages in different spheres of public influence.

The rationale behind accepting the red man's language is still under debate. The question of language between the colonizer and the colonized is always there. Despite continued pressure from nationalists, English has remained at the heart of Indian society. It is widely used in the media, in Higher Education and government and therefore remains a common means of communication. It is surveyed that approximately 4% of the Indian population use English representing 35 million speakers — the largest English-speaking community outside the USA and the UK. In addition there are speakers of English in other parts of South Asia, such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, where English plays a similar role. English is virtually become a mother tongue for many educated South Asians, but for the vast majority it remains a second language. This means there are speakers whose spoken English is heavily influenced by speech patterns of their ethnic language.

These questions were raised by Raja Rao, the novelist belonging to the genre of Indian English Fiction writers, in the foreword written for *Kanthapura*. The English language is not free from inflections of other languages and in a multi-lingual place like India it was apparent. Fiction is the rotund fruit which blossoms spontaneously and inevitably in the fast spreading, all encompassing, encroaching and evergreen tree of life, commented Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore in the introductory paragraph of his essay *Shesh Kotha* (Final Words). A comparatively new genre in the milieu of native Indian literature, the novel in India is a colonial product.

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The English novel in the Indian soil is more so, as the project of writing fiction in the colonizer's language is reflected with concerns of influence. But it is the same influence which accentuated the first colonial experience. Hence the cross-pollination of language, race and art churned out the Indian English novel. The inevitability of the genre in colonial and postcolonial India, roots back to 1835, the year of the publication of Macaulay's Minutes on Education. Since then, Indian English fiction carries on forging new narrative forms to express the Indian experience in the language of the British. In 1935 with the publication of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* the Indian Novel truly came to be established as a genre in the corpus of Indian English. The triumvirate of Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand were the true pioneers of Indian English Novel. After independence there were a number of novelists writing in English though the readership would be again a matter of concern. R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao managed to garner international acclaim through their scholarly works but their works were short of circulation and flow of movement was lacking. Who put India on the literary map of the world was none other than the Booker of the Booker winner Salman Rushdie. The most sensational event in the revival of English was the success of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. After its publication, the corpus of Indian English fiction, once assumed to be declining and dead, was reborn as masala-ized, chutnified English, and midnight's literary grandchildren scented fame and fortune. How languages evolve over time as culture is made and remade, and people adapt to conditions around them establish the supremacy of language which has time and again been proved by the language English. He was successfully followed by St. Stephen novelists like Amit Chaudhari, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth to name a few.

Though there had been a considerable splurge of new wave fiction in India it was limited to the elite class of the convent educated upper middle class, a class which has its prominence in post-colonial India. The readership is on a growing curve but what has made a mark on the average Indian is not the Rushdie's and Naipaul's but an IITian Chetan Bhagat.

There could be a number of reasons for the great masters of Indian English fiction not reaching the masses as in thematic concerns, atmospheric relevance and so on. One reason could also be the limited reach of English education to a certain section of Indian society. With liberalization in every sphere a normal Indian family has dared to achieve not only a progressive education but a free minded thinking has also developed. Industrial development and the advent of software had opened the doors of engineering technologies to the educated middle class.

Generally, English is used among Indians as a 'link' language and it is the first language for many well-educated Indians. It is also the second language for many who speak more than one language in India. The English language is a tie that helps bind the many segments of our society together. Also, it is a linguistic bridge between the major countries of the world and India. The importance of the ability to speak or write English has recently increased significantly because English has become the de facto standard. Learning English language has become popular for business, commerce and cultural reasons and especially for internet communications throughout the world. English is a language that has become a benchmark not because it has been approved by any

'standards' organization but because it is widely used by many information and technology industries and recognized as being set. The call centre phenomenon has stimulated a huge expansion of internet-related activity, establishing the future of India as a cyber-technological super-power. Modern communications, videos, journals and newspapers on the internet use English and have made 'knowing English' indispensable. Today, words such as wifi, internet, google, email and selfie have become universal; they have infiltrated English and languages all over the world. Social media has also changed the way one talks.

The stupendous example of this Hinglish feat could be seen in the outcome of a phenomenon called Chetan Bhagat which stormed the Indian literary scene few years back and has not looked back since. Lately there has been literally a sea of new books and the erstwhile publishing houses of India have awakened from its deep slumber. Not only have the established names in the industry but a number of additions found a largely growing reading public.

One reason which prominently came out is they are short and simple both in content and language. A book such as *Five Point Someone* or *Two States* or anything of the same genre is usually a 250 odd pages book which uses simple language to convey the meaning. One does not have to pick up a dictionary or google search for some idea in the book. In case one doesn't understand a word/phrase, one can still move on and get an idea of what the author wants to say.

The hobby of reading which was to a certain extent non-existent in the modern youth is being revived because of these pop-lit books. The language used in these novels is full of Indiannisms, which has been a distinctive feature of Indian Writing in English, making it connect relatively faster with the Indian public. English as a language had always had an aura of elitism around it which these young writers have abridged to a large extent. Not only the number of reading public has multiplied but also their confidence in tackling English as a language have grown manifold. It seems Chetan Bhagat and his contemporary followers know the pulse of young India.

Through all the glitterati of fame and success, criticism has never been far for all these pop-lit writers. The nativists and the nationalists advocate the discontinuation of English language in India. Whether it is a Chetan Bhagat, Durjoy Dutta, Preeti Shenoy, Adwait Kala or Ravindra Singh, they have all been shredded into pieces over their writing style and are in conflict for language issues. This controversy of elite versus mass has been going on ages in many areas of life, and literature also has not been a saving entity. As far as language is concerned English has always been given an elite status compared to the vernacular languages.

English as a language has out rightly sidelined regional languages. Indians have accepted that their nation's prosperity, as well as their own, is wholly dependent upon not just learning English, but exclusively learning it as a first language. It began with the travelled elite, boomed within the middle class that was hired by multinational companies, and trickled to the vast majority hoping to escape their destitution but unable to afford private English education.

As all development begins with education stemming from language, this lingua franca has gained standing as no other. Yet, language is much more than a means of communication; it determines the books one reads, the television programs one watches, the ideas one is exposed to, the values one holds, one's personal interests, and one's career

opportunities. As reiterating it defines our identities. Therefore, what is perhaps most saddening is that because of this favoritism afforded to the English language the cultures of India are dying as they lose out on generations of authors, activists, actors, artists, playwrights, innovators, orators, and businesspersons who would have otherwise contributed to, and enriched, their own language.

This discrimination has become so systemic that the elite and middle classes send their children to English private schools while the vast poor send theirs to the government schools of their mother tongue. One need not mention that universities and even government jobs require fluency in English, as mandated by the ruling elite. Therefore, a person's socioeconomic status in Indian society is approximately in line with his or her fluency in the language. In other words: a new caste system has prevailed.

In India English is not a language it is a class. The prevailing view seems to be that unless students learn English, they can only work in limited jobs. Those who do not have basic knowledge of English cannot obtain good quality jobs. They cannot communicate efficiently with others, and cannot have the benefit of India's rich social and cultural life. Men and women, who cannot comprehend and interpret instructions in English, even if educated, are unemployable. The English language has created an unbreachable linguistic line.

It was inevitable with colonialism that the location of culture underwent a phenomenal shift. The hegemony of language has once more given rise to a colonial and colonized class. The subversion and imitation of the west is creating a new empire within the country. This is as deep an entrenchment of class and power which will take more to rectify. It will take a dismantling of colonial education, a remaking of the relationship between language and power.

Critics have been questioning the value of the flood of Indian English novels. It is deemed to be low brow literature in an elitist English speaking class. Hinglish, however, and despite its detractors, is here to stay. And there are signs that it is a genre with life. V. S. Naipaul called this inter mixture "the riddle of the two civilizations." English as a language has undeniably evolved in India since it first gained prominence. In the present scenario the influence on language through the source of Indian English Novels cannot be denied.

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