

# Negotiating Aspects of Culture, Communication and Identity in Indian Literary Texts: An Analytical Study

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*Abstract—Every language functions as a replica of its culture and value system. As far as Indians are concerned, English is a foreign language. Expression of emotions in an acquired language, for an Indian writer, seems to be a difficult task. Since every language is rooted in its native culture, Indian writers writing in English face the challenges of conquering a foreign language in order to excel in their field. During the process, they succeed in imitating the English only in grammar, structure and style but fail to transmit the real spirit and soul in the foreign language. Therefore an attempt is made in this paper to analyse the negotiating elements identified in some of the Indian literary texts.*

*Key words: Indian Writing in English; Nativisation of English; Culture and Identity;*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language helps one to communicate with the world around him and express his emotions and feelings to the understanding of others. It is the only aspect which distinguishes mankind from animals. Both the written and the spoken forms of a language are the commonly acknowledged mediums of communication. Learning a foreign language provides opportunity to know more about one's own language, to expand the view of the world, to understand the culture of the foreign land and acquire a competitive edge in career choice. English language is accepted universally as the language of communication across the globe. Kachru notes that "English now has national and international functions that are both distinct and complementary. English has thus acquired a new power base and a new elitism" [1]. It is also believed that the ability to communicate in English is becoming important in the present scenario to compete with the increasing global competition.

## II. ENGLISH IN INDIA

English is said to be the language of the British but it is used in most of the world countries either as a primary language or a secondary language. In India it is used as a communicative language both by the central and the state governments because it is the only language which unites different linguistic states of India. Before independence English was viewed as an alien tongue but after

independence, the perception got changed and the number of people who began to learn and write in English increased drastically. Though English has been with us for more than 300 years, the number of people who use English is only very few. Yet the industrial and economic progress of India is led by the English speaking people who have roles to play in the world market. However, it is identified that the English language used in India is different from that of other English speaking countries. Since it is a distinctive variety, it is called Indian English.

## III. INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

In the beginning of the Indian literary history, writers had adopted the language and style of the English writers since they were the only models available. One could see the use of the unadulterated language in the early Indian writings because the text was meant only for the elite class of people who knew English. Moreover publications could be done only in Britain. Bankim Chandra's *Rajmohan's Wife*, the first Indian novel belongs to this category though the storyline is set in India. Later when the language got international acclaim, writers were emboldened to incorporate their real self into their writings rather than imitating the English. Mulk Raj Anand's rural Indian setting and R.K. Narayan's fictional town Malgudi can be understood best only by the readers who know the history, religion, culture and customs of the Indian people. In order to convey the Indian theme, modern Indian writers like Salmon Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul stick to nonlinear narration and hybrid or adulterated language.

## IV. EXPOSITION OF CULTURE

One of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, R.K. Narayan projects the Indian cultural practices, beliefs and heritage in all his works. With the theme, locale, philosophy, characters and language, he presents a typical Indian novel. Given below is an extract from his novel *The Guide* where Raju's mother questions Rosie as she comes alone to the house in the evening:

The very first question she asked was, 'Who has come with you, Rosie?'

Rosie blushed, hesitated and looked at me. I moved a couple of steps backward in order that she might see me only dimly and not in all raggedness. I replied, 'I think she has come alone, mother.'

**Revised Manuscript Received on May 29, 2019.**

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My mother was amazed. 'Girls today! How courageous you are! In our day we wouldn't go to the street corner without an escort. And I have been to the market only once in my life, when Raju's father was alive.' [2].

Raju's mother is brought up in a tradition where women are prohibited from going out of the house alone. She is surprised to see a woman walking out of the house alone without the assistance of her father or husband whereas the behaviour reflected from Rosie is modern. As a modern woman her longing for freedom makes her negotiate with the conventions and socio cultural practices. This novel depicts the conventions of the Hindu society where marriages are arranged, the astrologer is consulted for auspicious time and prostration is done before the elderly people and saints as a mark of reverence. At the same time Raju's racial thinking does not allow Velan to fall under his feet:

Velan rose, bowed low, and tried to touch Raju's feet. Raju recoiled at the attempt. 'I'll not permit anyone to do this. God alone is entitled to such a prostration. He will destroy us if we attempt to usurp His rights.' [3]

Sacred ash is applied on the forehead and sacred verses are recited. Rituals give confidence to the people and on one occasion one of the characters .

Narayan does not believe in writing an English novel with English flavour since he is not personally exposed to alien cultural practices. Generally his texts require a close understanding of the religious and cultural practices of the Indian people in order to decipher the meaning. His characters express Indian thoughts through appropriate scenic backgrounds. The central character, Raju, though flirts with a married woman, remains Indian by doing well to the society wherein he lives.

The literature produced by the Indian diaspora writers puts forth more of the negotiating aspects of culture and identity than that of the writers who were born and brought up in India. As diasporans, the writers themselves revolve around such conflicting cultural backgrounds. Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian American author writes mostly about the negotiation between two different cultures, Indian and American. Her novel, *The Namesake*, is a chronicle of the displaced characters and their conflicting cultural identities in the multi-cultural social order. One of the most significant characters of the immigrant existence is the blend of the two worlds – the homeland and the adopted one. The admiration for one's culture and roots is never out of mind and the first generation migrant always expects his children to admire the same roots and culture. The immigrant children are made familiar with the cultural products of his country by the parents – the myths, stories and literature. At the same time, the importance of the cultural shades of the adopted land cannot be negated. Since the future of the second generation lies there, they must be made to learn the customs of that culture too:

Most of the toys of her baby boy Gogol come from yard sales as do their furniture, curtains, toaster and the like.

At first Ashima is reluctant to introduce such items into her home, ashamed at the thought of buying what had originally belonged to strangers, American strangers at that. But Ashoke points out that even his chairman shops at yard sales, that in spite of living in a mansion an American is not

above wearing a pair of secondhand pants, bought for fifty cents. [6]

## V. EXPOSITION OF COMMUNICATION

English is appropriated in the hands of Indian writers in order to make it relevant to the society. They also incorporate a number of terms from the regional languages into their writings so as to enable themselves to express the social, cultural and religious practices clearly. The encounter or the interference of numerous words from one's mother tongue in English language is known as code switching and code mixing. This is inevitable for an Indian writer who writes in a foreign tongue. This is done mainly for two reasons: 1. the writer's inability to comprehend and deal with the linguistic system of the target language and 2. the writer's inability to communicate competently. Some writers do it intentionally during their pathetic attempt to find a suitable vocabulary and for others it is an act of ignorance as a result of prolonged association with the English language and the mother tongue. However both are the result of imperfect learning. The conscious adaptation of mother tongue in English may be called 'nativisation' of a language.

Using present participles and continuous forms of verbs, mostly in spoken form and occasionally in written form, is one of the distinctive features of Indian English. Habitual actions are generally conveyed using continuous tenses like 'I am going to school regularly' rather than 'I go to school regularly' and 'Where are you coming from?' instead of 'Where do you come from?' [11]. The poem *The Dance of the Eunuchs* by Kamala Das can be seen as an example of the extensive and exhaustive use of the present participle which is a rare occurrence in any of the native English poems.

Kamala Das' use of 'ing' forms may be intentional or unintentional but the repeated use of the same form especially the present participle gives an impression that loudness is getting increased word after word. At the same time the present participle makes it hard to breathe while reciting the poem. Kamala Das might have succeeded in communicating the message but the music is lost. On a deeper analysis, one could see the poet's scrupulous search and the failure for suitable words.

Sarojini Naidu hailing from an aristocratic family feels that her feelings are anglicised. While advised to write poems, she could not isolate herself from the Indian culture and tradition. As an ardent admirer of Indian folklore and conventions, she created indigenous poems with the spirit of India. Her poems *The Bangle Sellers* and *In the Bazaars of Hyderabad*, portray Indian pageantry in a simple and rhythmic language. Given below is an example of Mrs. Naidu's exhibition of local colour in English. Had she chosen an alien theme, her writings would not have been received much by the Indian readers.



## IN THE BAZAARS OF HYDERABAD

What do you sell, O merchants?  
Richly your wares are displayed.  
Turbans of crimson and silver,  
Tunics of purple brocade,  
Mirrors with panels of amber,  
Daggers with handles of jade.  
What do you weigh, O ye vendors?  
Saffron, lentil and rice.

.....

Though the poetess belonged to the elite, had her education abroad and her thinking anglicised, her inner consciousness remained in tune with the Indian aspects of life. All her poems propagate the concept of regionalism and nationalism and not Europeanism.

Giving English form to an Indian imagination, in fact, is a complex phenomenon. This has been proved numerously in the past. When something is done in one's native language, it becomes really enjoyable. Take for example the Bengali poems of Tagore. W.B. Yeats, the promoter of Tagore's poems, was not happy with the English translations of Tagore. Those translations only led Yeats to remark that Indians do not know English. After reading both the Bengali and English versions of Tagore's poems, Amartya Sen remarks that: "Anyone who knows Tagore's poems in Bengali would typically find it difficult to be really satisfied with any translation, no matter how good." [12] E.M. Forster, a renowned English writer and translator agrees with the fact that the theme can be transferred in any language but not the charm.

## VI. NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES

Psychological disorientation or physical dislocation in a country, culture or society leads to identity crisis which gives a sense of uncertainty. During the pre-independent era, people had a feeling that they had lost their identity. On getting freedom from the colonial rule, the post-colonial people thought of retaining their identity. The question of identity, irrespective of their profession, religion, region and nation, was important for each. So, they raised their voices against past exploitations and oppressions and attempted to establish their identity. Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchables* and *The Coolie* exhibit the identity crisis of the protagonists under the pretext of socio-economic and socio-political conditions. Almost all the protagonists of R.K. Narayan strive for self-identity in their own ways under different circumstances. The recent texts deal mostly with the identity issues arising out of immigration and diaspora concepts.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* and *Jasmine* are other striking examples to deal with negotiating identities. Dimple, the protagonist in *Wife* is conflicted between the twin cultural background and loses her identity at every stage of her life. As a daughter, to fulfil the fantasies of her marriage and future, she allows her name to be changed from Dimple to Nandini since the former does not sound like a Bengali name. After marriage she is neither Dimple nor Nandini but she takes the name of her in-laws and becomes Mrs. Basu. Her dream of living an exuberant life in America prompts her to abort her own baby.

However, her husband Amit's restrictive behaviour and respect to Indian values irritate her and she starts protesting against him. She cannot control herself. "Her body seemed curiously alien to her, filled with hate, malice, an insane desire to hurt, yet weightless, almost airborne" [16]. Living in an alien land with a tradition-bound Indian husband makes her feel helpless and arises in her the quest for a new identity. Her oscillation between the Indian and American way of life finally leads her to flirt with the American Milt Glasser. When she probes into her guilt, she feels that her desperation is more acute than the guilt. "She was so much worse off than ever, more lonely, more cut off from Amit, from the Indians, left only with borrowed disguises and she felt like a shadow without feelings" [17]. The status of her ambiguous identity does not give her any identity, instead it puts her in peril.

## VII. CONCLUSION

English has attained the status of an international language. It has paved the way for the political, economic and cultural interactions between India and other world countries. During the process of 'nativisation', it is inevitable for the users of English in India to add vocabulary to suit the local audience. Too much of Indianism in the Indian literary texts gives the Indian readers the feeling of reflecting their own self and, at the same time, such texts export the history, tradition, values and culture of India to the audience abroad. A text with no influence of any of the Indian aspects will be considered as western both in language and thought. Such dependence on this 'westernism' will fail to pave the way for the diverse experience which the author wants to impart.

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