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Changing Trends of Indian Writing in English in the Last Century

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Abstract: Over the last century the number of Indian writers in English has steadily increased. While initially, Indians tried to follow the formal style of English writers, this is no longer true. Words from Hindi and other regional languages have enriched their writings extending to inclusion in the English dictionary. The themes in English writing also developed from the conservative to bold styles of expressing stark reality on social issues.

In the 21 years of her life span, Toru Dutt (1856-1877) published a sheaf of translated French poetry in English that won critical acclaim. But posthumously after her early death, her father discovered her manuscripts of prose and poetry and published the stories and the poetry as *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*. Toru Dutt has the unequivocal position of being the first woman writer to have poetry published in English and French.

About that same time, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94) is the only other Indian author to have been the first to publish a novel in English – *Rajmohan's Wife*. This novel is very realistic in its representation of East Bengali middle-class life. Beautiful and passionate Matangini is married to a villainous man, at a young age and she actually loves her sister's husband. However, in keeping with the moral standards of the period, Chattopadhyay does not explore this romantic theme which comes to an abrupt end. Such a situation posed a moral dilemma for the author although the novel begins with some daring on his part. The helplessness of women in incompatible arranged marriages was clearly evident (Mukherjee, 2000).

In the 1860s, hundred and fifty years ago, it was a struggle for the Indian author writing in English to find the right audience among his

readers for a purely Indian view of life, as Englishmen who primarily read these books were still trying to understand the Indian culture. Today, Indian writing in English (as well as translations of Indian writing into English) has found a wider reading public all over the world. With the globalization of culture, literature too has transcended ethnic confines to reach and be appreciated in broader horizons. The cultural divide has been partly bridged through advances in technology, and completely superseded by the grand new paradigm of a digital divide, more concerned with the haves and have-nots. Multiculturalism is appreciated in all areas – be it a classroom or university setting, a web page, a movie or television show, or anything for that matter, with the integration of cultures in each country internally as well as globally. Today, the ‘melting pot’ concept has been replaced by the ‘salad bowl’ idea where integration does not necessarily mean merging one into another, but rather appreciation of diversity in its pure form. In those days, Chattopadhyay just gave up writing in English after his maiden novel, *Rajmohan’s wife* failed to be appreciated (Mukherjee, 2000).

Subsequently, in the last century we have seen a transformation with many Indian authors writing in English without worrying about being understood by colonial masters of old. If we look at current writing in English, there is a lot of Hinglish (Hindi words added) or words from Indian languages used to high lite emotions. We have also accepted some American spellings in English writing, carrying in its tide, some of the casual attitude to emergent language. This new freedom with language makes it easier for authors to let emotions flow fluently, in their writing.

Sisir Das talks about the poor quality of translation being primarily responsible for Tagore’s fame being short-lived in the West (Das, 2001). Examining comparative literature, looking at some of the works of Nirad Choudhury, Kamala Das, Davidar David, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Amitava Ghosh, etc. will give us an insight into current Indian writing in English.

In the 19th and early 20th century, literary texts were cultured products of race, class, gender, sexuality with the colonial men of upper class having power over women of lower classes (Sen, 2002). Sexual exploitation described in the literature then actually prevailed extensively. Literary texts are by-products of culture and clearly run parallel with

events. The language used is rooted in social practices as is evident from current usage of informal language.

The theme of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novels continued with a peaceful atmosphere of tinkling ankle bells, women doing each other's hair – dreaming of different ways of braiding, or painting lac on each other's feet (a north Eastern custom); to be suddenly shattered by the unexpected arrival of the husbands or men of the homes “silencing the women into awe and making them scurry and hide from the authoritarian male gaze.” In positions of absolute power, the masters of the house ‘depending on their mood’ could order instant obedience or punish defiance or confer instant favours (Sen,2002)! These words can have all the women's groups and feminists up in arms, if written today by an author, condemning him as ‘sexist’ for such descriptions.

We have Arundhati Roy talking about adultery, divorce and more (*God of small things*, 1998), and Kiran Desai has a good laugh at God men (*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, 1998). Sampath Chawla who was no good at studies or at his job as a post office clerk and flees to live on a guava tree in the outskirts of the city, suddenly becomes famous as a hermit! The story has a mysterious end leaving the readers to speculate if it was Sampath who turned into a large guava on the tree. Bad relationships, sexuality and bad (arranged) marriages are discussed interwoven with Naxalite politics in her Booker award winning *Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Shashi Deshpande writes again of complicated relationships and the dying culture of arranged marriages in *Ships that Pass* (2012), indicating the changes in the thinking of women and their ability to express their love to the male counterpart, unlike the expected norm of man wooing woman, as in the past century. The language changes along with this cultural change. There are no longer shy simpering creatures with lowered eyes in the presence of their masters (Sen, 2002) but women who make eye contact and question and debate on all the issues related to life, sharing a coffee with men they live with, or work with or study with. We have Rohinton Mistry's (1991) *Such a Long Journey* exploring both the political scenario and Parsi family and community life, with a rare vintage flavour. And of course, every story of R.K.Narayanan's is centered in the heart of normal Indian suburban life (Narayanan, 1992).

Toru Dutt's poetry written in English, earned for her the title of a forerunner to Indian women writing in English, and dealt with Indian epics

and topics (Sengupta, 1982). Writing of the famed Savithri's verbal duel with the God of Death Yama, she writes:

"The Power of goodness is so great, we pray to feel its influence,
Forever on us."
And feeling alone after her sister's death, she wrote:
"Wondering I looked awhile-then, all at once
Opened my tear-dimmed eyes- When lo! the light
Was gone-the light as of the stars when snow
Lies deep upon the ground. No more, no more..."
Such pure poetry has a place alongside Keats or Blake (in its mystic nature).

Toru spent the last few years of her life mastering Sanskrit and reading the Ramayana and Mahabharata in Sanskrit. Proficient in English and French, next studied Indian epics representative of the best of Indian culture and presented it to the world with the skills of her European learning.

We have Mamta Kalia (1940-todate , Thayil, 2008)) write:
"I can't bear to read Robert Frost.
Why should he talk of apple-picking
When most of us can't afford to eat one?"

Kalia moves between English and Hindi while writing poetry, with equal fluency and, she has no problem moving between cultures with boldness. "You start praying; spending useless hours at the temple. You want me to be like you Papa, or like Rani Lakshmibai. You are not sure what greatness is but you want *me* to be great." Women did not question men a hundred years ago but in line with the culture today, women poets and authors express their frustrations freely, without sugar-coating as in the days of Dutt or Chattopadhyay.

Another trail blazer of more recent times, after the short-lived Toru Dutt (Sengupta, 1982), was Kamala Das (1934-2009) who writes of female sexuality with an honesty that gives power to her writing although she was considered a trail-blazer for her times.

"O what does the burning mouth
Of sun, burning in today's,

Sky, remind me....oh, yes, his
Mouth, and....his limbs like pale and
Carnivorous plants reaching
out for me, and the sad lie
of my unending lust.” (From Summer in Calcutta, 1965)

And about her own writing in English, she has another poem *Introduction*:

“I don't know politics but I know the names
Of those in power, and can repeat them like
Days of week, or names of months, beginning with Nehru.
I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one.
Don't write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Every one of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like?”

Soon after her death, The Times called Kamala Das ‘*the mother of modern English Indian poetry*’ (Booth, 2009). English has now become native tongue in too many countries, not just in India, assuming unique forms and styles and accents from the native languages of that country. Poetry once had to adhere to rhyme and meter but can now be written with minimal concern to either and in each poet’s unique style. Formal language has been replaced by a tone of conversational English. Similarly the language of prose has moved into another realm with advances in technology. The Internet connects people across the world, a vast forum for social networking through messengers, chats, and blog pages. Just as the English language has expanded to allow terms like BRB meaning ‘Be right back’, TTYL for ‘Talk to you later’, and ROTFL ‘Rolling on the floor with laughter’, LOL ‘Laugh Out Loud’, RUZ ‘Are You There,’ to name just a few (Crystal, 2001), the cultural contexts and meanings too have broadened horizons for users of these services. While on one hand, the language of ‘chat’ forums and telephone text-messaging systems has added new dimensions and vocabulary to the English dictionary, it is difficult now to retain the purity of formal language. Perhaps one may even have given it up at many levels?

Matilal (2001) expressed it well: “Language anchors experience and experience anchors language” as we cannot think without language. So eventually the language we think in, the words we use in daily parlance evolve towards the language of literary texts. The worry now for purists of language in existence is the number of icons that are replacing text in communication – smiley faces of different kinds, and other images that convey what a word or a bunch of words did, similar to the acronyms listed earlier. Change is constant and this is true of language and literature too. Change involves re-thinking and revolutionary mindsets. We must embrace what is happening with language, else we may be left behind in this new world of technology and oneness, where all the languages are merging to some extent, borrowing words from each other and where the language of the computing technology and mobile phones is entering the every-day world of language usage including literary texts.

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