

Chutzpah, Chutnification and the Coming of Age of Indian Anglophone Literature

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Abstract

In a discursive space decussated by strong currents of postcolonialism, writing in English becomes for the anglophone Indian a deliberate strategy for undermining the universalist claims of Eng Lit. Going through the stages—adopt, adapt and adept—posited by Elaine Showalter and Peter Barry for gynocritics and postcolonial criticism respectively, anglophone writing comes of age in the hands of writers of Indian or of Indian origin who appropriated the dominant discourse to 'write back to the centre' through stylistic innovations. This paper attempts to map the timeline of its evolution and to explore the key features that mark Indian Anglophone Writing as having shaken off all but one colonial vestiges to achieving an expression entirely authentic.

Keywords: Anglophone, Indian, Chutzpah, Chutnification, Hybridisation, Fragmentation, Subversion.

Variedly known as Indo-Anglian Literature, Indo-English Literature, Indian Writing in English, Indian Literatures in English and so on, anglophone literature by Indians has a short but chequered history. What began, arguably, in the 18th century as a phenomenon birthed by the attempts of the Indian sensibility trying to express itself in a medium that is not organically its own has grown into a distinct and vibrant discourse. Ironically, it has passed the ultimate test of having achieved a standing of its own—institutional recognition in the West.

Clearly, British colonial expansion in India with its concomitant spread of the English language and of western education laid the foundations of anglophone literature by Indians. However, long before the now-infamous Macaulay's Minute on Education, which privileged and prescribed English education in India, and the marginalisation and obliteration of native systems of knowledge, Indians had already started writing in English, as evidenced in the prose writings of Dean Muhammad (*Travels*, 1734), C.V. Boriah, Raja Rammohun Roy, and a number of others who followed the lead. Figures like Kashiprasad Ghose and Michael Madhusudan Dutt helped usher in the early shoots of poetic expression in English. The earliest writers in English in India might have been imitators of British writers and writing, but later writers showed indications of having

appropriated the colonialist language to express themselves creatively. Post-1857, Anglophone writing in India displayed, in terms of forms, themes and subject matter, a clear influence of a nationalist consciousness. The Gandhian phase of the freedom movement impacted this literature, making it engaged politically, rooted in the milieu of India, nationalistic in spirit and sometimes (as in the case of Sri Aurobindo) spiritual and philosophical. Post-Independence writing in English is a literature of consolidation: it became diverse, self-confident and distinctively Indian and the fiction of the Big Three—R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao—whose works started appearing prior to Independence was a mere precursor to a whole new generation of anglophone writers across all the different genres: Nissim Ezekiel, Jayanta Mahapatra, A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Kamala Das and Dom Moraes in poetry; Bhabani Bhattacharya, Manohar Malgonkar, Khushwant Singh, Kamala Markandaya and Nayantara Sahgal in the novel, and G.V. Desani, Vijay Tendulkar, Asif Currimbhoy and Dina Mehta in drama are some of the most notable names that broke fresh ground in the modern[ist] age of anglophone literature in India. The postmodern in anglophone literature, marked by a bold experimental approach that employs such techniques as fragmentation, parody and intertextuality to transact the complexities of contemporary society and engages with the themes of postcolonial identity, diaspora, historical re-readings, incredulity towards metanarratives, and globalisation. A significant number of women writers who focus especially on gender issues are a major presence during this phase.

The trajectory of anglophone writing in India is inseparable from the locus, and deployment, of the English language in the country. While the language has been seen as a sign of prestige, privilege and even entitlement, “a middle-class privilege and preserve, a most invidious system of socio-cultural exclusion of less fortunate classes and castes” (Narayanachandran, 2), it has also reached a stage where it shed all the trappings of a foreign tongue to emerge as a potent medium of expression for the writers—stay-at-home, migrant, or diasporic—who appropriated this language of the once-upon-a-time coloniser with aplomb and gusto. The three stages of evolution—adopt, adapt and adept—that Elaine Showalter uses for gynocritics and Peter Barry applies for postcolonial criticism can be seen explicitly in anglophone literature in India. If in the first stage of Indian anglophone literature, the writers adopted the typical English idiom to express themselves creatively, in the second phase they experimented with the form to subject matter and specifications of their own, and in the third—postmodernist—phase, which began sometime in the 1980s, writers manipulate the English language to challenge colonial legacies, interrogate authority and forge hybrid identities. This can easily be perceived right from the early work of Indian or Indian-origin writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy who deployed respectively playful hybridity, realist clarity, polyglot pidgin and lyrical disruption. Their works achieve postmodernity and postcoloniality by challenging authority, reimagining identity and decolonising literary expression through the triple textual strategies of hybridity, fragmentation and subversion, which will be examined below.

Associated with the pronouncements of Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity in postcolonial theory is the blending of languages, cultures, identities and discourses that occurs in colonial and postcolonial contact zones where new identities—neither purely colonizer nor colonized—emerge. It is realised in postmodern literature as hybridisation, that is, the mixture of genres, high and low culture, multiple narrative methodologies, languages, registers, and fact and fiction. It destabilizes English by imposing on it multiple linguistic, cultural, and epistemic codes. This pluralization makes the language a site for multiple voices, histories, and perspectives to coexist and converse. This formally inventive language is politically charged as it resists colonial authority, encodes subaltern experience, and unravels social hierarchies. Indian anglophone writing achieves hybridity by overtly and deliberately infusing English with local and colloquial idioms and rhythms, and

multilingual textures. Thus, it not only appropriates the discourse but also destabilises its “purity” and “correctness”, transmuting it into something new and undercutting its hegemony. Rushdie explains the decolonisation of English thus:

Those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it. Domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it—assisted by the English language’s enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers.” (“In God We Trust”, *Imaginary Homelands*, 378)

Therefore, he “chutnifies” tongues, slangs and patois in his path-breaking work *Midnight’s Children*. He admits that language was central to its writing and alludes to his use in *The Gound Beneath Her Feet* of the acronym “Hug-me”—Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Marathi and English in addition to *Bambaiyya*, the unique slang of Bombay—to denote his hybrid language (Rushdie, 2021).

Rushdie linguistic landscape is richly hybridized and unmistakably local. Through the blending of the culinary metaphor in “*chutnifying history*” with narrative method he destabilizes English as a neutral, imperial medium. The excessive, playful and self-conscious language is dialogic, imbued as it is with multiple registers. Further, it allegorises the nation as enacted, performed, and contested.

Rushdie makes abundant use of the Hinglish idiom and the Indianisation of the English language in the stories collected in *East, West*. In the “East” stories, he uses a hybrid language generously sprinkled with expressions that have been lifted from the lingua franca of India and Pakistan. Amitav Ghosh in *Sea of Poppies* reconstructs the speech of lascars, indentured labourers and coastal communities, and blends Bhojpuri, Hindustani, nautical English, and creolized idioms. The linguistic opacity created in the narrative in which different registers overlap and which resists direct translation or glossing enables the reader to inhabit, and not consume in standard English, subaltern speech. English in *The Shadow Lines* is threaded with memory, oral histories, and cross-border idioms, thus destabilizing conventional temporal and spatial coherence with the result that it resists colonial standardization and centres voices that are historically marginalized by imperial and nationalist historiography. Vikram Seth achieves hybridisation in *A Suitable Boy* by appropriating the form of the nineteenth-century realist novel and populating it with Indian social life characterised by weddings, caste negotiations, rural marketplaces and interwoven family networks. Hindi and Urdu poetry, particularly ghazals, interact with the English prose without being translated or footnoted. The measured, expansive and meticulous narrative voice encodes Indian plurality into English realism and produces a familiar but transformed language. Aware of inherited literary conventions, this formally postmodern language is postcolonial in its proclamation that English can be domesticated and repurposed to express Indian ethos. Arundhati Roy’s hybridization in *The God of Small Things* involves the blending of English with Malayalam words, phonetic spellings, rhythmic repetition, and playful syntax. The heteroglossia resulting from making English absorb local sensory and cultural registers, thereby transforming it into carrying memory, emotion and regional epistemologies and the shift of narrative shifts between child and adult, the ordinary and the abstract, local and universal renders English estranged, performative and politically charged. Now it can express caste oppression, social trauma and forbidden knowledge. Hybridization here is both formal and political: through the postmodern experimentation with syntax and narrative voice, the colonial language is made to bear the weight of postcolonial social history and subaltern consciousness.

As posited by Jean-François Lyotard, the postmodern condition involves scepticism toward “grand narratives” which often results in fragmented storytelling involving non-linear timeliness, shifting perspectives, discontinuous narration, memory-based structures and metafictional

disruption. Rushdie, Seth, Ghosh and Roy deploy this defining feature of postmodern aesthetics to the break unified subjectivity down, disrupt coherent historical progression and destabilise meaning.

From its very opening, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* smacks of fragmentation: historical specificity is juxtaposed with fairy-tale indeterminacy and the boundary between historical realism and mythic storytelling is brought down. Saleem Sinai's narrative veers into extended familial histories, allegorical accounts of India's partition and playful asides to the reader. These digressions that decentre voice, perspective and chronology challenges nationalist historiography and reveals history to be mediated, contingent and subject to personal and collective memory. Ghosh fragments spatial and temporal narrative structures in *The Shadow Lines* by presenting the past as a constantly mediated construct. There is the intermingling of memory, imagination and narration with the locale shifting among India, England and Bangladesh and the perspective between child and adult. The postmodern suspension of linearity is deeply postcolonial: it highlights the contingency of power, memory, and identity by rendering colonial legacies, partition and migration as lived, unstable experiences. Vikram Seth interrupts temporality in *A Suitable Boy* by weaving together the perspectives of multiple characters and social plots, and by bringing in poetry, philosophy and cultural reflection. Indian society is presented as one of transition, the essence of which defies capture by a unilinear narrative. Roy's *The God of Small Things* coagulates past and present, mixes memory, trauma and social history, and thrusts memory with violence into everyday life through fragmenting sentences, bending syntax and disarranging chronology. The defamiliarization of narrative conventions disrupts caste legacies, colonialism and social taboos. Fragmentation in Roy is a stratagem to destabilise social hierarchies, make historical trauma palpable, and negate the authoritative perspective.

Postmodern narratives dismantle truth as a given by the strategy of subversion through parody, irony, pastiche, magical realism and rewriting history. They undermine dominant systems of meaning, power and representation, and interrogate structures of authority, hierarchy, history, patriarchy and colonial epistemology.

Rushdie posits history as mediated through perspective, ideology and power. By undermining metanarrative authority and foregrounding subjectivity, *Midnight's Children* critiques the colonial and nationalist construction of India's history and uses English to dismantle entrenched structures of authority. Subversion in Ghosh is closely tied to language, identity and colonial taxonomy. For example, the lascar's rejection of the caste category imposed by colonial authorities undermines the authority of colonial power, the linguistic hierarchies embedded in English, and the epistemic violence of imposed social labels. This postmodern insistence on the contingency of meaning asserts subaltern agency: the resistance to imposed identities highlights the politics of voice and representation in a colonial world. English here is a tool for resistance rather than compliance. Seth undermines grand nationalist narratives of coherence, progress and unity through understatement and narrative framing. The postmodern challenge to the expectation of authoritative narration is a postcolonial critique of inherited national discourses. English is subverted to serve as a medium for critiquing societal and historical narratives which are shown as contingent, negotiated and inherently fragmented. Roy's brand of subversion fuses syntax, narrative and social critique to destabilize caste hierarchies, social laws, linguistic norms and familial expectations. Language here is an act of insurgency and it undermines the presumption of rules as natural or universal. By challenging the syntax and narrative structure of conventional English, the resources of the language are manipulated to dismantle entrenched social hierarchies and enforced compliance.

The postmodern writings of Rushdie, Seth, Ghosh, and Roy achieve postcoloniality by making the English language a site of the convergence of aesthetics, politics and history. The foundational

methods of hybridisation, fragmentation and subversion have been adapted by Indian anglophone writers in the 2000s and extended to diasporic, globalised and feminist concerns. These strategies continue to resonate in the writings of Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Aravind Adiga, Meena Kandasamy, Jeet Thayil and a host of other contemporary writers who have created books which are adventurous in form, alert in terms of social commitment and mature in realisation. Their work proves that Indian anglophone writing has found its voice, is capable of asserting its dignity, complexity and centrality.

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