

IMPERSONATION OF CULTURAL HISTORY IN THE WRITINGS OF INDIAN ENGLISH WRITERS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the analysis of the connection between literature and culture in India and English literature. Contemporary Indian Culture is very complicated and captivating due to the strange amalgam of tradition and modernity as well as the diversity of subcultures and languages. While the treasures of regional literatures remain largely hidden from the sight of even Indians belonging to diverse regions, Indian English Literature is somewhat restricted in scope, dealing with certain common cultural traits. Indian language writers as well as Indian English writers have yet to probe deeper into the submerged layers of their own culture. They begin with my own discussion of the effect of cultural studies on literary studies in Indian literature, and of the role and legacy of transcendentalism for the future development of Indian literature and culture. Several writers explore cultural and ethnic literature in India and provide insightful analyses of several new works by ethnic writers. Their writings link the cultural studies approach to a discussion of literature. Besides the attention placed upon the general observations in the field, part of the work also examines methodological issues, especially the use of multicultural literature in the classroom. This paper is an attempt to reflect upon current tendencies in literary studies in a complex way, exploring both new potentialities for the interpretation of literary works as well as pointing out certain drawbacks and dangers.

Keywords: Culture, Literature, India, Writers, Integration

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The term culture is extremely wide, very general, frequently used in a very vague way and seems almost impossible to grasp. Tony Watkins refers to Raymond Williams, who summarises it as 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (Williams, 1976, p. 76 quoted in Watkins, 2005, p. 7). Discussion of culture is everywhere, and it sometimes appears as if there exist innumerable different definitions of the term suiting various discourses, fields of study and concepts. And, of course, the term culture is extremely popular nowadays. One simply cannot deal with the humanities today without encountering or using the term. Thus, we sometimes work with the concept we do not know much about – obviously not a very desirable approach.

The complexity of the term is expressed by Watkins: 'Culture is an ambiguous term: a problem shared, perhaps, by all concepts which are concerned with totality, including history, ideology, society and myth' (Watkins, 2005, p. 57). A more detailed account and far broader definition of culture is explained by Mitchell as quoted in Watkins:

'First, culture is *the opposite of nature*. It is what makes humans human. Second, "culture" is the actual, perhaps unexamined, patterns and differentiations of a people (as in "Aboriginal culture" or "German culture" - culture is *a way of life*). Third, it is *the process* by which these patterns developed... Fourth, the term indicates a set of markers that set one people off from another and which indicate to us *our membership in a group*... Fifth, culture is the way that all these patterns, processes, and markers are represented (that is, *cultural activity*, whether high, low, pop, or folk, that produces *meaning*). Finally, the idea of culture often indicates *a hierarchical ordering* of all these processes, activities, ways of life, and cultural production (as when people compare cultures or cultural activities against each other)' (Mitchell, 2000, p. 14, quoted in Watkins, 2005, p. 58, emphasis mine).

Indian life and thought and Indian literature in ancient, medieval, and Modern times (until very recently) have remained imbedded in the Upanisads, The *Ramayana*, The *Mahabharata*, and The Puranas. Without a knowledge and appreciation of these, no knowledge and appreciation of Indian literature, even for the modern age, is possible. These great works have exercised a tremendous fascination on the Indian mind for some 2,000 years and more, and left a profound influence on all Indian literatures. In fact, these works are India: and in all the languages of India and their literatures, it is the content and the spirit of The *Ramayana*, The *Mahabharata*, and The Puranas, with The Upanisads and Dharma-Sastras in the background, that has found and are still finding their full play and their natural abode. They have moulded the life and literature of India and constitute the greatest literary heritage of the country.

The cultural unity of India, ancient, medieval, and modern, has been primarily nurtured through them. There is, besides, the huge corpus of literature in Sanskrit that has grown round the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy and various other aspects of human knowledge and interest, to which scholars and writers from different parts of India had contributed. This 'matter' of ancient India or of the Sanskrit world forms the bed-rock of the medieval and modern literatures in most of the modern languages of India. Even a brief perusal of the histories of Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Malayalam, Kannada, and Telugu literatures, as well as of those which have not been as yet recognized in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (viz. Maithili, Magahi, Bhojpuri, Nepali, and Rajasthani), will show that, looming behind all these literatures not only as their background but also as their perpetual inspirer and feeder, there are the towering mountains of The *Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata*, The Puranas (especially The *Bhagavad Purana*) and the philosophy of The Vedanta as in The Upanisads and The *Bhagavad-Gita*, the ideologies and the ritualism of the Yoga and Bhakti and of The Dharmasastras, and the poetry of the classic writers of Sanskrit like Kalidasa, Banabhatta, and Bhavabhuti. (There is no lack of the 'matter' of the Sanskrit world in Sindhi, Kashmiri, Urdu, and even Tamil, either; but it is there in a comparatively restricted measure.)

There are of course the special gifts of the Jaina and Buddhist literatures which are also regarded as priceless treasures of India, but the influence of The Brahmanical literature of ancient India remains supreme. The streams of the Jain and Buddhist literatures easily and naturally merged into the wider 'Hindu', i.e. Brahmanical-cum-Jaina and Buddhist atmosphere, bringing some of their own elements to extend and diversify as well as unify the whole. One of

the salient features of almost all the modern Indian languages is that they follow more or less the same pattern in the process of their literary development and growth. Thus, it may be said that if one passes from one modern Indian literature into another, there will be no sense of entering into a different climate. And this will be still truer if one passes from Sanskrit literature into that of any modern Indian language.

Indian literature, like Indian civilization, is marked by its spirit of acceptance and assimilation. It has imbibed many features from other literatures over the centuries. In the modern period, many features of Western literature have found a welcome entry in the literature of this country. It may be asked to what extent the 'matter' of Islam has been assimilated in Indian literature. Sufistic Islam had many points in common with the Vedanta and Yoga and the essentials of higher Hinduism. The way of the Sufi (*Sufijana iariqa*) was, therefore, easily successful in bringing to the Hindus a closer understanding of Islam and *vice versa*. Through Sufism we find a considerable amount of spiritual understanding between Hindus and Muslims all over the country. Thus in literature, although the divergences in religious practices of the Hindu and the Muslim, when each tried to be specially orthodox in his own way, have been noticed, there have been the spirit of *laissez-faire* and a broad spirit of tolerance and compromise and integration which have never been absent in Indian literature.

The real integration of India into one single entity, in spite of some basic and fundamental racial, linguistic, and cultural diversities, has taken place through the Upanisads, the epics, the Puranas, the Dharma-Sastras, and the philosophical literature in Sanskrit, in the ancient and medieval times; and on this integration stand the cultural oneness and the political unity of India. This has been strengthened during the last one hundred and fifty years by the impact of the mind of Europe on the Indian mind through the literature of English; and the inestimable service of this last in modernizing the mind of India and making it once again conscious of its great heritage of the past and of its stupendous unity cannot be too highly rated. English has been one of the greatest gifts of the modern age to India. The results of this we find in all the modern Indian literatures.

There is no doubt that one of the most important issues challenging the world in recent times is the issue of culture – in all its varied manifestations. There is almost no aspect of our reality in which we are not confronted with the effect of the cultural – the human, social, and even natural sciences being no exception to this. While on the one hand we can see that cultural

differences may become a source of innumerable conflicts (including the most violent ones), on the other hand, they can also evoke the need for the overcoming of these differences through globalisation, or to present an appreciation of individual cultures through the policy of multiculturalism. In literary studies the cultural seems to take on the form of the latter, i.e. the struggle for multicultural representation on all levels of the literary process –a text’s production, structure, and reception.

For centuries, people have felt the need to express their opinion on things and events happening around them and to them. The urge to demonstrate and locate their own position in the spatial and temporal dimension naturally led to the process of documenting these events in various forms and by various media. Imaginative literature, penetrating under the surface of mere fact and documentary, proves to be one of the most vital tools to reflect the happenings around us. In the words of Philip Tew, ‘[n]ovels both rationalize and engage dialectically with our historical presence, playing their part, however provisionally at times, in our understanding of and reflection upon our lives’ (2007, p. 7). Moreover, as Tew argues, ‘[t]o cite history and critical longevity as offering the only correct or worthwhile arbitration of literary worth [...] is at best questionable and certainly naïve’ (ibid., p. 15).

In a recent writing, Reed Way Dasenbrock uses the term ‘mutli-cultural literature’ to include ‘both works that are explicitly about multicultural societies and those that are implicitly multicultural in the sense of inscribing readers from other cultures inside their own textual dynamics.’ Thus, a literature like the Indian English not only presents the multiple Indian cultural scene but also poses problems of reader-response for those belonging to the other cultures, universality notwithstanding. The Indian multiculturalism refers to the multistate, multicommunal, multilingual Indian nation as a whole. Multiculturalism also means the complexity, if not duality, in Indian individuals, prevalent among English-users as well as among other bi- and multi-linguals. However, the most isolated mono-cultured villager out of touch with the modern society presents an interesting case study. Indian English writers, novelists as well as poets generally tend to be ironic in presenting such a mono- cultured Indian villager. Complete involvement on the part of the writer and a sympathetic rendering of the typically Indian cultural or subcultural scene is more conspicuous in Literatures written in Indian languages.

Every Indian language has its share of enrichment in Indian literature. Creative writings in Indian languages are extremely vast and complex, reflecting not only the Indian culture in its

broad features, but also the several regional and sub-regional aspects. However, while popular and cheap writings proliferate, one feels that something more serious can still be said in Indian Language to bring out the cultural variety. In spite of the enormity of the Literatures in Indian Languages, it is difficult to have access to the writings in languages other than one's own. Authentic translations of regional fiction and poetry into English may help us to appreciate the other Indian subcultures. Great works are created in every field and to mention them and their authors will be exhaustive. The earliest literary works were revolving mainly around mythology and religion but gradually started to deal directly with social, political and economical themes.

India has produced a number of literary marvels in English as well. Rabindranath Tagore' won Nobel Prize for his collection of popular poems, Gitanjali'. Raja Rao received the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for literature. Vikram Seth who won the Commonwealth Writer's prize, published the first Indian English novel in verse (Golden Gate). Shashi Tharoor is another writer who won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Amitav Gosh has won the Prix Medici Estranger, a top French literary award, and the Sahitya Academy Award. Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for her first novel, The God of small things, for the year 1997. R. K. Narayan (fiction), Kamala Das (poetry), Mulk Raj Anand (social realism), Kushwant Singh (fiction) and A. K. Ramanujan (poetry) are only a few of the other literary giants in English.

To conclude, the regional literatures in India have cultural histories very different from that of Indian English Literature. If the cultural history of Indian English Literature is more limited than that of any regional Indian Literature, it is different too from that of the Christian Literature of the West. The Indian English writers have yet to rediscover their own roots and present the various regional cultures in all their depth and variety. Popularisation of authentic English translations of works of culture and creative writings of various regions may help critics to attempt inter-cultural interpretations. Also since the Indian writers in English have themselves some western, background cross-culturality is perhaps inevitable. The Indian culture is today is amalgam of the two traditions- the Hindu –Brahmanical, and the Leavisite- Eliotism. Both in Indian English Literature and its criticism one finds this paradoxical combination. Probably multi-culturality is expected in the Indian Literary situation, as in the social context.

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