

**CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON SOUTH ASIAN ENGLISH:
A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE**

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Introduction

The subtle investigation into the idea and the ideology of globalization constitutes and is constituted around the scholarly consensus of English language being a global means of communication, representation, reception and comprehension. It has, therefore, been referred to and accepted as ‘world language’ – ‘*lingua franca* of the modern era’ (David Graddol, 1997). However, it needs to be stressed that globalization of English has fundamentally raised the questions of ‘legitimacy’ and ‘standardization’ of the language. It has been researched and debated over the last few decades whether English can be circumscribed within a British or American form since there are multiple varieties of English languages clearly observable in various different cultural contexts. These are often caused by the constant and continuous language shifts through domesticization/nativization and hybridization as these multiple cultural contexts feed back into the language. The focal point of departure of the present study is to investigate into sociocultural, historical, linguistic and stylistic resonances of English languages in the light of South Asian literature in English. Moreover, the present study aims to examine the contemporary South Asian literature in English not merely as a localized creative constructs but as a representation of ‘South Asianness’ in its textual, contextual as well as conceptual histrionics. The contemporary literary constructs in South Asian region seem to cease, partially though, the depiction of postcolonial thematics; however, they adequately represent their own ‘self’ into the language that it has subtly and necessarily nativized to fulfill its creative impulse. The process of nativization and hybridization of the English language – from the English to englishes – is no longer a foreign means of expression; rather, it has become a subjective means through its localized and indigenous appropriation within the sociocultural forms.

South Asian English : A Theoretical Analysis

The term ‘South Asian English’ constitutes a formal assumption of English language in use in the South Asian region that geographically includes seven independent nations. The English language enjoys a substantial space in this region primarily because of its widespread functions in significant domains of social life, education and cross-cultural communication (Braj Kachru, 1997). In the entire region, English is perceived as a language of ‘power’ and as a means of ‘economic uplift’ and ‘upward social mobility’ (Baumgardner, 1996). Baumgardner further states,

“The presence of English language for over 200 years in the region has led to the nativization of the language, which is evident in several local varieties of English, collectively referred to as Asian English.”

B. Kachru adds to this argument and considers the nativization of English as an enriching process, not only for the English but also for the indigenous languages, in the form of borrowing and coining neologisms as well as developing semantic shifts. Since English serves as a 'link language' among the people of different regions with different L1, and in some cases even L2, more than a colonial liability, it is viewed as an asset in the form of international language representing cross-cultural communication and collective development. The South Asian region, historically, has a long tradition of acculturation of non-native languages and the acculturation/appropriation/nativization/domesticization of English has produced new forms and varieties, for instance in South Asia, these varieties have several nomenclature such as Indian English, Pakistani English, Sri Lankan English, Bhutanese English, Nepalese English, South Asian English etc. In such a scenario, as it has raised at the global front in regard to English language being a *lingua franca* of the world, can there be any legitimate formation or standardization of Asian English? Since there are multiple varieties of Englishes within the South Asian societies, is there any standard form of the language that could be identified as *the* South Asian English? At present, however, there is no prescribed or defined standard of English in South Asia. Since the majority of the users of language in the region use localized varieties, the question of standardization remains unanswered. Moreover, the terms, such as Hinglish, Singlish, Gujlish etc., presuppose and assume the use of English as a second or third language in a bilingual or trilingual context. Along with that, the social, cultural, historical and political contexts need to be understood as secondary forces in nativization of English. How do such factors influence South Asian English in creative writing?

In primarily bilingual South Asia, there are many authors whose literary representations are constructed only in English, although it is their second or third language. The very reason for the use of localized forms of English in contemporary Asian literature is to transcend the colonial past and to postcolonialize or to decolonize the attitudes and uses of English. The contextualization of English language in art makes the language more exotic to its context-based usages. The appropriations can be seen at times in changing the rhythmic pattern, which may eventually affect the conventional spellings, fusing words, using more localized lexicons, coinages and neologisms, syntax and symbolic representations.

English : Decentralization and Decolonization

“Something of the unwashed odour of the *Chamcha* lingers around its (English language) cadences. The language like much else in the newly independent societies, needs to be decolonized, to be remade in other images, if those of us who use it from positions outside Anglo-Saxon culture are to be more than artistic Uncle Toms. And it's this endeavour that gives the new literatures of Africa, the Caribbean and India much of their present vitality and excitement.”

(Salman Rushdie, 1982)

It might rightly be questioned whether the multiple varieties of English in South Asian region, geographically consisting of seven independent territories - India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives - has any 'legitimacy' and 'standardization' to identify itself collectively as the South Asian English; whether it gains its nativized appropriation on the objective basis; whether the formation of domesticized English shares any unified sociocultural context; whether the domesticizing of English has unified ethnic as well as political perspective; when the entire South Asian region is primarily

and fundamentally multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural, why South Asian authors need nativize English and construct their literary narratives into English language; whether constructing literary narratives in nativized English is 'to resist', 'to write back', 'to decolonize', 'to decentre' or it is 'to create', 'to represent', 'to attain' a subjective space. Pritish Nandy (1973) considers English as an Indian language so much nativized and acculturated that it can authentically express a typical Indian experience. He states,

"English is a language of our own, yes, an Indian language, in which we can feel deeply, create and convey experiences and response typically Indian."

However, the primary *raison d'être* for the numerous forms of Englishes on the global ground could be identified as a reaction against colonization or as a process of decolonization within the previously colonized societies. In other words, the decolonization of English could be perceived as a postcolonial consciousness to decentring the colonial structures of 'self-other'. In one of her most appreciated poems, Kamala Das (1997) so rightly justifies this :

"I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one...
Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother tongue...
...The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone, it is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest,
It is as human as I am human...
... It voices my joys, my longings my
Hopes..."

The tendency of 'resistance' in contemporary South Asian literature in English in particular, and postcolonial literature in general, refutes the very notion that idea of representation also connotes further subjugation. The tendency of resistance uses the language of empire to rebut its dominant ideologies. In other words, the colonized nation is 'writing back,' speaking either of the oppression and racism of the colonizers or the inherent cultural 'better-ness' of the indigenous people. Helen Tiffin expresses this point best in her essay *Post-colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse* (1989),

"Post-colonial literatures/cultures are thus constituted in counter-discursive rather than homologous practices, and they offer counter-discursive strategies to the dominant discourse."

It could further be validated in Bill Ashcroft's study entitled *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), where he rightly points out that the tendency of resistance has fundamental objective to onslaught the colonizer's language.

The primary objective of the South Asian authors creating their literary oeuvres in English language, thus, is to examine and to scrutinize the native history of the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial times, its spatio-temporal coordinates, its cultural shifts, its repressions and oppressions, its struggle for the subjective space and most pressingly its own unique existence. The South Asian literature in English resonates not merely 'questioning' but rather 'answering back' to the colonizers, who imposed every form of colonization during their course of power, including the imposition of language. The use of

nativized English in the constructions of nations and narrations has thus become a primary channel and one of the most subtle, hence conscious, attempt to decentralization and decolonization of the language.

The Process of Decentering and Decolonizing English

Though there are similar and common features of native languages in South Asian news media and electronic media, education and research, socio-cultural interactions, entertainment, fashion, trade and commerce etc. there is a substantial difference in the use of creative English because the authors have a unique perception of reality and they create and invent appropriate language to capture that reality, not only at the lexical and syntactical level but also at the semantic, stylistic aesthetic level. The creative language, or experiments with language, in the construction of any literary text is always evolved from the cultural roots to which the author belongs; the author, thus, creates his/her own language to represent his/her worldview, his/her own perception of reality. However, the act of representation itself requires the language that could possibly demonstrate the contextualized worldview of the author. On the premise that South Asian authors, not merely 'writing' but simultaneously 'writing back', has represented - its worldviews, its narratives - and it could rightly be observed that they have evolved the South Asian ideology of representation to meet their creative function.

The literary language is also evolved from various other features, such as ethnicity, gender, cultural diversity etc., that shape and form the creative representation of the author's worldview. As Salman Rushdie (1992) notes,

“Looking to India is like looking into a prism. You seek one reality for you to capture and represent whereas what you receive is multiple reflections simultaneously.”

Linguistic Features in South Asian Literature : Some Generalization

If we imagine the English language as representing western culture, postcolonial literature, especially the South Asian literature in English, is an example of a successful cultural transplant. Post-colonial literature written in English, it is observed, should only serve to strengthen a sense of identity by proving that South Asian values and ideas can survive the translation. The key is to make the language one's own, to incorporate rather than being incorporated. Raja Rao, in his revealing Introduction to his one of the most celebrated work *Kantapura* (1938), explains this argument :

“Yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up, like Sanskrit or Persian was before – but not of our emotional make-up... We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.”

If one surveys the contemporary South Asian Literature in English, the following linguistic features could clearly be observable in the narrative representation :

1. Coinage or neologisms,
2. Linguistic borrowing
3. collocation

4. The use of native similes and metaphors
5. The transfer of rhetoric devices for native languages
6. The translation/transliteration of native proverbs, idioms etc.
7. The use of culturally dependent speech style
8. The use of syntactic devices and deviation
9. Code-switching and code-mixing
10. Contextual meaning of lexical Transliteration
11. Semantic extension/shift
12. loan-blends

It would be a productive exercise to understand the definitional implications of these features in linguistic analysis of literary texts. Here are some elaborations of some of these features that could be generalized to the literary body of South Asian Literature in English. Further, their applicability to a literary text shapes the narrative space, where, in turn, the South Asian-ness of language is apparent and transparent.

1. In all the representative texts, a preponderance of lexical **coinages** is observed that reflect the linguistic milieu of the source/native language of the authors. Apparently, this is a product of the author's strategy of transliteration. This strategy precipitates a phenomenon of multi-word units or compound neologisms, which abound in the text. The meaning is traceable to the source language, though the constituent lexical choices are English.
2. Technically, **code-switching** is the use of more than one linguistic variety in a manner consistent with the syntax and phonology of each variety. Code-switching is distinct from other language contact phenomena, such as borrowing, loan translation and language interference. While borrowing affects the lexicon, the words that make up a language, code-switching takes place in individual utterance. The term code-switching is also used outside the field of linguistics. Some major literary scholars use the term to describe literary styles which include elements from more than one language.
3. In its simplest meaning, the term **Code-mixing** refers to the mixing of two or more languages or language varieties in speech. Code-mixing is similar to the use or creation of artificial languages; but while an artificial language is created across groups that do not share a common language, code-mixing may occur within a multilingual setting where speakers share more than one language. Code switching is associated with particular pragmatic effects, discourse functions, or associations with group identity. In this tradition, the terms code-mixing or language alternation are used to describe more stable situations in which multiple languages are used without such pragmatic effects
4. **Collocation** is a type of syntagmatic lexical relation which refers to the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items. Halliday sees it as "the company lexical items keep ... their propensity for particular neighbours and environments".
5. As the term indicates, the **Linguistic borrowing** is basically concerned with the borrowing of linguistic devices from the L1 (source/native language) in order to transmit the intended indigenous meaning in the target language or L2 (target language or language of representation). Bloomfield saw it as, "*The adoption of features which differ from those of the main tradition*". The implication of this definition is that, linguistic borrowing is essentially engendered by the non-availability of a lexical equivalent(s) of a native concept in the Language of representation. This seems to be informed by Yule's hypothesis in his *The Statistical Study of Literary*

Vocabulary that "... the colour and flavour of a text... are determined by the common words used by the author ..." However, in these representative texts, many native lexicons appear to have used indiscriminately.

6. If one surveys the Postcolonial literature, one feature strikes straight away to the comprehension : the use of **syntactic devices and deviation**. Since South Asian region is primarily multilingual and English remains as a second or third language, the use of English is subtly nativized. Not only the grammatical or lexical nativization, but also the more intellectual forms of abstractions are observable. The primary reason for such nativization is the mother tongue interference, in lexical as well as syntactical use.
7. There are multiple instances where the feature of **Semantic Extension** is observed. The concept/feature of semantic extension could be defined in this simple form : the meaning of standard English words are extended to accommodate local sentiments or concepts.

These features signify the comprehension of the textual representation only within the context of the author's native sociocultural values and environment. The contextual theory of meaning is associated with systemic linguists and constructs can only be decoded against the background of the pattern of signification in the source language. According to Brumfit, "...the more culture-bound the style becomes, the more distance is created between the native varieties of English and the non-native varieties."

The South Asian authors have a creative edge over other authors as they belong to linguistic and dialectical heterogeneity, but, moreover, they provide several instances of their deployment of code-switching, the moving back and forth between English and another language, or dialect, to use a wide spectrum of linguistic varieties such as English, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Gorkha, Malaya etc. language and non-standard English.

Conclusion

All South Asian countries are linguistically and culturally diverse, with a shared cultural and political history, collective experience of colonization by foreign colonizers, common literary and folk traditions, and pervasive strata of Sanskrit, Persian, and English in language and literature. As the discussion so far has concluded, it could rightly be summed up that the contemporary South Asian Literature in English undoubtedly constructs a collective ideology of representation; further, this conclusion implies that the study of the language created and invented to represent the South Asian authors' collective ideology could be authenticated. The collective ideology of representation could indisputably be constituted within the framework of the literary creations produced in English in South Asian region.

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