Grappling with the literary self in the diaspora

Susham Bedi

Writing in a language that is not spoken by a recognized minority in a country can make a writer irrelevant. On the other hand, writers hardly have a choice other than to write in the language they are born to. As the Indian novelist, Anita Desai puts it, a writer 'writes the way a spider spins; it is all he knows how to do and he does it without thought, almost without consciousness. To him it is a compulsive and instinctive act.'

So I wrote and wrote, without being aware of the relevance of what I wrote to the people or the community that surrounded me.

The question of a writer's identity was encountered by me, for the first time, in November 1993 when the translation of my first novel, Hasan (The Fire Sacrifice), was released by Heinemann at the Commonwealth Institute in London. The editor of one of the south Asian journals wanted to do a write-up on me. But then she told me that at the time she was working on Indian women writers and after finishing that she planned to write about me. I was startled. 'Am I not an Indian writer?' I asked. 'No, you are not. You are an American writer,' was the answer. I said, 'Everyone takes me to be an Indian writer writing in Hindi and of course I will continue to write in Hindi.' She responded, 'Hindi is a global language. Just by writing in Hindi one does not become an Indian writer.'

The question was particularly surprising since it was raised in my personal context; otherwise it is a rather common question that has been raised in the context of many writers, especially those writing in imperial languages like the English and French. There are many dimensions and aspects to this question ranging from the ideas of assimilation and ethnocentrism to racism and nationalism. The question is now gaining importance for writers writing in languages like Hindi, especially because a good segment of Hindi writing is taking place outside India. However, the status of Hindi is very different from that of English. First of all, it has been the language of the colonized, and not the colonizers. Although Hindi has been accused of perpetuating imperialism within India, it is still the language of the common Indian. The special status as the official national
Language does give it a certain degree of political power and status, which have been exploited by political leaders. Nevertheless, Hindi is only limited to what is known as the 'Hindi heartland', and it is now under threat from English in this and other parts of India. English is being preferred by many people for what they call 'practical reasons', e.g. it is their only connection to the outside world, it is the language of the sciences, of progress etc.

Moreover, as Aijaz Ahmed has rightly said, '...there has clearly developed, in all cosmopolitan cities of the country, an English based intelligentsia for whom only the literary document produced in English is a national document, all else is regional, hence minor and forgettable, so that English emerges in this imagination not as one of the Indian languages, which it undoubtedly is, but as the language of national integration and bourgeois civility.'

Therefore the status of Hindi as a global language is probably a myth. If there is a center for Hindi, it is India, whereas all English writing looks up to the west.

Interestingly, when I began to rejoice at the idea of being an American writer, I had another jolt. Last year, a writer friend suggested that I submit one of my short stories in English translation to Weber Studies for its special issue on South-Asian American Literature/Culture. I learned that they liked the story and as I was awaiting a written confirmation, I received a letter from its editor, stating, 'I liked the story. Its narrative technique and language are excellent. But I am afraid we cannot include this one in our special issue because it is a story in translation.' I felt I was denied the identity of being an American writer on the ground that I wrote in Hindi.

One of the questions raised by this incident was: Should the Indians who live outside India but write in one of the indigenous Indian languages be called Indian writers or writers of the country of their residence? The second question is: Who determines the identity of a writer? Is that the writer's own proclamation, or is it the judgement of the society whose language he has chosen to write in? Or is it determined by the people of the country where she resides? Further, is it the language or the content of the writing which is the determining factor? While living in the adopted country, if the writer portrays the society and culture of the adopted country, will this make him a writer of that country while her readership is mainly back home?

Is creative writing associated with the question of language only or do other factors like culture, society, geography and politics play equally important roles in it? If the works of a writer reflect the culture, society or politics of a country, does she belong as a writer to the country that nurtures this particular culture, or is it the country she lives in? Normally the writer would understand and write about the culture she lives in and therefore her works will reflect that culture. On the other hand, her writing will have a relationship with her land of origin and a readership there.

The expatriate writing has questioned all these assumptions about literature. The postcolonial writing is about dislocation, displacement, estrangement with one's inherited culture and society, and it is heavily reliant on fragmented memories of the inherited culture. It erodes all boundaries.

The issue is also of relevance in the context of Indian writers living in India who write in English. Can they still be considered Indian writers even when they write in English? Until recently, the Indian English writer was seen more like an outsider and therefore not taken very seriously, but now the popularity of the diasporic Indian English writer is forcing India to accept English as an important Indian language and thus the question of Indianess becomes irrelevant. But the question of the audience still remains. An English writer while writing in India may have his eyes set on the western market. In that case how much is her work addressed to the Indian audience and how much of it caters to the western taste?

This issue also needs to be discussed in the context of those writers who while living in the west keep writing about life in India and its people. They are taught in American schools and colleges as representatives of the Indian writers but many Indians don't consider them to be Indian writers. Some years ago at the University of California, Berkeley, the students proposed that Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee should not be included in the courses on Indian literature as they do not consider their writings to be representative of India, and they cannot learn about India through these writings.

The other author in question might be someone like Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. While living and writing in India and about India, will she be considered an Indian author while her roots are in another country? She was born of Polish-Jewish parents in Frankfurt, Germany. The Who's Who of Indian Writers lists her native language as Yiddish. She studied in England and after marrying a Parsi lived in India until 1975 when she moved to the U.S. It was in India that she wrote most of her novels and short stories. David Rubin, American novelist and scholar of Indian literature, argues that she should not be considered an Indian writer in the same category that includes Raja Rao, Anita Desai,
Salman Rushdie and R. K. Narayan etc. His argument is that if her marriage to an Indian and her long stay in India were the criteria to regard her as an authentic Indian voice, then by the same token Kamla Markandeya, married to an Englishman and living in London, should be considered a British author. According to Rubin, 'Actually she belongs to the tradition of the Anglo-Indian writers...who for the most part regard India with the critical and often indignant eye of the superior (if lonely) outsider.' Jabvala's own idea about her identity as a writer is that she should be considered 'as one of those European writers who have written about India.'

The question of the identity of a Hindi writer though similar to the English one is still somewhat different. First of all, English has found a place as a global language. Hindi is still related to India only and, barring Mauritius, no other country has it as its main language. Even in the U.S., which is wakening to a new awareness towards multiculturalism, Hindi hardly counts. The truth is that a language gains importance through its speakers and Indian immigrants in the U.S. speak many other Indian languages besides Hindi. Moreover, except for a few university departments, Hindi is hardly taught anywhere. When it comes to literature, the number of its readers probably could be counted on the fingers of one's hands.

Most English writers, after attaining international fame, retain their original nationality and are still considered British or American, e.g. Rushdie or Mukherjee. Sometimes they are categorized as writers writing from hyphenated spaces. There are different ways of understanding hyphenation. If it is to establish the uniqueness of these writers because of the distinctive quality of their works, then it would make sense. But if it is to keep them from the mainstream despite the high quality of their works, then obviously it is an act of discrimination on the basis of race and colour. On the other hand, after spending quite a lot of their writing life in the west, Hindi writers like Krishna Baldev Vaid, Rahul Sankritayan and Nirmal Verma have always been considered Indian writers. No one has ever raised the question of hyphenating them. It is possible that because of the regional status of Hindi, they never gained any recognition abroad and had to return to India in order to claim a place in the suitable region.

The question is, if a writer after living long periods of his life in another country can become an Indian writer instantly upon returning to India in his later years, then why not all the Indian writers living abroad be considered Indians as most of them have a lifelong intention to return?

A Hindi writer calling herself an American writer does not get recognition as a writer. Speaking from my own experience, no one ever recognized me as a writer in this country until I was published in English. However, I don't consider this to be a proper criterion of being recognized as a writer. At the same time, I don't expect anyone to learn Hindi in order to read my works.

Similarly, if a Hindi writer is ever included in the curriculum of Indian literature courses in her adopted country, she is taught as a foreign writer and not as one of their own. The translation of my novel Hasaan was published as representative of Indian literature and not as an American work written in Hindi.

The situation of other Indian languages is probably worse. In a conference on Punjabi literature in New York, most writers were invited from India. This offended the local Punjabi writers. Their complaint was that Punjabi was not the language of their adopted countries (Canada or the United States) and therefore they looked up to the Indian Punjabi literature world for recognition, but they were being ignored by both sides. This is probably true about Hindi writers too: they look up to India and Hindi readers in India. It seems a Hindi writer must have a solid base in the country of her residence before she can be accepted in the homeland.

One lesson to learn might be: unless the writer becomes important in her own right, she is not likely to be recognized, whether in the country of origin or adoption. If she is a powerful writer, then all sides want to claim her. Probably that is one of the reasons that writers like Rushdie get claimed by India as well as Britain, and I would not be surprised if they disown both in order to attain an even larger identity.

One important aspect of this question relates to the literary traditions that a writer carries in his or her works. In the context of Indian writers, this question cannot be answered easily as colonial impressions can be traced not only in Indian English literature but also in the literature produced in indigenous languages. In fact, the genres of novel and short story have evolved under the influence of European literature.

A Hindi writer in the U.S. obviously relates to the Hindi literary traditions. However, it is her own choice as to how much she associates with the Hindi tradition and how much she takes from her new environment. As the authors of The Empire Writes Back have argued, 'Hybridity and syncreticity are the...constitutive elements of all postcolonial literatures' and there is no returning to a purer pre-colonial literary form. That would be a narrowing, fundamentalist attitude. Thus there is bound to be some kind of syncretism
and hybridity in Hindi literature too. The question of language could be extremely important here. It remains to be seen how Hindi shapes itself in the new, host countries’ environment; what new genres or literary forms evolve as the writer weaves stories of the diaspora.

In the words of the Canadian writer Chelva Kanaganayakam, ‘The space that immigrant writer occupies is unique in that it intersects with different national literatures but maintains its particular uniqueness.’ And it is this uniqueness that has appeal across boundaries. He further says, ‘Uniqueness also comes from the quality that makes immigrant writing about a sensibility rather than a space.’

It is this distinctive sensibility that gives the Hindi immigrant writer’s work its own uniqueness.

Should I say that this uniqueness would ultimately shape the identity of a Hindi writer?

But, one issue still remains unresolved. The excellence of regional language writing may remain unrecognized in this part of the world because of paucity of translations. This situation leads to tall claims for writing in English, e. g. ‘The true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half century has been made in the language the British left behind’ or ‘The prose writing – both fiction and nonfiction – created in this period by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen “recognized” languages of India.’

The truth is that expatriate writing is limited. It mostly deals with the issues of displacement, estrangement, and is preoccupied by the concerns of the ‘self’. The ever-changing variety of India is not covered by this writing, whereas Hindi novels like Renu’s Maila Aanchal and Shrilal Shukla’s Raag Darbari, or Bengali novels like Tarashankar Vandhopadhyaya’s Gandeva or Mahashveta’s Haazr Chaurasi Ki Ma have captured the Indian readership. Maila Aanchal captured, with great ingenuity, the changing life of an Indian village that was awash with Gandhi’s independence movement. Shukla deals with the changing village of independent India corrupted by politicization: major democratic institutions like the high school, the panchayat and the thana (local police station) manipulated to meet political ends. Old values seem to be breaking down, and the new symbolize consumerism, nepotism, lack of a sense of responsibility, insensitivity and a lack of moral courage. These writers have full control over the inner and outer workings of their subjects and characters. Krishna Sobti in Dilo-danish takes us back to the old Delhi-life vividly. In Haazr Chaurasi... Mahashveta Devi portrays with a fresh gloss the legendary mother-son relationship at the time of the Naxalite movement. These writers have their fingers on the pulse of the rhythm of Indian life, traditional and changing.

The expatriate writer does not generally deal with the issues of her country of origin in a sympathetic manner and may have an attitude of mockery at the culture, mostly making fun of it.

Rushdie, who has made his place in the literary world on his ability to play on English language, presents the exotic alien Indian with Peter Sellers effect. The language play and exoticization appear ordinary in translation. On the other hand, novels like Maila Aanchal and Raag Darbari are special for giving a new regional idiom, new colloquial expressions to Hindi language. Probably they also don’t translate well for these very reasons. Rushdie, Shukla and Renu, all write about a similar world with passion and poignancy. They have a keen ear, a deep sensibility and a special talent to evoke rhythm and sensuality through their language, but the latter two are hardly known to the west.

Of course it is very hard to compare a Hindi novel translated into English with one written originally in English. Shukla’s Raag Darbari is superb for its wit, humour and irony. I decided to look at it comparatively with Rushdie’s Satanic Verses because of similar qualities but then the whole effort seemed foolish. But in no way Satanic Verses and other Rushdie novels seemed superior to these regional works. But those who read Raag Darbari in English will not be able to appreciate its power of language, wit and irony. Working with translations, I was not able to have my students of South Asian literature appreciate or comprehend fully the power and play of the original language.

Such experiences often discourage people from reading translations.

Another problem is that there is no national canon of Indian literature, especially modern Indian literature. There is no regular establishment that would oversee translations of Indian languages’ work into each other. English is the only language that has been taught in schools and colleges all over India from the colonial times onwards. The only connection Indian languages then have with each other is through English. Unless something appears in English it does not obtain the status of national literature. The Indian Sahitya Akademi is making an effort to have Indian languages’ literature translated into each other in order to give them national recognition. Translating Indian languages into each other is accomplished more easily without significant loss of meaning. The idiom of culture lends itself to translation. In the same manner, translation from
Russian or Spanish into English works much better because the cultural idiom is not difficult to translate. It is far more difficult to bring a Hindi, Arabic, Chinese or Japanese translation to work well in English. Certain idioms, themes and metaphors do get translated well whereas certain alien and complicated notions of a culture may remain untranslatable. Hindi writers like Krishna Sobti, in spite of a high quality of fictional work, have remained unknown in the west precisely because of this reason.

English cannot be uprooted now; it has come to stay. Bilingualism may then be one solution. Aijaz Ahmed has pointed out that during colonial times India had a tradition of bilingualism and those who taught English at schools and colleges did their creative writing in their mother tongue. This is true about some of the regional languages writers even today. Ananthamurthy is one example. But with the pressures of 'professionalism' and the 'Americanization' of the English teaching professionals, more stress is given on producing scholarship in English language. The same is happening to creative writing. Only after appearing in English Indian writers get national and international attention. Consequently, they focus on publishing in English.

To me it seems that bilingualism is certainly helpful, but as long as these languages are secondary in their place of origin, bilingualism will not elevate the status of these writers.

There is a category of less commonly taught languages in the U.S. education system. Hindi, Bengali, or Tamil fall into that category. In the same manner I guess these literatures and their writers will be identified as less commonly read/known/taught and written about.

Notes

4 Ramal Agarwal, 'An Interview with Rush Prawat Jhabvala,' Quest 91, September-October, 1974, p. 36.
5 Canadian-Asian critic Arun Mukherjee discusses the question of racial discrimination in the context of such literary works written in Canada, in her book, Oppositional Aesthetics: Readings from a Hyphenated Space.

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