Introduction to the Author:

Ankita Jain has completed her Masters in English Literature from Delhi University recently. She loves to write, a hobby that she recently discovered. Teaching is a passion that she wants to pursue as a profession in the long run.

“The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queerness
All mine, mine alone.”

(“An Introduction” by Kamala Das)

India is a multicultural nation- multilingualism being a fraction of the range of its diversity. Although speakers of dozens of languages find a place in this country, the Constitution of India recognizes as far as 18 languages. The literary production, not limiting itself to any one language, is created in every major tongue. But over the course of time, the category Indian Literature has come to mean literature produced only in the English language, whereas the literary output in other regional languages tend to occupy a secondary place, and hence, is the title of the present paper.

This paper looks on the issue of language which haunts the Indian literary scene with the focus being on English, how it came into being in India, what is the place of English in India, how
it is no longer a foreign language and how English is no longer associated exclusively with England but is appropriated by the writers.

Let us start by taking a quick glance at how the study of English established its roots in India which proved to be so strong that the language continues to exercise its influence on the lives and minds of Indians till the present day.

English Literature entered India with the Charter Act of 1813, according to which the responsibility of the education of the natives lay with the British empire. Macaulay’s Minute and the 1835 English Education Act of the Governor-General William Bentinck also called for the reforms in education. Through these factors, coupled with the acceptance of the English literature and language by the upper class Bengali intelligentsia, the study of English found its inroads in the Indian education system, which the British were clever enough to mask in terms of “benevolence” towards the natives.¹

Though India became free and gained independence from the British rule, in a paradoxical situation, the Indians vociferously returned to the language of the colonizers. The most significant instance of this comes in the form of our Constitution, which was written in English. There was opposition of course, with regard to this turning towards English in the post-independent India which was based on the fact that English stood for the colonial rule where the British were the masters and the Indians were their servants. Also, English, not being the language of the majority of the population of India, remained alien to them.

¹ Gauri Viswanathan, in her book Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India, informs us about the corruption that had ensued in the Company servants to hide which this ‘responsibility’ was assumed by the British.
But the cause for English was supported by Jawahar Lal Nehru too. According to him, India’s rejection of English would be sought with the “danger of our getting cut off from the world of thought in all its aspects and becoming complacent in our own little world of India” (qtd. in King 127).

As opposed to this, was Nehru’s friend and counterpart, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi’s opposition regarding English as the lingua franca of India stemmed because of the elite nature of the language which would in turn serve to divide the nation. He pinpointed the gulf that this language would create between “the educated classes and the uneducated masses” (6). Emphasizing the significance of context for any language, he said, “In England one discusses high politics with barbers while having a shave. We are unable to do so even in our family circle,” (qtd. in Joshi). Gandhi, contemptuously, also said, “Of all the superstitious that affect India, none is so great as that a knowledge of the English language is necessary for imbibing ideas of liberty, and developing accuracy of thought” (Gandhi).

Gandhi’s views on English find an echo and hold true in the contemporary Indian situation where out of the entire population of the country, only about 10% are fluent in English.3 Hence, it can be safely concluded that when any Indian writer writes in English, he is, in reality, writing about people who know either minimally or nothing of English and live in a world that is inaccessible to English. However, one should not derive from this that the authentic representation of India is not

3 Data collected from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_English-speaking_population](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_English-speaking_population) Where it lists 226,449 Indians who speak English as the first language and 125,000,000 Indians with English as the second language. The site further mentions “2001 figures for native language (first language). The additional language figure includes English speakers, but not English users. Data from the 2005 India Human Development Survey shows that surveyed households reported that among men 72 per cent do not speak English, 28 per cent speak at least some English, and 5 percent are fluent. Among women, the corresponding proportions were 83 per cent, 17 per cent, and 3 per cent.”
possible if a writer chooses to write in English (as discussed later through the example of R.K. Narayan). But, as mentioned in the introduction, literature produced in English becomes a representative for the whole of India, with the works in regional languages finding no place among it, though, in actuality, Indian English literature is only a small part of the larger umbrella that is Indian literature.

A part of the reason behind this is the privileged position that English holds in our country and the hierarchy of languages that haunts it where English undoubtedly scores the highest rank. This superiority of English, is however, not a recent phenomenon; it dates back to the days of colonial rule in India. This can be illustrated through the lives of the writers who lived and wrote during that era, for instance, R.K. Narayan. Like much of the contemporary urban education system (the one major difference being that we are now independent), English was the first language that Narayan learned within the confines of the classroom, his native language, that is, Tamil thereby receding to a secondary position. Though the classical and the native languages managed to find a place in the school curriculum, but they were assigned an inferior status. Also, for all the high government posts and jobs, first preference was given to those who were fluent in English.

Narayan admits this in his essay ‘English in India’- “But in the classroom neither of these two languages was given any importance [Sanskrit, the classical language and Tamil, his native tongue]; they were assigned to the most helpless among the teachers, the pundits who were treated as a joke by the boys, since they taught only the ‘second language’, the first being English as ordained by Lord Macaulay when he introduced English education in India”.
Narayan’s situation reverberates during our times too, for students are brought up studying English, not as an alien but a native language. This is what even Narayan said when he opted to write in English, being well aware that it was the colonizer’s tongue, that since his entire education was conducted in the medium of English, he never realized that he was writing in another language. He wrote in English because it came to him very easily (Sundaram). Narayan’s situation finds an exact parallel in the current day and time as little seems to have altered- English was, and still remains, the dominant language, although a minority of our population, as seen above, is well versed in it.

There are many for whom English is no longer a language that owes its allegiance exclusively to Britain but is as much their own language as any other regional tongue would be. The lines by Kamala Das quoted at the beginning serves to illustrate this. Salman Rushdie once said: “English, no longer an English language, grows from many roots, and those whom it once colonized are carving out large territories within the language for themselves” (London Times, July 3, 1982). Professor Puroshottama Lal, of the Writers Workshop in Calcutta, too regarded English as an Indian language, though Indian English for him was distinct from the Queen’s English.

Raja Rao should be credited for the introduction of new idioms and themes in the Indian English fiction, the basis of which are the history of his own nation. In his Foreword to Kanthapura, Rao states:

One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up. We are all instinctively
bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. 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 some day prove to be as distinctive and colorful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it.

In *Kanthapura*, the employment of expressions like “I lick your feet”, “the pumpkin moon”, “my right eye winks”, “heats squeezed like a wet cloth”, “son of a widow”, “not a mosquito moved”, “a cow and sparrow story”, “a traitor to your salt givers” or his Indianization of some English words like “tongued”, “milkless”, “secable” or his retaining of some Indian words like “vidwan”, “patwari”, “kumkum” or “khir” stands evident to the fact that he is trying to generate an idiom in Indian English so that it becomes accustomed to the tradition in the same language.

The publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* changed the Indian literary scene. It not only gave a new lease of life to Indian fiction in the world market but also gained prominence for the innovative use of English. Sisir Kumar Chatterjee states that Rushdie makes an attempt at the destruction of the “natural rhythms of the English language”.

The abundance of the Hindi and Urdu phrases and words throughout *Midnight’s Children* not only aids to locate the novel in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, but it also becomes a tool for the subversion and indigenization of the English language, associated with the colonizers. Examples from Rushdie’s masterpiece can be words like “garam masala”, “angrez”, “barfi”, “nasbandi”, among many others. Rushdie makes use of the pidgin English employed by the certain middle class circles in India. Therefore, the post colonial writing, though makes use of the language of the colonizers, adapts it to suit their own purpose or in other words, appropriates it.
Amit Chaudhuri opines that Rushdie propagated, among the Indian writers, the use of magical realism and the hybrid language. He takes the example of R.K. Narayan to prove that an authentic representation of India can be done using the standard English, though a familiarity with the culture of India becomes a prerequisite to understand the meaning of the text. The characters depicted by Narayan in his works are essentially Indian; they are extracted from the everyday life and caricatured in simple words, retaining all their essence as Indians: be it the saints, the common men or the female characters. The female characters that Narayan portrays are traditional, loving and caring. In *The English Teacher*, Krishnan’s wife Sushila bears the anger of her husband, as a conventional meek housewife. Despite being aware of the colonial underpinnings of the English language, Narayan recognizes the important fact that it has become a part and parcel of the Indian culture. In other words, he is not negligent of the impossibility of wiping away of the English language from the social and cultural reality of India.

What we as a multicultural nation require, whose literary output is not confined to any one language, is precisely this type of language which incorporates the Indian forms and expressions without altering the meaning and retaining the authenticity of the Indian culture. The English language, being a pan Indian language, performs this function as its presence resonates through the entire subcontinent, without associating itself to any one particular region.

In a multi-lingual nation like India, thus, translation plays a major role. Dr. Devy in his essay, ‘Translation Theory: An Indian Perspective’, calls the Indian consciousness as the “translating consciousness” where translation has been carried on for generations. English is the

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dominant mode of translation in India for its status as a pan-Indian language, as highlighted above. The language has acquired a status symbol as the author tries to reach the audience in the West. For Aijaz Ahmad, the only translation that is promoted in India are those that are done in English while those in other languages do not stand anywhere near it.

The cultural domination via English language and literature is an issue coming under the purview of post-colonialism. For instance, Ngugi wa Thiong’o talks about the domination of English, in the African context, saying that it arises due to the assumed cultural superiority of the West. This is the reason that he cites for the abolishment of the English departments from African universities. The reason that Ngugi delineates for the domination seems fair enough and applicable in our Indian context too, but having said that, abolishment of the departments is not a solution.

Instead of ceasing to look at English as an outsider’s language, efforts should be made to not confer any special status to it, which is actually the case in India. This is evident in the lives of those who remain illiterate in English in India for the lack of knowledge of English is felt by them in their day to day lives. It is little surprising then that all the highest posts and jobs are allotted to those well versed in that language.

To conclude, the field of Indian English literature yields enormous power, so much so that many writers who earlier wrote in their native tongue have now turned to writing in English, like Narendrapal Singh. We have seen, starting with the colonial past, how English has come to grasp a firm hold in India where it is inseparable from our lives. Writers of the Indian diaspora, in showing how England does not hold the patent to English, have proven Derek Walcott’s statement to be true: “The English language is nobody’s special property. It is the property of the imagination.” (qtd. in Baer).
Works Cited


