

English Literature in South Asia

Dr. Almuth Degener

University of Mainz Germany

1. A Colonial Heritage

English came to the South Asian subcontinent with the British. In 1835, English was introduced as the official language in all the territories occupied by the East India Company, and later the British Raj. The British left in 1947, but the English language, in several regional varieties, stayed on. The only South Asian state where English does not play a major role today is Afghanistan - in fact the country where the British never really managed to establish their rule. English as a colonial heritage may well be compared to Latin, the language of the Romans: colony, after all, is basically a Latin word. After the end of the Roman Empire, Latin remained the language of at least written communication in all the former Roman colonies, that is the greater part of Europe, and not for 200 but for almost 2000 years. Nowadays, for people all over the world, whether they speak English as a mother tongue or have to learn it as a foreign language, English is the link which connects its speakers with the world at large. It opens up a cultural space which stands for cosmopolitanism, for modernity and urbanity. It has become a global language, just as Latin was in the old world of Europe.

2. An Amazing Career

English is also the language of an amazing treasure of literature, and a considerable part of it was written by authors from South Asia. Novels by Amitav Ghosh, Mohsen Hamid, Kamila Shamsie, Michael Ondaatje, Nadeem Aslam and many others have won international acclaim.

But one might ask oneself what the place of anglophone literature can be in the subcontinent where literature in several classical and modern languages has a centuries old history and has yielded masterpieces of world standard, and where literature is continuing to flourish in Urdu,

Kannada, Bengali and many other languages. Why authors whose mother tongue in most cases is not English, choose English as a medium of literature?

A simple answer is that many authors were educated in English medium schools and feel more comfortable in it as a written medium. But this is not only an oversimplification, but is also contradicted by the many authors who write in vernacular languages despite their excellent command of English, and by those who write both in English and in one of the South Asian languages. We will therefore try to find some other reasons for the remarkable career of English as a literary language, beginning in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century with writers such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, and enjoying a dynamic growth since the 80ies of the last century, until today. Besides original creative works in English, a huge body of critical secondary literature has sprung up and continues to grow, as South Asian literature in English has become part of the syllabus and subject of research at the English departments of many universities worldwide. In the past years, there has also been a welcome shift in the focus of literary studies of English literature which have moved away from the previously dominant Euro-centric viewpoints and opened up the path for looking into the interrelatedness between the subject of research and the identity of the researcher (Khan & Amra, 2020).

3. A Language of Freedom

Despite its omnipresence in South Asia, English is still the language of an elite, and most authors of South Asian English literature are in fact members of the elite classes of their countries. Many of them have a privileged educational background, many live permanently or temporarily abroad, the majority are upper caste or class. But it is not only authors from the upper classes who use English as a medium, and many of those who do belong to the upper classes, are in fact outright opponents of class and caste hierarchies. Not a few are also activists and opponents of government policy, and they use English because it gives them a much broader platform to express their views. Even the use of the English language itself can sometimes become a political statement, because in the past thirty years certain modern South Asian languages have come to

be identified with religiously biased, or marginalising politics. English transcends boundaries of politics, religion and ethnicity, it provides both a wider stage and a more neutral, or independent, point of view. In this sense, it has acquired the quality of a language of freedom.

4. Voices across Boundaries

The political potential of English, however, reaches beyond its aptitude for larger circulation, and as a means of demonstrating against the abuse of vernacular languages for sectarian purposes. When we look at lists of Anglophone fiction from South Asia, we'll find that a considerable part consists of novels. There is, of course, excellent South Asian poetry in English, and there are lovely short stories, but the novel seems to be predominant, both in quantity and in popularity. One of the reasons why the novel is the genre of choice, may lie in its very character. Novels allow for a high degree of complexity, for expansion of ideas into more than one direction. Consequently, the novel is capable, more than other genres, of giving expression to complex discontinuities, contradictions, and traumata. And exactly that may be essential in order to at least allow literary glimpses into the reality of South Asia with its long history of changing dynasties, cultural, religious and social diversity, with its individual and collective memories of migration, rebellion, disaster and injustice. This is all the more the case, as traumatic experiences are often not reflected in official accounts, while they are deeply engraved in the mind of individuals and - consciously or unconsciously - shape identities. Fiction, and in particular novels, can serve as counter-narratives which challenge nationalist and mainstream discourses. Here the Anglophone novel can fulfil one function which a novel in any of the regional languages could not, in a world where the linguistic diversity as well as religious and national borders make direct contacts difficult. English can act as a link between people who speak different regional languages, not only in everyday matters, but also in giving a voice to those whose afflictions may otherwise not be noticed, or understood, and making it heard by others, in South Asia and beyond, who can tell similar stories. If the novel in general is particularly apt to give expression to the dark sides of human experience, the Anglophone novel has the potential to act as a connecting bridge between readers and writers with different linguistic and political backgrounds but comparable experiences. Here, English fiction rather than fiction in any

vernacular language plays a unifying role, not because it will act as any kind of uniform “national” literature, but on the contrary, in the sense of a transregional and transnational medium of processing such experiences which are not reflected in national historiography.

5. Representing one’s Country

Of course, not every South Asian English novel has a political component. But whatever the character of a literary work, political or non-political, using English as a medium is substantially different from writing in any of the vernacular languages. For, “to speak or write in English, a language which migrated into the region fairly recently, is to address a national, and potentially, an international audience, and by doing so to take on the responsibility of presenting an ancient civilization in its modern phase” (George, 2013, p.1).

Indeed, an author who writes fiction in English, takes on a responsibility which is different from that of an author in any other language. Creative writing in English is practically the only writing which is widely read by an international public, and if it comes from a country other than England or America, it is commonly perceived as representative of the author’s country of origin, even if it was never meant to be. Moreover, only if it lends itself to being interpreted as representative, does South Asian literature run a chance to be accepted as “world literature”:

“As posed by Franco Moretti in ‘Conjunctures on World Literature’ and in his collaborative anthologies on the novel genre around the world, within the ‘world literature’ frame, both ‘national’ scholarship and fiction are understood to be subsumed by the larger category of ‘world literature’ which is then ‘coordinated’ by the (west-based) comparativist scholar. Under these critical circumstances, the non-western novelist (if she wants to be counted) had best present work that can be read in relation to the nation with which she is most closely associated” (George, 2013, p. 53).

But how representative is South Asian literature in English? After all, Anglophone literature is only a small part of the huge amount of literature produced in South Asia. Also, most English writing authors are people who have access to the facilities and amenities of the modern world. Can they be representative of countries with millions of people who do not share their economic, educational and social privileges? And by the way, what does “South Asian” mean, if authors have lived most of their lives outside South Asia, or when they write about topics which are not related to their countries of birth, like Vikram Seth’s “An equal music”? Surely someone’s place of birth, parents’ nationality, and cultural background are important for an author’s personality, but considering them as main criteria to classify literature has a touch of racism to it.

6. The Book Market

In order to examine the question of how representative South Asian anglophone literature actually is, rather than focussing on the authors we might take a look at the other side, at literary criticism, and publishing policies. Whether a book becomes part of public discourse in the world of literature, depends on literary criticism which in itself is subject to trends and fashions. If, for example, postcolonialism is on the agenda, those books are likely to be discussed which correspond to what critics define as postcolonialism, while literature which may be no less relevant is neglected simply because it cannot be accommodated within the dominant paradigm. This is similarly true for feminism, magical realism, 9/11 literature and much else. In other words, in order to be acknowledged, creative writing has to conform to the current fashion. As for English writing from the global South, it has to overcome another threshold as well, that of exoticism. It is no coincidence that some of the South Asian writers who are showered with awards and publishing contracts in the Western, are received with critical praise in their home countries, or, if they are valued, then for different reasons. Throughout history, South Asian literature in Europe has been welcomed most if it would conveniently reinforce certain prejudices and stereotypes. Rabindranath Tagore, for example, was hailed as a kind of oriental mystic and religious saviour in Germany, because India, for the German public in the first half of the 20th century, was the country of a romanticised upanishadic mysticism. And Tagore himself, in his flowing hair and long garment would of course fulfil all such expectations, although he

actually came from a family which was not only affluent, influential and extremely cultured, but also open-minded, and well versed in both Indian and Western philosophy, music and literature. There is no doubt that Tagore was one of the finest authors of world and of Indian literature, but for a full recognition of his achievements the preconceptions of his critics were rather less than helpful. The sale of books, however, is dependent on publishing firms, and publishers will select books that are expected to sell. That is not a bad thing in itself but it may result in the preference of books which will support cherished habits of reading and interpreting. It has been pointed out that even some authors of Anglophone South Asian fiction themselves reproduce neo-colonialist clichés (Khan & Amra, 2020, p. 31), which may have various reasons, ranging from internalized conceptions to the intention of serving the alleged needs of a mostly foreign readership, and, last but not least, the not completely unfounded hope of achieving better sales.

7. Diversity of Approaches

Besides current trends and the readers' tastes, there are also expectations and notions of what, generally speaking, a good book should be like, in terms of plot, style, and topic. But could quality standards not differ in countries which have a literary heritage other from that of America or England? As for South Asia, literary criticism in various languages was cultivated long before Europeans ever arrived. Such indigenous traditions still exist even if they are largely ignored by critics outside the community, even by students of literature in South Asian countries themselves, much to the detriment of scholarly excellence:

“Literary theory has to be decolonized and it cannot be done without indigenizing it. Without the presence of literary theory which has its geographical roots in the areas that now constitute Pakistan or South Asia, a genuine scholarship that is qualitatively and valuably unique cannot be produced” (Khan & Amra, 2020, p. 29).

We sincerely hope that there will be more diversity of methods, approaches, and outlooks in the future, using all the tools available from various literary traditions:

“These tools could be Indian, ancient, Western or anything else that is handy, since we are no longer limited by anything in 2015, but the exciting part is applying them to new writing today, hot from off the presses, irrespective of whether one is burning one’s fingers in the process or not” (Koshy, 2015).

8. Translation from English and Into English

Of course, writers of vernacular literature are not ignorant of or immune to global trends. Still, literature which is produced for a regional readership, is more likely to show patterns of indigenous literary traditions. It will reflect more fine-grained analyses of historical and social contexts, will show critical positions, ask questions and fulfil expectations which differ from those of books written for a wider readership. Thus, literature in the regional languages of South Asia may be expected to contain some of the hidden treasures of world literature. These treasures should be made accessible to critics and readers worldwide. Since, however, nobody is able to master hundreds of languages, the only path to enable critics to notice, analyse and evaluate them, is to translate them into English.

At present, the percentage of translations from the languages of the world into English is fairly low, while translations from English into other languages are the rule. In countries like Germany, France and Spain, since the 90ies of the last century, about 60% of the translations have been made from English year by year, while only about 1.8% of total translations were reported to have been made into English in 2008 (La Roche, 2008), and the figures have probably not too much changed since then. In a recent interview, the sociologist Gisèle Sapiro pointed out two reasons:

“Often books don’t manage to get abroad because there are no influential intermediaries. For a US publishing company, it is easier to publish a book that is written in English and represented by a famous agency rather than to take care of translation work” (Sapiro, 2019).

Translated literature is part of the literature of a linguistic community no less than original literature. It is part of the national literature of a given country if we define national literature as the corpus of literature produced and consumed by the inhabitants of this country, as an expression of intellectual life and a source for outlining the space and character of aesthetic discourse. When, for example, Shakespeare is translated into Punjabi (Khan & Amra, 2020), it will henceforth be a part of, and will potentially influence further developments of Punjabi literature. This does not mean that Punjabi literature will lose its special flavour, but it could and should mean that Shakespeare will be looked at from a different angle, and from a different background, it may in fact appear in a different light which could inspire new ideas of both literary critics and Punjabi writers. And what will happen when Punjabi literature is translated into English? If the translation is really good, it could in fact enrich the English language, enlarge the connotations of its vocabulary, and broaden the mind of the reader on both an emotional and a cognitive level. On the other hand, if literature is translated only from one dominant language, this is not just an unnecessary narrowing of the literary horizon, but may even lead to language impoverishment in the target language community.

“The gravitational pull that English now exerts on other languages can also be seen in the world of fiction. The writer and translator Tim Parks has argued that European novels are increasingly being written in a kind of denatured, international vernacular, shorn of country-specific references and difficult-to-translate wordplay or grammar. Novels in this mode – whether written in Dutch, Italian or Swiss German – have not only assimilated the style of English, but perhaps more insidiously limit themselves to describing subjects in a way that would be easily digestible in an anglophone context” (Mikanowski, 2018).

Therefore, the value of translation should not be underestimated. Translation of vernacular fiction into English should be actively promoted by publishers and cultural institutions, in order to show the diversity of South Asian cultures to the world, and not only South Asian, but all

kinds of cultures. Global literary culture should not mean a more or less uniform literature with some superficial regional features to give it a local touch. Global literary culture in its best sense should mean to exchange ideas about literatures from all kinds of linguistic and literary communities with an open mind - and the opportunity to do so is given to us by English translations of the world's literatures. Only if this opportunity is taken seriously, if writers and scholars from various backgrounds are willing to learn from each other and share their own thoughts and experiences, will we be able to overcome neo-colonial attitudes.

9. English as a Global Literary Language

Far from being a language of colonial bondage or post-colonial fighting back, English in modern South Asia has become a medium of communication across boundaries, a language of freedom, of tolerance. It has even become a valuable means to counter a colonial or post-colonial outlook. The literary community of Anglophone writers and readers is a cosmopolitan community, with many different historical, and geo-political contexts. English creative writing adds its specific flavour to the global literary culture shared by writers and readers from England, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Canada and many other countries. Literature in English is predominant in the book market. As has been said before, English today is very similar to what Latin was to ancient Europe.

There is one other global language, not so well known, but in its time as successful in another part of the world, as Latin was in Europe. This language is Sanskrit, the predominant classical language of South Asia. Over many centuries, the sphere of Sanskrit culture extended from Indonesia to the oases of the Central Asian Silk road. After Sanskrit was freed from the bonds of the sacred Vedic ritual, a literature emerged, which was elitist in a way, exclusive to the educated classes, but which was also trans-regional, supra-national, and basically secular. This literature was shared by people of different linguistic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, and it has influenced literature and concepts of the literary in various vernacular languages - just as literature in English in our own time. Through Sanskrit literature, Indian cultural norms and

values were exported far beyond the borders of Ancient India, and that without India being a colonial power.

This peaceful, and truly South Asian, heritage, might serve as a better role model than the Roman one. Today, this role of a truly global language can be fulfilled by the English language, and it will be able to fulfil it if it is accepted in all its regional varieties, with beautiful literature from many countries and cultures, including South Asia, with original English literature and with translations from all kinds of languages into English.

REFERENCES

- Kamal, A. (2019). A case for collaborative translation of literary texts in South Asia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *54*(16, 20). Retrieved from: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/case-collaborative-translation-literary-texts-south-asia>
- La Roche, C. F. (2008, Oct 13). *Literature in Translation: Why is it so Difficult to Enter the Anglo-American Market?* http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/riecano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/spanish+language+culture/ari124-2008
- George, R. M. (2013). *Indian English and the fiction of national literature*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Asghar, J., & Uzair, M. (2017). The necessity of translating Urdu Literature into English: A Plea to Rend the Iron Curtain. *Me'yar*, *17*, 57-74. Retrieved from: <https://www.iiu.edu.pk/wp-content/uploads/downloads/journals/mayar/articles-wise/Meyar-17-2017/26.pdf>
- Khan, S., & Amra, R. (2020). (De) Coloniality in research: A case study of English literary humanities in Pakistan. *Journal of Research in Humanities*, *56*(1), 17-35.
- Koshy, A. V. (2015, May 29). *Indian English literature, literary criticism and theory*. Retrieved from: <https://learningandcreativity.com/indian-english-literature-literary-criticism-and-theory/>

- Mikanowski, J. (2018, July 27). *No language in history has dominated the world quite like English does today. Is there any point in resisting?* Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jul/27/english-language-global-dominance>,
- Mukherjee, M. (1971). *The twice born fiction: Themes and techniques of the Indian novel in English*. New Delhi: OUP.
- Pollock, S. (2003). *Literary cultures in history: Reconstructions from South Asia*. Berkeley: UC Press.
- Sadana, R. (2012). *English heart, Hindi heartland: The political life of literature in India*. Berkeley and London: UC Press.
- Sheeraz, M. (2017). The compromise candidature of English and the unifying slogan of Urdu: The past and the present of Pakistan's linguistic landscape. *Mayar*, 17-18(1), 43-56.