

Indian writing in English

Mohd Tahir Amin khan

Research scholar CMJU

Email: mohdtahir9419@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

“Indian Writing in English,” wrote M.K.Naik, “began as an interesting by-product of an eventful encounter in the late eighteenth century between a vigorous and enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India.” (M.K.Naik,p.1). The important words here are vigorous and enterprising, which imply a sense of ordered action or progress, and stagnant and chaotic, which in turn imply disorder and inaction. Postcolonial critics like Homi Bhabha and others have drawn attention to the colonizing strategy of dividing “colonial space” into binary opposites—that of nature and culture, chaos and civility etc.

The colonizing enterprise of the British subsumed the Indian subcontinent through its strategic deployment of such culture shocks. As we gather from Naik’s generalized statement, playing the Indian’s distorted psyche against its own self-styled superior order and culture, the British, unconsciously though at first, set in motion a new literature of the subject race.

KEY WORDS : western culture, dissemination, Colonial, superstition.

The birth of Indian writing in English could be traced to this paradox of subjectivity and reclamation of the self.

Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in his, *An Autobiography* (1947)

I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. Perhaps my thoughts and approach to life are more akin to what is called Western than Eastern, but India clings to me as she does to all her children, in innumerable ways... I cannot get rid of that past inheritance or my recent acquisitions... I am a stranger and an alien in the West. I cannot be of it. But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile’s feeling.

But much before Nehru felt this sort of alienation in terms of a national identity, Indian intellectuals of the early part of the nineteenth century were compelled by the pressures of the colonial propulsion to subject their own selves to the superior civilizing culture of their colonial masters. They were branded with the need to de-school themselves and build up a newer Western identity. Thus the reformist zeal of a Raja Ram Mohun Roy or a Vidyasagar could be accounted for by this compulsive colonial ideology. Alongside Macaulay’s celebrated Minutes that drastically waved aside everything Indian as hardly of any worth, while simultaneously highlighting

the civilizing force of everything English, Raja Ram Mohun Roy, gave a highhanded call to Indians to learn and master the English language. The need of the hour was felt to be a collective purging of the ill effects of a dormant and static culture coupled with a grafting of the Western culture and value systems on to the thus uncontaminated tree of Indian life. Of course the coloniser's intent remained distinct from the colonial's in this regard. K.N. Panikkar points out

The nineteenth century intellectuals were firm believers in the efficacy of enlightenment as a panacea. They traced the source of all ills in Indian society,

including religious superstition and social obscurantism, to the general ignorance of the people. The dissemination of knowledge, therefore, occupied a central place in their programme of reform. Their ideas on education were different both in purpose and detail from the educational policy of the colonial rulers. While dissemination of the colonial ideology and utility for administrative needs were the main objectives of the educational policy of the British government, the educational programme of the Indian intellectuals was oriented to the regeneration of the country. (p.8-9)

As for the creative writers of this formative period, there was but one obvious option - to write in the "more elite" language, and find their continuities in the great English literary tradition. They easily succumbed to the prescriptive role played by English literary canons and thus the earliest Indian writers in

English were more Anglo than Indian in that sense. Perhaps for them the second category never existed—for a non-English identity would have necessitated an ejection of a *civilized* image which was the last thing they wanted. Therefore we have in these writings a double struggle: a struggle to find a different harmony and a struggle to infuse the English muse to accept and bless. The writers who could represent the first phase of colonial writing would be: Henry Derozio (1809-31) whom Iyengar dubs: "the marvelous boy who perished in his prime," (p.40) Kashiprasad Ghose (1809-73), Toru Dutt (1856-77) ["Beauty and tragedy and fatality crisscrossed in the life of Toru Dutt, and it is difficult, when talking about her poetry, to make any nice distinction between poetry and what C.S.Lewis would call 'poetolatory.'—Iyengar p.55] and Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-73). It was natural for them to tune unto the nightingale's throat and gather the sheaves of the great British bards. They let themselves be most profoundly influenced by the nineteenth century Romantics.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Mohd Tahir Amin Khan is a research scholar CMJU. He has done graduation from Govt. Degree College Rajouri affiliated to Jammu university. He has done LLB 3 year Professional from Dora Law College Jammu affiliated to Jammu university. He has done post graduation from CMJU. He has written number of books .



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