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## Is the postcolonial effort of publishing Indian texts cultural exchange or disguised neo-colonialism?

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### Introduction

Publishing became a colonial enterprise across the British Empire in for example, India or the African continent and publishing in the English language became a means of controlling and subjugating the native inhabitants to British rule. India is a special case however as it had been under British influence since the East India Company was established in 1612 (1), making the publishing efforts of the 1950s seem rather recent. Indeed currently only ten percent of the population speaks English but that equates to 125 million people making it the second largest English speaking population in the world (BBC). It could be argued therefore that the English language (and possibly all that comes with it) has become somewhat integrated into Indian life. Indeed Rushdie acknowledges the historical legacy of a hybridised culture in *Midnight's Children*: 'Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me' (Rushdie 1995). This essay will therefore endeavour to unravel the extent to which colonial rule has had an impact on late twentieth century publishing in India. This will require as a result definition of the term *postcolonial* and whether it is apt to describe contemporary Indian literature we find in British bookshops and on bestseller lists today.

Power is exerted by the coloniser over the colonised through a series of ways however, and as Foucault may argue, the primary site of colonisation in which *power* lies is that of discourse. It 'is best understood as a firmly bounded area of social knowledge' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2002) which provides a clear set of rules to which one must abide. An imperial power imposes their language and rules upon another country and as it does so, the social knowledge linked to it begins to disseminate to the colonised. This social knowledge therefore influences the formation of the cultural field of production within a society. (Bourdieu) Therefore when trying to trace the root of culture, it is useful to examine the power structures present within literature as this becomes the permanent site of language usage.

Prior to independence the publishing scene had been largely controlled by the British. (Collingridge 2009) As western publishers pumped predominantly educational literature into the country, the dissemination of the English language became more widespread. 'There was no publishing outlet – Indian publishers of the time would do the safe thing, that is, publish textbooks or reprints. They never looked around or paid much attention to local, contemporary writers.' (Desai) It became expected that to advance in a career or become entitled to privilege one had to master the language – following the rules of discourse that had been imposed by the colonising force. Indeed the 80 to 90 per cent of the population who did not know English or French were barred from the higher levels of education and as a result aspiring Indians were forced, through necessity, to become fluent in either language (Huggan). Significant effects were visible after independence, throughout the Indian literature that made it back to the west.

### **Small numbers, big impact**

It is also interesting to note that a number of the works of Indian literature have been successful because they have been adopted by universities initially and then disseminated more widely. At the London Book Fair 2015 the agent Sridhar Gowda described the value of this process 'I try to get their work onto recognised courses, six or seven universities is enough. For my writers an uptake at university is a guarantee that their work will eventually reach a wider audience'. For many Indian writers the 'thought [is] dazzling... like getting a contract from Bollywood' (Desai) but reality is far less glamorous than the blockbuster success of Rushdie. It can be seen that to become part of the English published discourse, often one must be approved or certified by academic uptake first. It is not enough to simply write. However English language writing makes up a tiny percentage of Indian literature. 'For most Indian critics, writing in English represents a small and marginal aspect of the practice of contemporary Indian writing' (Ashcroft et al), it is a hard space to inhabit. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin explore the existing critical structures present within Indian discourse which they argue is 'an indigenous critical tradition at least as old if not older than that of Europe' (ibid).

So what effect have the British had on the native literary tradition? Many of the older Indian critical methods were put aside in favour of European critical systems of thought and in doing so it could be argued that the formulation of literature itself changed. As a child Desai read 'Mainly non-Indian writers, as you might have guessed. I read all the English classics ... We didn't really study the Indian writers – even Tagore wasn't studied – we had to discover them on our own, later in life.' (Desai) If

Indian writers hoped to be published, they knew they must write for their colonisers. However this also meant adopting their structures of critical interpretation, discarding their own, if at times chaotic, literary heritage. Ghosh's debut novel *Circle of Reason* (1986) for example was centred around the exploration of Louis Pasteur. The novel is a mediator between India and the West and is perhaps less radical than his later works. Although this could be due to development of his writing abilities, there is certainly something to be said for producing a first novel which fits within a western tradition of literature.

Post-independence a rift has opened up between what is considered native language writing i.e. Hindi, Tamil, Sanskrit and English language writing. Writing in English is subject to western critique – therefore, can something that has been produced outside of this framework hope to be successful or valued? The lack of translated Indian fiction on British bookshelves reveals the answer, however gatekeepers of publishing certainly play a central role in sustaining this answer. The most successful publishers are part of conglomerates and as a result control the cash flow within the industry. They operate within a western framework and it could be argued that 'our all round acceptance of the British hegemony supplies perhaps the only cause for our recent interest in commonwealth literature and culture' (Ashcroft et al). This implies that we both as publishers and consumers are only interested in literature if it is served up to us in a familiar form. By conforming wilfully to western frameworks of discourse, we are given literature which ultimately acts as a mirror simply reflecting back what we already know. In this vein, publishing has certainly not moved on from that first colonial effort.

### **The pursuit of Indian-ness**

'More than anywhere else in the postcolonial world, perhaps, the possibility of writing in vernacular languages other than English exists in India as an immediate and practical choice' (ibid). As a writer in pursuit of Indian-ness it becomes more 'vigorously asserted' in the vernacular languages rather than English. The tradition of writing in these languages is still, therefore, extremely strong and in fact there has been a revival in addressing such work through critical perspectives (mentioned above) that existed before the British colonised. So why does the British publishing industry only engage with Indian literature written in English? Indeed the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* is an interesting example to look at. The anthology marked fifty years of an independent India and seems to be based on the 'Indian-ness' of the writing within it – 'the finest Indian writing of the

past fifty years' (Rushdie) but the whole book was written in English. 'Rushdie [went] to great lengths to justify the choice of *English* writing' (Huggan) within it and argues that the English language writing of Indian authors post-independence was 'a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 "official languages" of India' (Rushdie). He goes on to assert that it is 'the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books' (ibid). His ability to both dismiss a continent and claim advocacy of it in the same sentence is quite astonishing, and as can be imagined raised both eyebrows and tempers, especially in the Indian writing community. This may be because of his essentially Eurocentric view, running against the purpose of the anthology all together – celebrating fifty years of independence. It could be argued that in fact this brings Rushdie's dependence into the spotlight. Furthermore Huggan critiques this with a review of Rushdie's work by Narayan who concludes that Rushdie is out of touch with Indian writing and language. Yet 'still the label sticks – not English but Indian writing' (Huggan), the work written and published in *English* but marketed as authentically *Indian*. However this is often perceived as misappropriation by writers – Desai confesses she 'doesn't like to be a spokesperson for India' (Desai) and Vikram Seth posits 'No-one knows if I am an Indian writer or a Californian writer' (Seth). Indeed with the reissue of three of Desai's novellas, Random House chose which to publish as well as the cover design (Singh) prompting questions as to the motivation for the choice to initially republish. Similarly the Vintage website proudly hosts 'The perfect introduction to one of the world's richest literary traditions, Rushdie's anthology boasts the best in Indian writing across 50 years of independence.' (Vintage) Here English readers are sold the work as a complete formative basis representative of *postcolonial* Indian literature as a whole.

Of course the real problem here is that the proliferation of language and literature produced in India post-independence; it makes it difficult to ever-present Indian literature as a cohesive whole as it is just too extensive. As Saleem in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* says 'to know me, just one of me, you'll have to swallow the whole lot as well' (Rushdie). Therefore when deciding whether to publish Indian literature, publishers must use their resources wisely and to explore this in more detail we return to Huggan. He asserts that Said recognised the inevitability of fragmentation and hybridisation, in particular in relation to academic discourse, as the voices of the peripheries being called forth. That is to say that the voices of outsiders are brought in to the centre. In this way postcolonial discourse can be perceived as becoming much more varied as a result of colonialism in the first place. Huggan adds with caution however, that access to this discourse is only available through metropolitan centres which, as it turns out, many of those outside Europe are not party to.

These metropolitan centres can be interpreted as literary regulators or gatekeepers and the agents of these being publishers. Seth is aware of this when questioned about numerous exploits in travel writing, poetry and novels: 'It's not particularly smart, publishing wise, to spread your net as wide as that [different publishers for each text]'. This demonstrates the low provision for literature from the peripheries and the lack of native publishing which may be able to provide a more cohesive structure for Seth to publish his work within. Little has been done to open up metropolitan centres and allow publishing to become cultural exchange rather than drawing in.

Therefore if literature perceived (or that can be marketed) as Indian is being written in English it is much more likely to be seized upon - the publisher can keep costs low as there is no need for translation, and the authors are much more marketable. This leads to the conclusion that perhaps publishers are on the whole proliferating the phenomenon of English written Indian writing. On the other hand perhaps this problem has actually arisen from the hybridisation of culture which followed the colonial rule in India. So where does this fit into postcolonial publishing? Huggan defines two terms very early on – Postcolonialism and postcoloniality and the latter applies most relevantly to this argument and the business of postcolonial publishing as a whole.

### Postcolonial in focus

Postcoloniality, Huggan argues, 'is a value-regulating mechanism... constructed through global market operations involving the exchange of cultural commodities, and particularly, culturally "othered" goods'. It 'is *bound up with*' (ibid) postcolonialism as it is the way in which an anti-colonial intellectual reaction becomes a commercialised exoticised product. 'Raj nostalgia is entertained in Britain' (Ganapathy-Doré) extensively, and has been since India gained independence. The combination of nostalgia, for the loss of our empire as a nation, and the undermining of our imposed power structures have led to both an exertion of power in alternative ways and simultaneously a high demand for exoticised goods to fuel our longing for the orient. We have examined how power has been exerted, using the colonial structures inherent in discourse, and will now focus on exploring exoticised products and how publishing has played a part in this industry.

Exoticism, discussed by Huggan, appears to underpin the concept of postcoloniality as it provides the basis for market demand of postcolonialist products. To understand, therefore, publishers roles as cultural brokers and marketeers, it must first be qualified what exoticism is and then apply this to products of publishing. Exoticism in a postcolonial context 'describes the symptomatic assimilation

of cultural difference, ascribing familiar meanings to unfamiliar things'. The 'rhetoric of fetishised otherness and sympathetic identification masks inequality of power relations without which the discourse could not function' (Huggan). Huggan acknowledges that the exotic is framed by both a differentiation from the culture consuming that cultural other and fetishisation which reinforces the power structure which this consumption constructs. Indian writing is perceived from a Eurocentric point of view in mainstream, 'metropolitan' publishing. As a result it is 'characterised not by remoteness but by *proximity*' (ibid). Indeed he uses Appadurai to argue that decontextualisation, bringing ethnic products to the centre, allows an attribution of value to these products through their dislocation. Because they are being consumed in a context which is not that in which they were produced, as Bourdieu might argue, they become a site of cultural capital. The mode of this dissemination is also key and here commodity fetishism, 'the veiling of material circumstances under which commodities are produced and consumed' (ibid), is used as a vehicle to market the exotic. Indeed Freud defines fetishism as substituting physical absence with a spiritual or non-physical presence. However commodity fetishism within the context of the postcolonial often serves to mystify rather than clarify. It promotes interchangeability of the cultural other, access to the exotic through those aligned with the peripheries and the view that these are experienced as constituent parts of the same (ibid).

In terms of post-independence Indian publishing this holds serious implications. The marketing of Indo-Anglian authors reinforces the authenticity of the claim that postcolonial discourse in the framework of the west becomes both decontextualized and as a result fetishised. One very visible agent of this within British publishing is that of the Booker and the media frenzy it whips up. In his essay *Prizing Otherness* Huggan explores the function of the Booker as a legitimising agent for the framing of these works as culturally other. Rushdie serves as an example of an attempt to undermine the neo-colonialism which a prize like the Booker, deliberately or not, imposes. The Booker is a good representation of recent British publishing in general. From the concern and subsequent malaise over British novel writing in the seventies the prize slowly became more focused on media and promotion, so that by the nineties most correspondence in the archives is related to the BBC and negotiation of PR. However Huggan asserts that the Booker's treatment of Indo-Anglian literature in particular 'exemplifies the double standards in promoting "multicultural" goods' (Huggan). I would argue that its struggle between 'casting a generally pluralist light on contemporary English-language literature, but operating at the same time within a narrowly profit-driven

framework' is one which reflects the rise of the conglomerate publisher. One that caters to consumerist behaviours and has no qualms in exoticising authors if the books sell.

Publishers continue to hold a strongly Eurocentric view and in even in Britain today only 4% of literature is translated from another language – the large majority has originated in English. However a small canon of Indian born writers have broken into the market. In the 1997 Roy won the Booker prize with 'God of Small Things' and sparked debate, reflected in academic discourse soon after, about the value or authenticity of her work. 'Indian literature in English [is] a literalised *consumer item*' (Huggan's italics) and 'it remains true that the market in Indian literature in English has helped sustain the fiction of a close knit family' (Huggan). This 'family' perpetuates the cultivated view that because they share a nationality, this group of Indian writers can somehow become parts of the same. Perhaps it is more accurate to describe 'Indo-Anglian writing is the product of a roving band of privileged diasporics [...] written by élites and defined and canonised by élites' (ibid). Within Indian literature in English, the hierarchy established in colonial rule seems to remain post-independence. Only a select few names are known to western readers and this has been reinforced by the Booker Prize and the Anglo-centric nature of publishers. Indeed this spreads into academic discourse too – when in need of a quote Said, Spivak and Bhaba are verily used in relation to postcolonial Indian criticism. Huggan asks 'Why does this industry seem to privilege a handful of famous writers... [and] why does it devote so much time and attention to its three celebrity critics?' (Huggan :4) .

Indeed it could be argued that within twenty first century publishing in relation to Indian literature has sought not to bring about authentic marginality but actually exert a neo-colonialist force through a combination of linguistic homogeneity and simultaneous justification through a Eurocentric publishing effort. Writers like Rushdie and Roy are sold to 'the masses' (Carey) through media hype and cultural estrangement. Indian writers who have been taught the only route to success is through the use of English are seized upon by publishers and serve, often, to reinforce western experience rather than become cultural ambassadors for India. In doing so they have often left behind a writing tradition which would often lead to a more authentic product which the market is searching for. Huggan effectively summarises postcolonial discourse in relation to the production of culture and within that literature. When applied to the publishing industry in relation to post-colonial India trends and parallels can be effectively drawn between academic discourse and practical evidence. Independent India is not as post-colonial as we may think.

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