

When the East is a Career: The Question of Exoticism in Indian Anglophone Literature

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Institutional recognition of Indian English writers in the West is at its pinnacle. Within the span of less than a year, one writer received the prestigious Man Booker Prize and another was knighted. Kiran Desai and Salman Rushdie are part of a flourishing group of writers whose credibility has been cemented by illustrious awards, lucrative publishing contracts, and an increasing readership. Acceptance in the West, however, comes with a price for writers practicing their art in a colonial language. Indian Anglophone writers share a sense that their reception in India has been less than adequate. Rushdie has long bemoaned his lack of acceptance by the Indian critical establishment (Dhondy). Desai was questioned by interviewers about how she could consider accepting the Booker prize, given the colonial underpinnings of the award (Barton 24). Recognition and acceptance in the West co-exists with a mixed response back home, where Anglophone writers do receive some praise but are also routinely treated with a dose of suspicion if not hostility.

This essay defends the critical position that there is a strong element of exoticism in Indian Anglophone literature. I do so by offering a rebuttal of two recent articles written by prominent writers defending Indian Anglophone literature against its detractors. Amit Chaudhuri, in an article in the *New Left Review*, challenges head-on the charges levied against Anglophone literature (Chaudhuri). Another reputed writer, Vikram Chandra, wrote a similar piece in the *Boston Review* (Chandra) decrying the Indian critics of Indian Anglophone literature. I have chosen Chaudhuri's and Chandra's pieces because they are established writers of the genre and their views are aired in prestigious journals; they are therefore in a position to mold critical opinion. I begin with an overview of Chaudhuri and Chandra's position and then proceed to interrogate some of their central assumptions.

Chaudhuri and Chandra: An Overview

Chaudhuri's article, "The East as a Career," is written as a defense of Indian Anglophone literature; his main concern is to reject the charge of "exoticism" frequently leveled against this body of work. Indian Anglophone writers, he observes, routinely face the ire of their audience in

the form of two common questions: “What audience do you write for?” and “Are you exoticizing your subject for a Western audience?” (111).

Chaudhuri contends that such attacks belong to the arena of “politics of representation” (111) and do not contribute to an appreciation of “literary practice” (111). In the post-Saidian era, he laments, analysis of a text’s conditions of production has taken clear precedence over the examination of its meaning. The charge of exoticism issuing from a vulgarized Saidian legacy of vigilantism is ultimately grounded in a homogenized nationalist narrative and any departure from it is perceived to be “exotic” (113).

Like Chaudhuri’s article, Chandra’s “The Cult of Authenticity” begins by invoking images of writers beleaguered by vociferous critics, requiring them to repeatedly justify their practice. He describes the scene of a reading he did with two other Indian English writers. All three writers were questioned about whether they wrote for an Indian or an international audience. The interlocutors charged that the writers betray an anxiety about portraying “Indianness” to the West (42). Chandra believes that such critics are primarily motivated by a kind of “nativism” and a moralistic attitude that make them protective of an abstract and non-existent notion of “Real India” (45). Chandra points to the cosmopolitan character of urban India (45-46) and designates the notion of an authentic India as misplaced. Second, he takes strong exception to the critics’ position that English is an alien language in India; he contends that it is the “lingua franca of power, of business, of cultural exchange, of politics” (46) and, therefore, for writing in English the Indian writer should have to offer no apology.

The specific accusation that both Chaudhuri and Chandra contest is that Indian Anglophone writers tend to become orientalist to cater to their international audience. In their articles, Chaudhuri and Chandra highlight some of the central critical assumptions against Indian Anglophone literature. They foreground the critical contention that Indian English writers capitalize on their ethnic identity in ways that both pander to immigrant nostalgia and offer images of India that are packaged for easy consumption in the West. The exoticized cultural images, the critique claims, are, rather than a presentation of the national condition, in effect details of banal particularities devoid of history and politics. (Chandra 44-45; Chaudhuri 122-24). On this, Indian Anglophone literature is contrasted with its vernacular counterpart, which, critics assert, largely escapes the pressures and lures of a global market (Chaudhuri 111-12; Chandra 45). Adding to the critics’ ire is the fact that the rich corpus of Indian regional literatures, even in translation, rarely captures global attention (Chandra 45). Chaudhuri and Chandra succinctly grasp the underlying assumption of the critique: the international popularity of Indian Anglophone literature is riding high on the preferences of a global market rather than on the intrinsic literary qualities of the text.

After identifying the widespread suspicion against Indian Anglophone writers, both Chaudhuri and Chandra proceed to deny any validity to such criticism. The critics, Chandra asserts, have created a “cult

of authenticity” (42) and cry out against all perceived distortions and misrepresentations of what they believe to be the “real” India. Both writers decry what they view as the ingrained parochialism of Indian Anglophone criticism and hold that there is no material basis for its assumptions. For Chandra, the cosmopolitanism of urban India (45), and, for Chaudhuri, the complex conglomeration of social classes (113) belie any homogenized notion of the nation. Their critics are thus reproached for subscribing to a utopian idea of Indian history based on a denial of its manifold social complexities.

Both writers highlight in passing the possibility that the charge of exoticism is related to several factors specific to Anglophone writers: the use of an elite language, the often-deracinated social position of the writers, the catering to an audience largely untutored in Indian realities, and the lure of a lucrative Western market. But instead of engaging these issues, they ridicule them. They deny that there are any meaningful differences between the conditions of production—with regard to access to intellectual and material resources facilitated by publishers, media and the academy—of Indian Anglophone and vernacular literatures. Such differences, even when present, the writers hold, should not be read into the literatures. With the denial that social conditions have a role in literary production, the writers come perilously close to advocating that art exists for its own sake. The critics, they contend, with their new-fangled views, are obsessed with market conditions and audience reception rather than with questions of aesthetics (Chaudhuri 112).

In the following sections, I argue that Chaudhuri and Chandra misread the political character of the exoticism critique. First, I focus on the material conditions of the critique and argue that it is rooted in the legitimate concerns about the place of English in social and cultural reproduction. Then I offer a rebuttal of the position that the charge of exoticism against Indian English literature is a post-Saidian phenomenon and has little to do with the actual literature in question (Chaudhuri 112-13). I engage with the charge that the critique has “little critical content” (Chaudhuri 113) through a discussion of both the literature and the critique.

This discussion, I believe, is warranted because Indian Anglophone literature has acquired prominent global status and, more importantly, is often viewed to be the quintessential cultural product associated with the country.¹ The exasperation of writers like Chaudhuri and Chandra by their critics is understandable. The exoticism critique is underpinned by charges of bad faith, and of a certain complicity with colonialist and elitist ideologies. However, the counter-attacks presented by the writers do not do justice to the exoticism critique. Looking at both the historical and

¹ Wrongly so of course. India has rich and vibrant literary traditions in its many languages, but the body of literature in English is globally most *visible*, thus leading to this perception.

critical content of the exoticism critique, I explore the issues at stake in the acrimonious discussions on this particular branch of literature.

The Exotic

Chaudhuri offers an ambitious defense of Indian Anglophone writing. He begins by conceding what he believes is the central assumption behind the exoticism critique: because English is an elite language, there is a distance between the Indian English writer and her audience (113). This distance between writer and audience, he holds, is what critics believe to be the condition for the production of the exotic. However, the Indian audience, he argues, can never be a homogenous entity. It is a deeply stratified society where even the Anglophone minority is rife with political, intellectual, and other divisions. Thus the distance between writer and audience is inevitable, regardless of the language of literary practice. The idea of an “Indian audience” is a utopian fiction based on an “Arcadian vision of Indian history” (113-14). If the idealistic desire for unity between writer and audience is misguided then Indian Anglophone writers, the argument goes, are no more responsible for the production of the exotic than are regional writers.

Chaudhuri’s line of argument, however, does not do justice to the exoticism critique. The premise behind this criticism of Indian Anglophone writing is not that its exoticism results from a dissonance between writer and audience but rather *from a dissonance between the writer and his subject matter*. The slippage between the terms “audience” and “subject” is a telling one, especially in the context of Indian Anglophone writing. There is usually little social dissonance between the Indian Anglophone writer and his audience. Typically, the writer’s audience is people like himself—urban, well educated, and upper-middle class—both at home and abroad. The slippage from “subject matter” to “audience” deflects attention from the fact that exoticism very often results from catering to the social and literary tastes of this very recognizable community of readers and writers.

The phenomenal success of the genre in the West is deeply related to a cultural affinity between Indian writers and their audience. The Indian Anglophone literati are in circulation in a West where often a facile multiculturalism makes them very acceptable. It is the kind of multiculturalism, very prevalent in the affluent sections of Western metropolises, that promotes a superficial and comforting familiarity with foreign cultures. Exoticism has a dual aspect: an identification with a marginal group and the lack of engagement with the political and economic life of the group. It usually translates then into familiarity with certain everyday aspects of cultural life, such as food, clothes, music, and religious rites. The fascination with everyday practices and artifacts—shorn of their links to politics and culture and unencumbered by questions of power and ideology—is both non-threatening and pleasurable. In this

marketplace of consumable cultures, India becomes primarily a land of yoga and *chai*.

In an insightful analysis, Graham Huggan connects key aspects of the postcolonial exotic with commodity fetishism, like “mystification (or leveling out) of historical experience; imagined access to the cultural other through the process of consumption; reification of people and places into exchangeable exotic objects.” Huggan observes that these processes “help [postcolonial] books and their authors acquire an almost talismanic status” (19). The Indian Anglophone literature’s readership is largely composed then of a group that subscribes to an idea of India that may be charitably described as benignly exotic. The readership base, however, is substantial and powerful enough for publishing companies routinely to offer extremely lucrative contracts to Indian writers. And for his part, the Indian Anglophone writer usually finds this audience and its milieu entirely familiar and comfortable. Cultural symbiosis and material benefits thus create fertile grounds for production of the exotic.

Exoticism is a reflex of the particular insertion of the writer into his environment, in particular, of the social distance between him and the culture that he seeks to represent. However, it is not an attribute of cultural or ideological distance alone. At a fundamental level, exoticism is a symptom of a lack of empathy between artist and subject. In principle, therefore, it is possible to find it any language and any genre. Chaudhuri rightly notes that with the incursion of capital, there has been commodification/exoticization of both culture and history in various Indian art forms. He finds it irksome that on the issue of exoticism, critics confine their ire to Indian Anglophone literature (112). However, while there are certainly instances of exoticism in Indian vernacular literatures, as I explore in the next section, it does not follow that there is equal vulnerability to this phenomenon between the two genres.

Language and Class

British colonial rule was responsible for introducing the study of the English language in India. The extensive research on the subject is unanimous in the view that even though the British offered their “civilizing mission” as the principal motivation behind the institution of English studies in India, the actual reasons were political and ideological, serving the interests of the empire (Krishnaswamy and Burde; Agnihotri and Khanna; Sunder Rajan; Viswanathan). The eventual consolidation of English both in British and post-independent India did face considerable challenges from the anti-colonial movement and the native intelligentsia.² The opposition to English was based primarily on two motivations: English symbolized colonial rule and Indian servility; second, it was a distant and alien language for the overwhelming masses of the country. Education in Indian languages was viewed to be not only an affirmation of

² For a historical account of the response to the introduction of English education in India, see Surendra Prasad Sinha, *English in India*, chapters 4 and 5.

independent nationhood, but “the proper teaching of the mother tongue,” the Zakir Hussain Committee recommended, was also the “foundation of all education” (qtd. in Aggarwal). However, influential support for English within the anti-colonial movement carried the day. The anti-colonial leadership that emerged from the small section of English-educated Indians realized the significance of the “master’s” language to subvert his rule. Even as English was used in the struggle against colonialism, it also became entrenched as a preferred language of the anti-colonialist intelligentsia.

The cause of English found an ardent supporter in Jawahar Lal Nehru, a stalwart of the anti-colonial movement and India’s first Prime Minister. In his support of English, Nehru was partly responding to the multilingual aspect of Indian society where English as a “neutral” language was viewed to be more acceptable as the lingua franca. But it is also crucial to recognize that Nehru symbolized that duality dominant in the native intelligentsia: impeccable anti-colonial credentials coupled with the belief that the West was a repertoire of desirable civilizational values.³ India would reject English, the language of science and technology, Nehru said, only 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). Even as Nehru remained instrumental in firmly consolidating the position of English in free India, a note of dissent was issued, above all, by his comrade and guide, M. K. Gandhi.

Throughout his political life, Gandhi staunchly opposed the imposition of English and instead advocated the use of Hindustani as the lingua franca for India.⁴ Gandhi recognized the elite character of the language in the Indian context and thus its divisive role; he repeatedly pointed out the “gulf [that the English language] created between the educated classes and the uneducated masses” (6). With a firm understanding that the purpose of any language is context specific, 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, not because the members of the family or the barber are ignorant people” (qtd in Joshi 284). Above all, Gandhi contemptuously dismissed the view that English was inseparable from the democratizing project: “Of all the superstitions 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 10). If anything, then, the class character of English in India worked against the ideal of meaningful democracy.

Gandhi’s characterization of English remains accurate in contemporary India where only about 5% of its massive population is conversant in

³ For a pioneering discussion on the issue of this “duality” in the native intelligentsia, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*.

⁴ For a discussion of the conflict between Nehru and Gandhi on the issue, see Robert D. King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*.

English.⁵ The tiny minority of the population well versed in English consists overwhelmingly of the urban elite. They learned English as if it were their native language, often at the expense of learning their native language. Facility with English connotes an immediate social distance from the rest of India, even its literate vernacular sections. In a deeply hierarchical society with a strong colonial hangover, social attributes of the ruling class, such as language, acquire iconic stature. English is arguably the most sought after, the most desirable of all the languages in the country. The Indian ruling class has established a defining role for English in key areas of public life, such as employment, education and media. The political issue of the desirability of a language inaccessible to the overwhelming majority has been successfully shelved. Consequently, the test of a good education is considered to be a sound knowledge of English; similarly, competence in English is a necessity for a white collar job. Those who have little or no access to the language are perhaps the ones who best appreciate its power—they feel it in job interviews, in their children’s schools, in court rooms, in hospitals, in community forums—they know they are powerless and socially marked. English is not merely a signifier of class in India; it is a facilitator of class rule.

Should we be surprised that Indian Anglophone literature is subjected to more severe scrutiny given the extraordinary association of the language with class privilege? If the charge of exoticism is grounded in the distance between author and subject, it is to be expected that Anglophone writers are especially targeted on this issue. The more interesting question is why Chaudhuri and Chandra, established Indian English writers, consider the charge to be a non-issue. Chaudhuri barely addresses the question of the class character of English and its possible implications for artistic practice. Chandra makes the novel claim that precisely because English is the lingua franca of power and privilege and the underprivileged aspire to the knowledge of English, it is not an alien and a foreign language (46). But Chandra misses the point. The exoticism charge is not based on the idea of English as an alien language, as he suggests; instead, it focuses on the *alienating effect* that the language generates in a fiercely stratified society.

Chandra and Chaudhuri’s attitude reflects a strong cultural current in India today, wherein the elite provenance of the language has become naturalized. There was a period when public culture and the intelligentsia were more conscious of these phenomena, but that is quickly receding into the distant past. Unsurprisingly, this consolidation of English coincides with the emergence of a class culture brazenly unapologetic about rank

⁵ The latest census report on languages was published in 2001, see http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/State_ment1.htm. The report based on usage of mother tongue lists only .02% of the population as English speakers. Scholars, however, accounting for the actual number of speakers that include the part of the population that may not list English as its mother tongue, typically place the percentage of English speakers between 3 and 5. See for instance, Jason Baldrige, “Linguistic and Social Characteristics of Indian English.”

and privilege. Subscribers to such attitudes either are members of privileged classes or aspire to such class position (Mukherjee 178). The dismissal of a key strain of criticism related to Indian writing in English is in sync with a cultural climate where the privileged character of English is not an issue. It is possible to engage and disagree with the charge of exoticism. But to contend that the very problem of exoticism—intertwined as it is with underlying historical and political considerations—has “*no provenance and little critical content*” (Chaudhuri 113, emphasis added) is astonishing.

Of Post-Saidian Provenance?

Much of the writers’ ire at their critics stems from their exasperation regarding political criticism. The assumption is that the critics of Anglophone literature are politically motivated and ignorant of the real issues of artistic practice. According to Chandra, the attacks against the literature are led by “cultural commissars” (42) belonging to the political extremes of either the Left or the Right. He draws parallels between contemporary Indian English critics and the ideologies of Nazi Germany and of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (48-54). Indian critics, in his view, are as obsessed with questions of authenticity at the expense of art as some of the most repressive regimes of the recent past. Chaudhuri shares this aversion of the political and laments that in our post-Saidian era, the analysis of a text’s conditions of production has taken clear precedence over the examination of its meaning.

The publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Chaudhuri contends, has generated a climate of obsession with the “politics of representation” (111)⁶ at the expense of the appreciation of literary practice. Meaningful discussions regarding the mystery of the creative act have been usurped by tired moral gestures about the social construction of meaning. The charge of exoticism against Anglophone literature then issues from a vulgarized Saidian legacy of vigilantism. Such political charges against writers—“for questions about a writer’s audience and his or her use of the exotic are political questions”—are instances of “knee-jerk response to the problematic” (111).

Either writer might contend that he is not against political criticism per se; his quarrel is against what he considers to be reductive practices of such criticism—of which the attacks on Anglophone literature would presumably be an example. The charge of exoticism then belongs to a species of criticism that is objectionable not just because it is political but

⁶ Interestingly, Chaudhuri’s antipathy to political criticism is not borne out in his own evaluation of works of art. In an insightful discussion on the emergence of modern Indian art, he argues that the exotic is not merely an import but an intimate aspect of native politics and identity. Modern Indian art emerges either as reflection or, more significantly, in opposition to the all-pervasive exoticism of popular culture that occurs with the incursion of capital. Chaudhuri’s assessment of modern Indian art relies centrally on a political analysis of the particular historical juncture when that art emerges.

in the way that it is political. Chaudhuri places the root of its illegitimacy in its short pedigree; since it is a recent, post-Saidian phenomenon, it has no historical or critical basis. He acknowledges that critics like Buddhadev Bose did target Indian Anglophone writing, but that for the earlier generation of critics, the focus was artistic practice rather than questions of representation (112).

Chaudhuri's rendering of this history, however, is demonstrably untrue. Contrary to his claims, there has been no radical shift within Indian Anglophone criticism from considerations of artistic practice to issues of representation; this has always been a central preoccupation of Indian Anglophone critics and interlocutors. In other words, they have never observed a rigid demarcation between artistic practice and the politics of representation. Earlier generations of critics would have found such distinctions to be rather quaint. For instance, in her 1933 critique of Sarojini Naidu's English poetry, Latika Basu might not have used the word "exotic," but surely any Saidian today would find her position a familiar one: "She [Naidu] merely continues the picture of India painted by Anglo-Indians and English writers, a land of bazaars, full of bright colours and perfumes, and people with picturesque wandering minstrels and snake charmers" (21).

It is hard to fathom how Chaudhuri can claim that there is "no persuasive and intelligent debate ... on the nature of Indian writing in English" (111). The decades of the 50s, 60s, and 70s were marked by ongoing, lively, and often acrimonious discussions by both supporters and opponents of an indigenous literature in English. And questions of artistic practice and representation remained intertwined as critics addressed multiple dimensions of these issues: the desirability of Indians choosing English as a literary medium, the practicability of doing so, the literary dilemmas of the Indian Anglophone writer, the changing character of the literature. The Bengali writer and critic, Jyotirmoy Datta, for instance, refers to the lone predicament of the Indian writer in English as "bastilled by 360 million" native speakers, comparing the writer to caged chaffinches who, according to experiments, may evolve slightly different songs but will never have the full range of the wild songster (286–96). Masti Iyeger, reputed Kannada writer, represents a more nationalistic sentiment in his appeal to fellow writers to never write anything at the expense of their mother tongue (qtd in McCutcheon). Bitter attacks on Anglophone literature were matched by spirited defense. Critics like Balachandra Rajan contended that the questioning of Indian English literature was not as much a sign of nationalism as it was of insularity (2–3). P. Lal, poet in English and founder of the "Writer's Workshop" in Calcutta, claimed, first, that English has become an Indian language and, second, that while the regional languages were just that, *only* the writer in English could hope to attain the cosmopolitan character of India (297–303). Critical interest in the literary product has always been framed by the issue of the viability of an Indian literature in the language of its colonizers.

If the basis of Chaudhuri's dismissal of the contemporary character of Indian Anglophone criticism is that it is a recent, post-Saidian phenomenon, then the foregoing discussion should suffice to call his position into question. Since the 1980s the older debates have not died away but have acquired a somewhat different shade. Now the focus is less on the *desirability* of writing in English as it is on the *nature* of the writing. But contrary to Chaudhuri's claims, this critical shift has very little to do with the publication of *Orientalism*. The change has been brought about by several factors; a confluence of forces in the past three decades or so—the advent of neo-liberalism, the decline of progressive nationalism, and the anglicization of the middle classes—has strengthened the hegemonic hold of English on the culture. The volume of Indian literature in English in the same period has witnessed remarkable growth by virtue of an array of talented writers, and the literature has shown unquestionable signs of maturity. Consequently, critics are no longer concerned with the viability of writing in an “alien” language.

So while Chaudhuri is correct in identifying the question of exoticism as a political one, he is wrong in assuming that the issue lacks historical and critical basis. The charge of exoticism in recent years is consistent with the fundamental concerns that have animated literary criticism of Indian Anglophone writing for decades. The dilemmas of a literature in a colonial language, the nature and conceptualization of its subject matter, its modes and methods of representing the nation, its reception at home and abroad—issues that are at heart political—have been the mainstay of critics from the outset. It is not a product of what for Chaudhuri is the lamentable development where “the politics of representation, rather than the definition of literary practice [has become] a principal preoccupation of literary departments” (111). No doubt, in some fields—such as Renaissance or Victorian studies—the emergence of such approaches is of more recent provenance and has produced some exciting results. However, the small field of Indian English literary criticism did not need to undergo any such transformation.

Of Little Critical Content?

The exoticism critique of Indian Anglophone literature foregrounds the fact that in the international market, Anglophone writers from the global South are usually treated as cultural ambassadors. The expatriate Indian writer or the anglicized writer at home, however, is often alienated from the very culture and people he supposedly represents. The writer then compensates for his lack of cultural connectedness by resorting to reductive constructs of the nation—a strategy leading to exoticization of subject. Chaudhuri and Chandra do not engage this position or refute its assumptions with instances from the body of work.⁷ Instead they attempt

⁷ Chaudhuri's article offers a discussion of only one Anglophone writer, Arun Kolatkar. A single example could be acceptable if the case were to be made that the writer is *representative* of the genre. According to Chaudhuri, however, Kolatkar was “the first

to deny any basis to the critique by asserting that it proceeds from an exclusivist nationalism or cultural fundamentalism (Chandra 44-47; Chaudhuri 125-26). This defense, unfortunately, completely misjudges the political orientation of the critique.

Chandra singles out the critic Meenakshi Mukherjee because of what he calls her tendency to represent an “overpowering nostalgia for an Indianness that never was, for a mythical paradisiacal lost garden of cultural and spiritual unity” (48). Since Chandra spends much of his energies refuting Mukherjee, and since Mukherjee is one of the most distinguished critics of Indian Anglophone literature, her positions deserve a closer scrutiny.

Mukherjee has argued that exoticism in the writing of the earlier generation of Indian Anglophone writers signified their compulsion to provide a veneer of detachment from the indigenous context; whereas, in contemporary writers, exoticism is often the outcome of their anxiety to be viewed as authentic. The novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, she contends, creak under the burden of the colonial language in the heyday of colonialism. At the very time when writers in the regional languages were providing literary shape to the growing anti-colonial nationalism, writers in English steered clear of political engagements that might antagonize their potential audience. Using the English language, it was not possible to assert a regional identity, and “any assertion of a broadly *Indian* identity was undertaken generally to emphasize otherness and exoticity rather than to make a political statement” (Mukherjee, 15-16). With time, the benign attitude to the colonialism of earlier writers has certainly changed. Now there is an anxiety to assert one’s ethnic identity to a global audience.

The charge of exoticism is intertwined with what Mukherjee calls an “anxiety of Indianness.” The desire to prove one’s “Indianness” leads to homogenized national narratives or exotic constructions of the nation (Mukherjee 2608). Mukherjee’s analysis is borne out in the works of writers such as Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, whose works often betray an anxiety to offer a packaged image of the nation. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, for instance, Rao equates India with only its spiritual aspects and the spiritual with just the esoteric Brahmanical world-view (Mukherjee 2607). And delightful as R.K. Narayan’s fictional town of Malgudi is, it is also Hindu, upper-caste and apolitical—Narayan’s image of the quintessential India (2608). Unlike Narayan, writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Kamla Markandya were especially committed to representing the plight of the underprivileged sections. But even in novels such as *The Untouchable* or *Nectar in a Sieve*, which avow social realism, a portrayal

writer in the fledgling tradition of Indian writing in English” (121) to have written a certain kind of poetry and the avenue opened by him “has hardly been noticed, let alone explored” (121) by his contemporaries. Kolatkar, in Chaudhuri’s reading, has neither predecessors nor followers and therefore is not representative of Indian Anglophone literature. It follows then that the defense of Kolatkar against the charge of exoticism as offered by Chaudhuri is not applicable to Indian Anglophone literature in general.

of the complex and conflicting cultural realities is sacrificed in favor of a flattened and minimalistic representation of the “national condition” (2608).

It is ironic that in most Indian Anglophone writers, the act of writing in English generates the need to identify with the nation, but the anxiety of identification leads the writer away from experiential reality toward exotic ideological constructs. Reductive constructions of India are evident in the works of contemporary expatriate writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in which images of their lost homeland rely heavily on easy and available constructs of India. One commentator points to the emergence of a neo-orientalism in some recent novels such as Manil Suri’s *The Death of Vishnu* and Amit Chaudhuri’s *Brave New World*. He observes the complicity of Western critical culture in the production and popularity of such novels (Shivani 4-5). Critics exhibit a twin tendency, first, to be very suspicious of anything political in the literary realm and, second, to glorify any display of cultural difference as deeply meaningful. It is not surprising that the novels, filled with paralyzed characters untouched by the political sphere, basically dwell on inane cultural particularities like food, Bollywood movies, and spirituality.

This trend in the literature speaks to the debate between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad on national allegory. The adherence to nationalistic constructs in the literature is an illustration of Jameson’s position that “third world texts are *national allegories*” (69; emphasis in original). For Jameson, this is a desirable aspect of cultural production, as he believes nationalism to be the force that can resist the onslaught of North American postmodernist culture. But a more comprehensive view of Indian politics and culture bear out Ahmad’s position that nationalism is not necessarily the language in which the diverse constituents of the nation speaks. Thus, while Jameson views nationalism as an oppositional force against North American postmodernism and capitalism, in India the various shades of nationalism, ranging from the Left to the Right, have wholeheartedly embraced economic liberalization, the neo-colonial logic of North American capitalism. More pertinently, for cultural production, Ahmad shows that it is neither desirable nor inevitable that writers subscribe to emblematic notions of the nation.

In a sense, English is the only pan-Indian language because, while it is not associated with any particular region, the language maintains a presence all over the country. The pan-Indian aspect of the language, however, rarely translates into a sensibility that meaningfully engages with the national culture. Russian literature of the nineteenth century, Pankaj Mishra observes, offers a poignant contrast with Indian Anglophone literature. In a land marked by a colonial culture, much like India, uneven development, brutal class hierarchies, and people caught in the vortex of unmanageable forces, the Russian writers performed an indispensable function. They made their lived world their raw material and created a literature that the people could recognize to be their own. This, Mishra observes, is the “truest function of a national literature: it holds a

mirror in whose unfamiliar reflections a nation slowly learns to recognize itself” (1). In contrast, the Indian Anglophone elite writer rarely empathizes with the world that he seeks to represent. Inhabiting a colonial class culture, instead of a reckoning with the material and social conditions of everyday life, he very often reveals a shame, an evasiveness about these conditions.

In their attempt to rebuff the exoticism critique, both Chaudhuri and Chandra claim that the critique betrays a hankering after a non-existent notion of a “Real India” (Chandra, 48; Chaudhuri 125-26). However, the contention that the critique is grounded in an idealized nationalist narrative not only misses the point *but actually inverts it*. The exoticism critique is based on the observation that Anglophone literature often lacks signs of genuine engagement with Indian realities. This position can hardly be conflated with the view that Anglophone writers do not represent an “authentic” India. The charge of exoticism is not based on a homogenized version of the nation; indeed the charge is that Anglophone literature tends to do precisely that—offer neat, mythologized images of the nation.

While there are certainly elements of moral posturing among some literary critics, the objections against Indian Anglophone literature have very little to do with the kind of empty moralism caricatured by Chaudhuri and Chandra. The critics are accused of adopting a “very high moral ground” (Chandra 44) from where they attack writers for choosing an elitist language. Similarly they are charged with erecting artificial and moralistic divisions between Indian writers in English and those writing in the vernacular.⁸ None of this, however, survives close scrutiny. It is widely acknowledged, for instance, that writers “choose” English not because it offers all the perks of a global language but because it is usually the only language in which they have literary competence (Mukherjee 2607). And while Anglophone literature is sometimes contrasted with its vernacular counterpart, the critics’ aim is not to erect non-existent binaries but to highlight the influence of varying social conditions on cultural production.

Possible Pitfalls

While it does not characterize the critique of Anglophone literature in general, there are certainly strains of xenophobic nationalism among certain cultural critics, as Chaudhuri notes, and their judgment of art forms tainted by the Western market (121-25). To an extent these tendencies are themselves the product of an incomplete decolonization, a love–hate relationship with the colonial world. Whatever their source, these

⁸ Ironically, in the very article by Mukherjee that Chandra ridicules, she strongly advocates for a perspective that would consider vernacular and Anglophone literatures as “disparate literary products of a complex plural culture.” Far from adopting a moralistic stance, she clearly states that language, in the context of literary practice, is rarely a matter of choice.

nativistic tendencies need to be fully rejected. The position that English should be weeded out of the country would be an instance of this tendency. Although the structural privileging of English in India should be questioned, it would be deeply erroneous to hold that English is not an Indian language. The attempt should be to dethrone English from its special status, not to banish the language altogether.⁹ Equally indefensible is the notion that nothing valuable can be produced in literature in English. In art, while social conditions explain certain trends, they never exhaustively determine the possibilities inherent in individual artists.

At the other extreme of the pole of nativism is a glib postmodernism that is dismissive of all power hierarchies. It usually takes the form of puncturing oppositional perspectives by exposing some signs of complicity in them. Any weakness in the armour of resistance becomes a reason for clubbing it together with the forces that it resists, or at the least to assume the pointlessness of resistance.¹⁰ In a recent article on the Hindi translation of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, Rashmi Sadana strongly implies that there are no real benefits in translating an English text for a wider Indian audience. The suggestion is based on the fact that the Hindi translator chooses to delete some descriptions of animal fleshing undertaken by the low caste *chamar* community in the novel. Sadana asserts that the deletions are a sign of pandering to the religious considerations of an upper-caste Hindi elite for whom such details of animal, especially cow fleshing, could be detestable. The translator, in deference to upper-caste Hindu tastes, chooses to excise the "offensive" parts of the novel, thereby violating the integrity of the text. Sadana contends that if English points to a privilege associated with class and urbanity, then regional languages like Hindi are affiliated with their own elite constituencies. In both linguistic arenas, elite interests influence the production of texts and thus she concludes that English and other Indian languages are on the same footing (327-28).

The existence of regional elites is certainly irrefutable, and the assumption that the deletions in the translated texts reflect a caste bias is also entirely plausible. It does not, however, follow that a more faithful translation would have received any less a favourable reception than the actual translation did. For Sadana's argument to hold, the sanitized translation of the novel would have to be a *representative* text for a

⁹ I also find Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o's plea for the abandonment of English to further the process of decolonization to be problematic. The structural dominance of English cannot be challenged through the initiative of individual writers. Also, for most Anglophone Indian authors, writing in English is not a choice that they make; it is the only language in which they can attempt creative expression. Thus it is neither practical nor desirable to demand that individual writers and artists abandon their linguistic medium.

¹⁰ Thus, for instance, both Chaudhuri and Chandra point out that very often their own critics function in English (Chaudhuri 122; Chandra 48); Chandra also draws attention to the way Indian academia often blindly follows the intellectual currents of Western academia (48). Legitimate as these issues are, it remains unclear, however, how any of this invalidates the exoticism critique.

literary field tailored to the religious preferences of a Brahmanic elite. This is not at all the case. The existence of a Hindi-speaking, upper-caste elite notwithstanding, the rich Hindi literary field offers numerous instances of texts engaging with caste issues.¹¹

It is undeniable, however, that there are power imbalances between regional languages in India. Administratively, Hindi has occupied a position of power and privilege that has been repeatedly contested. It may be fair to point to the elite status of Hindi as a language in relation to other regional languages, but that does not change the fact that users of Hindi, like other regional languages and unlike English, are not necessarily members of the elite. The readership of Hindi literature, much like any other regional Indian literature, cuts across class and caste divisions and encompasses a wide social field.

Sadana's poststructuralist equation of the original and translated texts as sites for "competing privileges" (327) of particular linguistic elites completely misses the point. The central difference between the two texts is their respective potential readership among Indians: the original novel in English can only be read by a privileged minority, whereas the translated novel is available to a large and socially heterogeneous population. To the extent that art is influenced by its audience, the nature of such influence is very different for an English versus a regional language writer.

Audience awareness, or the knowledge that one's *subject* will rarely be one's *reader*, must play its role in literary production. In contrasting Russian with Indian Anglophone literature, Mishra does not discuss the issue of language. But the subject of Russian literature—the Russian people—was also its primary readership. Only the most privileged minority of Indians read Indian Anglophone literature. Chandra speaks of his cosmopolitan Bombay, where English is a familiar language in the streets and slums. Rushdie often gives a voice to the slums and street folk thus skillfully mocking the propriety of the colonial language by bringing people with a thin, elusive grasp of English into his narrative fold. And yet, Rushdie's pushing the language against its proper margins is pleasurable only because he himself is a master of the language. The Rams and Rehanas in Rushdie's stories, the less fortunate multitudes who make Bombay cosmopolitan, will almost certainly never read Rushdie or Chandra.

Conclusion

The exoticism critique against Anglophone literature is based as much on the actual literary product as it is on the material conditions of its production. Chandra is off-the-mark when he compares it to the censorious rhetoric of a Hitler or a Mao Zedong (48-49). The critique

¹¹ Premchand would of course be the most notable instance. *Dalit* writers like Om Prakash Valmiki and Suraj Pal Chauhan are also excellent examples of the same phenomenon.

bears more meaningful comparison with Frantz Fanon's views on the possible limitations of cosmopolitan intellectuals and artists in the construction of an anti-colonial national culture.¹² The cosmopolitan intellectual or artist, Fanon observes, in his anxiety to identify with his people, ends up instead producing a narrative of exoticism: "He sets a high value on the customs, traditions and the appearances of his people; but his inevitable painful experience only seems to be a banal search for exoticism" (177). Indian Anglophone literature often exemplifies this search for tired particularities and their presentation as the national condition.

The understandable exasperation of some writers notwithstanding, the exoticism critique has its place in the evolution of a robust critical culture. The critique, as I have tried to show, carries both historical weight and critical relevance. At its best, it represents a healthy spirit of self-questioning for a nation coming into its own. There needs to be vigilance, however, against tendencies to degenerate into an exclusivist discourse or worse, a garb for petty competitiveness. And, while the exoticism critique points to a general tendency within Indian Anglophone literature, there always has to be room for praise for individual works that not only defy the particular tendency but remain remarkable in their own right. Finally, it may be hoped that there will be a time, culturally and politically a different one, when the critique will become irrelevant.

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¹² It is worth remembering that the cosmopolitanism that Fanon castigates is only the rootless, deracinated kind. Also, Fanon's idea of "national culture" (188) is distinct from nationalist ideology.

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