

Bizarre Pronunciation Levels Of Indian English Is A “Grave” Concern: A Study Of Khushwant Sing’s “A Bride For The Sahib”

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Abstract

English, a crumb of the colonial heritage which proves to be a crumble for many Indians as it has been since the arrival of the Britishers also have crumbled many lives in its clutches due to poor proficiency levels. Even though there are few differences in grammar compared to other standard varieties, Indian English Pronunciation fall into a cline ranging from near native level standard to the lowest intelligible varieties. Even though, purity in language use is no longer considered as the ‘correct’ usage of a language and the “englishes” used worldwide are accepted as varieties of English or “world englishes”. Such a contention, if one looks at the Indian context, even though linguistically agreeable, but socially it is not so as this has resulted in a psychological setback for many people affecting prospective growth in various aspects of life. Along with practical life experiences, the themes in literature in Indian English writing bear a testimony for the same. The representation of different proficiency levels and codes of “English” is highlighted in many post-colonial Indian writing in English, and such a representation created fun and defined a class of people who, out of their social circumstances, became a victim of parody and pastiche. The protagonists in are such characters. This article analyses the characters of A Bride for the Sahib by Khushwant Singh in terms of the “englishes” they use and how a deviant pronunciation resulted in a “grave” tragedy for Kalyani, the protagonist Mr. Sen’s wife.

Keywords

english, lingo, proficiency levels, post colonial literature, cline, parody, pastiche, hybridity.

1. INTRODUCTION

English or any other language is not a monolithic entity and vary according to place, time and other socio cultural backdrops. A language thus diverges itself into different dialects and co-exist reflecting their peculiarities. English is a monumental example which has spread across the globe as the first of language for many nations and the second and foreign language for many others. However, the usage of English in foreign countries especially in former colonies of England deviate to an extent that arises concern regarding mutual intelligibility. Many eminent scholars addressed this complex phenomenon of wide varieties of English

which deviated considerably from their native models. Bill Ashcroft, et al[2]., in their book *The Empire Writes Back* makes a distinction between English and Englishes.

Though British imperialism resulted in the spread of a language, English, across the globe, the English of Jamaicans is not the English of Canadians, Maoris, or Kenyans. We need to distinguish between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, English, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world. For this reason the distinction between English and English will be used throughout our text as an indication of the various ways in which the language has been employed by different linguistic communities in the post-colonial world. (8)

In the Indian context, it has wider significance. English which came as an imposer, then as a link language between the colonizer and the colonized, acquired the status of the second language and a prestige symbol which so assimilated with the Indian psyche that she can never do away with English. To quote Kachru[3],

In the multilingual and culturally pluralistic context of India, the English language has naturally developed its regional, social and occupational varieties. Indian English has developed typically Indian registers of legal system, business, newspapers, and also a large body of Indian English creative writing. (110)

Similarly, according to Allen H[1],

English is not considered as a foreign language in India. It has been given the status of a second language as it is another tool of communication alongside the first language. English becomes a second language when it is used as lingua franca between speakers of widely diverse languages as in India. (4)

Nevertheless, English as it is used in India, stumbles, tumbles and trembles across the country and many fall a victim especially due to its low level of proficiency levels in pronunciation. The deviant pronunciations in Indian English (English) cannot be compared to a dialect existing in a native country. A dialect as such is natural variety and is part of a linguistic community. In contrast, a deviant usage is the result of lack of proper understanding of the proper usage of a language. Even though, in India grammar is given importance while teaching, the pronunciation part is neglected. So many a time, the writing part comes handy and when it comes to speaking, they go bizarre. Due to her multi-cultural, multi-linguistic background, even fellow Indians have problem in understanding their deviant English pronunciation. There are contentions to overlook this aspect of deviant pronunciation, but this article postulates that that the deviant pronunciation should not be overlooked as it creates social problems. It also has been a theme in Indian literature written in English especially in the postcolonial era. This article analyses the Indian deviant pronunciations and how it is a serious concern with the help of the short story *Bride for the Sahib*, which portrays the pathetic story of a lady who because of her poor pronunciation had to dig her own “grave” even though educated and knew English.

Bride for the Sahib is a concatenation of two different cultures in one level and of two lingos on the other. As a result of the British colonial rule, a new breed of educated Indians sprouted who incline to Western cultural values and try to disinherit the cultural values of their own country. The ‘white man’s burden’ really worked on such people and they looked down their own heritage. This has resulted in serious aftermaths which had its resonance in the social set up of the country. Indians began showing their pride “in a language that was not their own” and also a culture that was not their own.

The division thus created two types of people: on the one hand, the western educated bearing the western values in their mind and on the other, a group of people still Indian but overpowered by the colonizers' cultural imperialism. The former when felt pride in the foreign culture, the latter found it difficult to adapt to an alien way of life because of the enrooted cultural value of their mother country in their psyche. It is quite surprising that a language as such plays a crucial role in determining a cline in the society. Unfortunately, the sub-verities of English used in India were an instrumental tool in class marking and even class determining that people are further divided especially in the academic circle, in the context of career growth and higher education. To take an extreme division of these lingos, one falls in the upper layer with a proficiency level close to the native variety and the other falls to the bottom with too much of mother tongue interference and poor performance due to lack of proper education and training. The protagonists Mr. Sen's and his wife Kalyani's proficiency levels and codes of "English" adequately represent these two poles. It helps the author to achieve the effect as intended where Mrs. Sen becomes an object of parody and Mr. Sen that of pastiche.

Mr. Sen, the British educated Indian is an epitome of the western values who speaks a spotless British accent. He is a "wog" (westernised oriental gentleman), whereas his newly wedded wife, even though educated (MA in English Literature) only represents a typical and "ordinary" Indian girl. They represent two extremes in the proficiency levels which ranges from the highly educated variety of Indian English to the least educated variety. The other characters also fall into different gradations in the cline of the proficiency levels and thus represent different proficiency levels. An analysis of their linguistic expressions would make these different proficiency levels explicit.

The address of the superintendent of the clerical staff to commemorate Mr. Sen's marriage in the beginning of the story was effective in bringing in such a representation: "Saar...whee came to wheesh your good shelp long liphe and happinesh". It proved to be a paradoxical comment as Mr. Sen faces a tragic and disappointed life where proficiency level in English plays a crucial role. When the superintendent responds to Mr. Sen with a "Shuttenly, Saar", it indirectly represents something which reverberates a yielding certainty of ignorance of language which is the theme of the story. These are typical examples of the Bengali speech habit which makes English appear as some "exotic" variant of English. The author himself explains the reason for such a deviant pronunciation: "The Bengalis had their own execrable accent: they added an airy 'h' whenever they could after a 'b' or a 'w' or an 's'. A "virgin" sounded like some exotic tropical plant, the "vharjeen," "will" as a "wheel" and the "simple" as a "shimple." (8)

Similarly, the Director who is a south Indian pronounces horse as "harse". It is a typical example of Tamil-English which can be piled up with other deviant funny expressions like 'yate' for eight, 'yugg' for egg. Similarly, the Director finds it extremely difficult to pronounce words beginning with an 'm'. Mr. Sen sarcastically recalls the Director's instruction to his private secretary, "I want Yum YumYumeer, Yumpee." for I want M Ameer, M P.

The turning point in the story is when Mrs. Sen's poor proficiency level in English produces a bad impression in her husband which leads to the essential but undesirable climax of the story. Mrs. Sen wanted to know whether her husband wanted to sit inside or outside for having dinner. Such an innocent enquiry when expressed in her 'execrable' Bengali accent

turned out to something very similar to an enquiry for defecation: “Do you want to shit inshide or outshide? The deenerrees on the table.” Mr. Sen by hearing this became quite apprehensive of what his English friends if they were present would have thought of the ‘invitation to defecate was Mrs. Sens’s first communication with her husband’.

In the story, this misappropriation in English usage is not just a different usage of a language code, but a deplorable and shameful behaviour which never can accord for a proper and equal relationship in marriage. This is quite evident when Mr. Sen after reading his wife’s final letter to him which made a mysterious and sarcastic smile on his lips dwindling the shock of his wife’s death.

On the table beside the bed was an empty tumbler and two envelopes. One bore her mother’s name in Bengali: the other was for him. A haunted smile came on his lips as he read the English address: ‘To, Mr. SenEsq.’ (33)

Adding the comma after “To” and using both “Mr” at the beginning of the name and “Esq.” at the end are again a reflection of poor proficiency level which made Mr. Sen smile. The English thus brought Mrs. Sen and Mr. Sen a terrible life after their marriage and an undesirable and pathetic death for Mrs. Sen who represented the poor proficiency level. A language is indeed the carrier of a culture too. It is evident from what Mr. Sen has become and what Mrs. Sen who struggled between the coloniser’s and the colonised culture. This problem of hybridity still exists as Mr. Sen thought if his wife were of a western make up then, “They would have kissed a hundred times between the wedding and the wedding night; they would have walked hand-in-hand through the forest and made love beside the river; they would have lain in each other’s arms and sipped their Scotch. They would have nibbled at knick-knacks in between bouts of love; and they would have made love till the early hours of the morning.” Unfortunately, Mrs. Sen’s culture was different which believed in touching the feet of the husband with reverence. She could never raise herself up to understand her husband and thus behave appropriately and vice versa. The essential culmination of the story brings in this wide gap that they have brought into, “Sen put his hand on her forehead. It was the first time he had touched his wife. And she was dead”. (33)

A language as such quite naturally adapts to cater to the needs of the people and one can find instances of different types of appropriation in the usage of English in India. Appropriation as such doesn’t create any problem and they can be very positive contribution to a language. Instances of *code-mixing and code-switching* are throughout the story . “Mez par-on the table”, “Hey spittoon lao”, “sahib”, “Arey” etc are embedded within English utterances. There are instances of *untranslated words, syntactic fusion, neologisms, and clagues* to indicate different levels of appropriation. “Sahib, Memsahib, chotahazri” are examples for untranslated words. “Much water had flowed down the Ganges”, “Heavens won’t fall down” are examples of calques. “Salaaming” is an instance of syntactic fusion.

Appropriation is an important term in the assimilation process of a foreign language. English has appropriated itself to the Indian culture even though the perfection of assimilation has always been a question. Nevertheless English has become part and parcel of Indian consciousness both physically and mentally and we should find ways to adept. We have achieved to a great extend in this regard. It is almost a century since Rajarao[4] made his visionary comment in the preface of *Kanthapura*:

It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before –but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own

language and English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as part of us. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it (Rao vii)

To conclude, *Bride for the Sahib* displays the difficulty in the process of the appropriation of English language and the social aftermath due to poor proficiency levels. Khushwant Singh had an effective use of postcolonial stylistics to represent the hardships in the concatenation of two cultures, two languages and thereby pointing out the difficulties through different levels of English proficiency.

Still in India one can see the repercussions of the problem in various levels. Although, the varieties have become part of Indian English, one cannot oversee the fact that makes the language unintelligible not just to a native speaker but even to his fellow men. Such differences or deviations or 'errors' may not reflect the individuality of a culture or society and rather reflect ignorance and lack of awareness of how the language is generally used.

It is a fact that accent and pronunciation changes among the varieties of naïve speakers of English. It is the characteristics of a dialect, not a result of lack of understanding or absence of education. Also, these problems in pronunciation affect the performance of the students who appear in IELTS, TOEFL and other international English proficiency tests which result in an emotional setback for them. Many Indians after reaching their countries of destinations also find difficulty in getting adapted and their lives become more cumbersome due to poor proficiency in pronunciation levels.

2. REFERENCES

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