

Bhabani Bhattacharya's Portrayal Of Indian Life Through A Foreign Language

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Abstract: *Indian writers in English have long faced the difficulty of expressing experiences that are not central to the language they have chosen to write in. The way Bhattacharya handles the language – moulds and makes it Indian becomes one of the distinctive features of his prose style. The expressions used by the writer have their unmistakable flavour of the vernacular speech and serve the purpose of bringing authenticity to the Indian dialogues. They also provide a glimpse of the wise sayings of the rural people, preserved and transmitted in their everyday conversation as also their attitude to life, and above all, are a gentle reminder to the reader that the characters are firmly rooted in the Indian soil. An occasional use of Indian words in an English dialogue is a laudable attempt to fuse Indianness in English in order to distinguish the native from the foreign dialogue. Even phrases and sentences literally translated into English, do appear quite metaphorical, fairly concrete and tie the speaker to his native place. The caution, of course, is a prerequisite if the use of such expressions is not to degenerate into mannerism and eccentricity.*

Key words: *fuse Indianness in English, expressing Indian life, flavour of native words*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Indian writers in English have long faced the difficulty of expressing experiences that are not central to the language they have chosen to write in. The sheer range of emotions, actions and sensibilities seen in people living on the Indian subcontinent is hard to encapsulate in a language that grew out of a different history as well as geography.

Whenever one talks of moulding the English language for depicting Indian ethos, for painting a picture that would reflect the true spirit of the country, its inmost grace, one remembers Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya who have done pioneering work in shaping English to suit Indian needs. For purists, such experiments have been sacrilegious acts in contaminating a language, which for centuries has stood as a symbol of perfection with well-established norms and usages. What they forget to see is that English has also a flexibility and with minor pressures has been able to carry the literary burden of various nations of the world. Raja Rao was aware of this pliable nature of English, but aware too, that it is not a easy job “to convey in a language not one’s own the spirit that’s one’s own” as certain shades of feelings and emotions look “maltreated in an alien language.” He hastened to add, however, that English is not an alien language and we cannot and should not “write like the English”. Mulk Raj Anand braving the onslaughts and derisions of literary critics, made several linguistic

experiments which give English a distinct flavour of Indian soil, even if it sounds rather strange to English-reading public. For Anand, Indo-Anglian tend “to bring the hangover of the mother tongue... into their expressions.” While writing spontaneously, he himself was “always translating dialogue from the original Punjabi into English. The way in which my mother said something in a dialect of Central Punjabi could not have been expressed in any other way except in an almost literal translation, which might carry over the sound and sense of the original speech.” Hence his translation of Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi expressions in his writings. Bhabani Bhattacharya, too, like Anand, “usually thinks in Bengali, then translates the thoughts into English,” and has made experiments in using English not as a yoke carried over his reluctant shoulders but as the challenge of “using the English language in a way that will be distinctly Indian and still remain English.” He has also confessed that without caring for the technical hurdles in the way of using a foreign language, he “loved writing in English” and “enjoyed the challenge of this literary problem – expressing Indian life in the idiom of an alien language.”

The way Bhattacharya handles the language – moulds and makes it Indian becomes one of the distinctive features of his prose style. The device of the literal translation of an Indian phrase, idiom or proverb into English is quite frequently used by Anand and Bhattacharya. Some of Bhattacharya’s translations are crude but clear and strike the reader with the violence of a pebble on his pate, but there are others which pass to the consciousness like the fragrance of a distant flower that wafts gently on the air, making him slowly but pleasantly aware of their meaning. Thus we have expression which originate in the vernacular language and then are paraded in English uniform. This is what Robert Payne must have meant when he commented in *The Saturday Review*: He (Bhattacharya) writes in a language which is not English, yet all the words are English.” The translated expressions do not have the crudity one associates with Anand’s, but are intelligible to the non-Indian reader, and are added with the richness of associations for Indians, as can be seen from the following:

“The tail of a cow and the tongue of a rustic never cease wagging.” (*Music for Mohini* p.9)

“Why expect out girl to be like them? How can a plum tree grow pears?” (*Music for Mohini* p.129)

“You think you are not getting sixteen annas for your silver rupee.” (*He Who Rides a Tiger* p.10)

“People have long tongue and tongues will wag.” (*He Who Rides a Tiger* p.172)

“You have to clutch at the touchstone as a drowning person reaches for a twig in the current.” (*A Goddess Named Gold* p.11)

“When an ant grows wings and starts flying in the air, it is not far from its doom.” (*A Goddess Named Gold* p.128)

“One must wear painted plumes in the company of peacocks.” (*Shadow from Ladakh* p.112)

These expressions have their unmistakable flavour of the vernacular speech and serve the purpose of bringing authenticity to the Indian dialogues. They also provide a glimpse of the wise sayings of the rural people, preserved and transmitted in their everyday conversation as also their attitude to life, and above all, are a gentle reminder to the reader that the characters are firmly rooted in the Indian soil.

There are other words and expressions too, mostly small phrases, which also have been literally translated and fall into the above category. These are: *tying a soul to the saree-end*, *laughing a belly-full*, *eating one’s salt*, *eating one’s head*, *holding one’s chip up*, *chopping off one’s nose or making one nose less*. Though Bhattacharya must have literally translated them into English from Bengali, they have good parallels also in Hindi and other north Indian languages. Some of the expressions related to measurement or counting reflect the attitude of the traditional,

rural people, who do not believe in precision and accuracy but in proximity, signifying their generosity, their lack of education, carelessness, and an attitude of taking life at ease. Hence Meera's age is referred to as "ten-eleven". The sun in the sky was "a bare man's height" (Music for Mohini, p.129) instead of being five or six feet up. Compound expressions, such as well-water, child-pain, happy-sad mother, mother-of-Onu, tear-haze, picture-show(cinema), fire-wagon(train), chatter-machine(radio) also sound peculiar to our ears, as we are not used to them, though they have their originals in the regional language.

Bhattacharya goes a step further and gives simple, non-technical terms, intelligible to the rural people in place of complex and difficult ones. Thus we have "*ships of the sky*" (for aeroplanes). The x-ray becomes the '*wonder-ray – you can see through the body*' (Music For Mohini p.147); the telephone a '*speaking wire*' and the gramophone '*a song machine*'. A motor car or a truck becomes a '*wind van*' and a tap '*a water-machine*'. The same kind of simplified, ruralized terminology has been used by Raja Rao too.

To point out that the characters do not speak English, Bhattacharya uses a large number of Bengali and Hindi words, such as '*apsara, asirbad, bhai, beta, bhootni, chal, champa, choorie, dal, doti, diruba, ghee, haat, jilebi, kachu, kajal, kos, kamar, kusa, laddoo, pronam, nimkin, poori, guddi, shehnai, sindur, swarga* and *thana*. Most of these words are quite familiar to every Indian. Besides, these, Bhattacharya uses other Indian words with English equivalent, such as *ma-bap, mother-father, viman, aerial cars, sab-vedi, cannon ball, Brahmastra, a wonder missile, pagla, ghanta, crazy bell, chamar, untouchable, tamasha, spectacle, lota-kambal, blanket and water bowl; ojha, exorcist*. The idea of Bhattacharya must have been to feed the readers a flavour of native words but at the same time to save their labour and confusion by giving English equivalents side by side. Unfortunately, no principles seem to govern the use of native words with or without accompanying English equivalents. There are many words like *apsara, kabiraj and kusa* for which English equivalents might have been preferred and others, such as *ma-bap and chamar* which needed none and yet it has been done so. The use of vernacular words many times adds not so much to our pleasure as to our confusion when they are not italicized in the text and are confused with English words.

We have English words, too, which by distortions and wide uses have begun to be taken as Indian. Such words are: *Engraze, Chinee, Japanee, Iranee, Goerment, Sigrette*. Even the illiterate Indians make frequent use of these words. Except for the fact that by their origin the words happen to be English, for all practical purpose they are Indian and their misspellings are in order to conform to their use by the rustics. Hence they can be justified in dialogues though not in narration.

2. CONCLUSION

While experimentation in the use of English is a welcome step in involving a language representative of rural Indians, a conscious effort to introduce these changes, which may make the style artificial, is not desired. Each country has its rich reservoir of proverbs and sayings in which the experience and wisdom of many generations go and it is the duty of an author – being a spokesman of the cultural heritage of the country – to familiarize them before they are completely extinct. An occasional use of Indian words in an English dialogue is a laudable attempt to fuse Indianness in English in order to distinguish the native form from the foreign dialogue. Such words cumulatively give a feeling of the cultural background of the characters, the local colour, their economic background and even their attitude to life. Even phrases and sentences literally translated into English, do appear quite metaphorical, fairly concrete and tie the speaker to his native place. The caution, of course, is a prerequisite if the use of such

expressions is not to degenerate into mannerism and eccentricity. Unlike Anand, Bhattacharya uses this device with caution and discretion. It is a periodic reminder of the nationality and the mother tongue of the character.

3. REFERENCES:

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