

REGIONAL LITERATURE THROUGH THE LENS OF INDIAN ENGLISH: AN ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW

Dr. Suresh P. Agale, S.S.V.P.S. Bhausaheb N.S. Patil Arts, and M.F.M.A. Commerce
College, Deopur, Dhule (Maharashtra-India)

Abstract

While India officially recognizes 23 regional languages, over 2,000 additional languages are spoken across the country. English, therefore, remains an indispensable medium in this linguistically diverse nation. In a country where establishing a single national language would be nearly impossible, the colonizers introduced English—a language that has now become globally pervasive—in exchange for the exploitation of India's rich cultural heritage. This study examines the concept of "literature" through the prism of Indian English and explores both works authored in English by Indian writers and those created in India's regional languages. By aligning itself with post-colonial discourse, Indian Writing in English (IWE) often positions itself as more prestigious than regional literature. Since IWE is not a self-contained entity, much of its corpus emerges from the contributions of the Indian diaspora writing in English. In contrast, regional literature struggles to gain visibility and recognition, unable to reach a wide audience and disseminate its cultural richness globally in the way IWE has achieved.

Keyword: Indian English Literature, Indian English with Regional literature, Translation

Introduction

During the period of British rule in India, the foundations were laid for what would later be recognized as Indian Writing in English (IWE). Over time, this seed has grown into a flourishing tree, adorned with vibrant blossoms and rich fruits. Native readers savor its offerings, while international audiences also engage with and appreciate them. This literary growth was nurtured through consistent cultivation, careful guidance, and continuous encouragement. Beginning with the pioneering works of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, IWE was further developed in the 1930s by authors such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao. These writers, who chose English over regional languages, are often regarded as the

cornerstones of Indian Writing in English. Following India's independence, ex-colonized authors continued to explore their struggles and experiences, articulating them in the language of the colonizer—a language that had once been imposed yet became a medium for self-expression and literary achievement.

Regional Literature in Indian English

Local Indian literature often remains overshadowed by English-language works from India. *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing* and *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, edited by Salman Rushdie and Amit Chaudhuri respectively, offer perspectives on the debate between Indian Writing in English (IWE) and regional authors, including those residing abroad writing about India. Rushdie observes that “the ironic proposition that India's best writing since independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists is simply too much for some folks to bear,” which created resentment among many writers, even those writing in English. Chaudhuri questions whether Indian literature—so rich, complex, and multifaceted—should be represented predominantly by a few authors writing in English and residing in the West. He further notes that IWE adopted techniques such as magical realism, nonlinear narratives, and hybrid language to portray India in miniature, mirroring social conditions. Comparing contemporary works to earlier writers, Chaudhuri emphasizes that while their English is pristine, readers familiar with regional culture—such as in R.K. Narayan's works—gain deeper understanding. Consequently, Chaudhuri suggests that many aspects of Indian life are represented almost exclusively in IWE, while regional literature struggles for recognition. The success of Indian English authors in reaching global audiences and monetizing their works has been remarkable.

Literary critic ObliWali reflects, “one wonders what would have happened to English literature if writers like Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton had neglected English and written in French or Latin, simply because these were the cosmopolitan languages of their time.” Nevertheless, the contributions of regional authors are crucial. Regional literature, grounded in authentic language and setting, conveys local culture in depth, providing unique insight into specific communities. Fiction, poetry, and theatre in India's regional languages have long thrived, preserving traditions and enriching the nation's literary heritage. The kathas and folk stories of ancestors survive through these works. Authors like R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, and Mulk Raj Anand incorporated regional flavor into English, “indigenizing” the

language. For instance, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* depicts a small town in southern India, detailing its inhabitants and local customs, giving standard English a distinctly Kannada rhythm. Narayan's Malgudi stories similarly blend English with the essence of Tamil culture. Regional writers are responsible for highlighting the unique characteristics of their areas, which contribute to the region's identity, a task often classified under IWE when written in English.

However, a regional work gains international prominence when translated, reaching a wider global audience. India's vast array of folk tales, novels, and poems holds immense potential for global readership. Assamese works like *BurhiAairXadhu* exemplify the enduring appeal of regional storytelling. Yet, translation into Hindi and English remains insufficient. English translations can not only enhance Indian literature but also contribute significantly to world literature. As Vinay Dharwadker notes, "Indian-English literature alone is insufficient to represent India to the world. Only a broad spectrum of Indian literatures, translated into a global language, can achieve this goal." Dissemination of regional works is essential, ensuring that readers across linguistic backgrounds can engage with India's literary richness. Arundhati Roy's experience with *The God of Small Things* illustrates how English publication can amplify reach and acclaim.

Writers like Mahasweta Devi in Bengali and Perumal Murugan in Tamil (*One Part Woman*) exemplify the power of regional literature. Their works, once translated, gained wide recognition and critical success, earning prestigious awards such as the ILF Samanvay Bhasha Samman and international prizes. Other notable translations include N. Kalyan Raman's *Poonachi: Or the Story of a Small Goat* (Tamil), Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar* (Kannada), and Shahnaz Habib's *Jasmine Days* (Malayalam), all achieving global acclaim. These examples underscore the importance of translating regional texts into English to reach a broader audience and highlight authentic Indian literary expression.

English-language works by Indians cannot be considered fully representative of Indian literature because they often lack local flavor, regional diversity, and cultural rootedness. Regional languages like Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam have long nurtured more authentic, passionate, and socially grounded literary traditions. As Arunava Sinha notes, literature in regional languages tends to be less self-congratulatory and more reflective of real

life. Translations of works like K.R. Meera's *Hangwoman* (translated by J. Devika) enable global readers to appreciate these qualities.

Until recently, regional literature struggled to gain attention in India, but translation has enabled critically acclaimed novels in native languages to transcend linguistic barriers and reach wider audiences. However, regional writers often receive less recognition than their English-writing counterparts. Peter Ripkin of SPALA observes that English writers are still perceived as the primary representatives of India's literary canon, while rich regional literatures remain underrepresented in the Western canon. For example, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, only 40 Indian titles translated into German came from regional languages, highlighting the shortage of qualified translators. Nonetheless, works like *One Part Woman* demonstrate that translation can successfully introduce regional literature to a broader audience.

Ironically, this process, conducted in the colonizer's language, can facilitate a more interconnected and enriched Indian literary discourse. English translations allow regional literature to circulate globally while preserving India's diverse linguistic heritage. The time has come for regional writing to assume its rightful place as a standard of literary excellence, complementing and, in some cases, surpassing IWE in representing the nation's authentic voice.

Conclusion

One might wonder how many modern readers engage with literature in their mother tongue. If the same text were translated into English, for instance, it might attract the interest of the Westernized Indian elite or those influenced by colonial education. This phenomenon was evident in the case of *One Part Woman*; before its translation into English, the work was largely unknown, but it quickly sparked widespread discussion once accessible to a broader audience. Scholars have argued that a person's native language remains the most effective medium for both creative expression and the acquisition of knowledge. Consequently, Indian regional literature alone can be considered "authentic Indian literature." This body of work is also gradually developing, and its rich cultural offerings—the "fragrant fruits"—are poised to gain recognition and appreciation on a global scale.

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