

INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE: IN SEARCH OF A NAME

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When one thinks of Indian English Literature, one cannot but think of the complexity and difficulty in choosing a name for it. The following names been given with different interpretations suggesting different nuances and shades of meaning.

1. Anglo-Indian Literature
2. Indo-Anglian Literature
3. Indo-English Literature
4. Indian writing in English
5. Indian-English writing
6. Indian English Literature

It's true that the literary nomenclatures are never fully resolved to the best satisfaction of all. To start with it was referred to as an Anglo-Indian Literature (to think of Edward Farley Oaten's prize-winning essay with that title) and it covered the writings of Englishmen in Indian on Indian themes but the word Anglo-Indian also refers to a race, a microscopic minority in India and it somehow acquired a pejorative dimension. But the Indian creative writing in English needs to be referred by a name. The phrase Indian Literature, on the analogy of American Literature or Australian Literature is not suitable here, for in America and in Australia, English is the only language (may be with different dialects or creolized English as it happens to be in the case of Black-American Literature) and the spoken medium of people. But in India the case is different. Indian Literature would mean, any literature in any Indian language, hence the difficulty.

It's said that J.H.Cousins coined the term Indo-Anglian literature in 1883 and later it was given currency by Sreenivasa Iyengar, the pioneer in this field. But Iyengar himself feels that the phrase 'Indo-Anglian' is not much too happy an expression and this phrase was used by him as a title for his handbook on Indian writing in English, brought out by PEN- (All India Centre).

In this book he makes a reference to the phrase 'Indo-Anglian' and how it was misprinted as Indo-Anglican by mistake and how he had to send an answer when he was chastised for this odd expression by 'Autolycus'. He feels that people prefer 'Indo-English' to 'Indo-Anglian', though 'Indo-Anglian' can be used both as an adjective and substantive. Referring to this body of literature he recalls Bottemley's phrase 'Matthew Arnold in Sari' – not so an appalling apparition, perhaps after the passage of 150 or more years. Iyengar likens this body of literature to legendary Sakuntala who was disowned by her parents and feels that it is a tributary and an off-shoot of English Literature which he refers to as a new mutation.

The more surprising thing is two distinct streams flow together simultaneously; one, the other Indian language classical works getting translated into English and the other creative works in English. V.K.Gokak prefers the phrase Indo-English to refer to the former work and the latter is termed as Indo-Anglian. Surjit Mukherjee in his essay 'Indo-English Literature' refers to works like 'Geetanjalai' (works translated by the authors themselves into English) not merely as

translations and like to call them as trans-creations. Referring to 'Geetanjali' he says, "Its unique quality was the result of the author endeavouring to be his own translator, in which process, he went beyond the bounds of translations and achieved something which may be called 'trans-creation'". [1] And he refuses to categorize 'Geetanjali' under either Indo-English or Indo-Anglian. For that matter any creative work is a trans-creation, for, that in the sub-conscious is brought out as creation. It's a creative transformation.

It's understandable that a distinction is kept between these two types of translations;- one ,a work put into English by others, (other than the author) two, a work translated into English by the author himself. The former is considered under Indo-English writing and the latter is considered under Indo-Anglian or Indian English Literature (a phrase coined by Dr.M.K.Naik for his critical survey of this body of literature and accepted by Sahitya Akademi and \gained currency now for the simple reason that it scores over other names, for it can widely cover the entire body of Indian creative writing in English).

Amarjit Singh feels that "The appellation 'Indo-English' or even the less felicitous 'Indo-Anglian' suggests only a part of the difficulty in trying to place the literature produced by Indians in English within clear, national, regional or linguistic boundaries." [2]

Mulk Raj Anand - himself an established writer- prefers the phrase 'Indian-English writing' and says, " I feel that Indian-English writing has come to stay as part of world-literature". [3] But somehow the phrase Indian-English has not yet coughed off its pejorative colouring. Also Indian-English cannot be considered as pidgin-English, for it is nothing short of degradation, for Indian-English is almost on par with English barring a few irregularities in speech, nor can it be considered as creolized English as seen in some parts of the world.

In this connection, the remarks of M.K.Naik are quite appropriate. Referring to the origins he says "Indian English Literature began as an interesting by-product of an eventful encounter in the eighteenth century between a vigorous and enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India". [4] Later, almost coining a phrase , he explains it thus: "The Sahitya Akademi has recently accepted 'Indian English Literature' as the most suitable appellation for this body of writing. The term emphasizes two significant ideas: first, that this literature constitutes one of the many streams that join the great ocean called Indian Literature, which though written in different languages, has an unmistakable unity; and secondly that it is an inevitable product of the nativization of the English Literature appears to be more acceptable than the other phrases discussed earlier.

Indian-English Literature has acquired a new identity as much identity as American and Austrian literature have acquired which of course is quite distinct from Indian English. The efforts by writers like Raja Rao in Indianizing English language cannot be ignored though it is very difficult to express the Indian sensibility in English. I am reminded of my own remarks in this connection: "to clothe the very Indianness in English tongue – though it has gone into the very system of our life – without making it appear bizarre is yet another difficulty for the cloth which sometimes is either too long or too short which makes one prefer the naked majesty itself. A rapprochement is somehow wrought between Indianness and the English tongue and sometimes vice verse". [6]

People feel that Indian writing English at the moment is more an illusion than of reality and more a promise and less an achievement. It's too early to pass such a judgment. While dealing with this mass of literature, the Carlylean approach of dealing with the literary biography as a first-phase in tracing literary history is needed but it is not all, for "Indian writing English produced over the last hundred odd years does not reveal a homogenous continuity, but rather a critical cyclical continuity ."[7]

The role of a literary historian in tracing this great unwieldy mass of Indian English Literature is a no mean task. The early writers and their immediate demandings followed by the next successive phases and writers before and after Independence present a much too complex picture to analyse. The pioneering efforts of Sreenivasa Iyengar followed by the pursuing efforts of professors like M.K.Naik and C.D. Narasimhaiah in this direction, deserve not only complaints but even commendation.

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