

# Marginalizing the Centre — Centring the Periphery

The Critical Debate on 'Indian' Literature in English

THE DEBATE ON THE ROLE and the status of literary texts in English written outside Great Britain and the United States has, in the course of the latter half of this century, found its rightful place in the academy. And among the various literatures in English, writings by Indians do not only,



and justifiably so, claim the longest history dating back to the early years of the last century, but have also been exposed to the perhaps most vigorous and controversial critical debate both inside and outside the country. To attempt thus a general critical survey of the reception of Indian literature in English would entail extensive research and necessarily result in a detailed and comprehensive presentation, a task that can only be hinted at here. What this paper then will set out to do is to present a provisional report on work in progress by sketching the historical background to the discourse of the reception and a few of its characteristic features. Accordingly, attention will be called to the last three decades, and, more specifically, to the discussion during this period on Indo-English writing in general.

The critical realization of a remarkable tradition of Indian creative writing in English could only be a question of time but did not, initially and in spite of Iyengar's work,<sup>1</sup> occur in places of higher learning but outside the English departments of the country's colleges and universities. Thus, on the occasion of the Second All-India Writers' Conference in Benares in October and November 1947, the All-India Centre of the P.E.N. led the way, and the writers assembled here discussed Indian literature, including

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1 K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House 1962, 2

its Indo-English brand.<sup>2</sup> Iyengar defined the critic's task as not merely that of analysing the text but also of contextualizing his reading and modified Taine's 'race', 'milieu' by emphasizing that the critic "should also learn to locate each work of literature in its unique context in terms of place, time and circumstance and judge it in relevance to them."<sup>3</sup> Once again, this literature is to be approached in cross-cultural terms:

As regards Anglo-Indian literature, the 'race' is the mixed Indian race, a resultant of invasions, conquests, and occupations extending over a period of 4 or 5 thousand years; the 'milieu', the variegated Indian subcontinent, comprising extremes of every kind, heir to a geography and cultural heritage all its own; and the 'moment', the meeting of the West and India.<sup>4</sup> (22)

Almost forty years later Feroza F. Jussawalla's *Family Quarrels: Towards a Criticism of Indian Writing in English*<sup>5</sup> links up to Iyengar's view by arguing a combined textual-analytical and contextual-culture study approach with regard to the evaluation of the Indian writer's use of English and his or her execution of literary themes. Grounding her methodological considerations on J.R. Firth's definition of 'context of situation' as "the series of contexts of both verbal and non-verbal that make up a text..." (89), and on Braj B. Kachru's application of this concept to the (creative) use of English in India (98), Jussawalla rejects the, in her eyes, dominant approach hitherto practised by Indian critics who ignore the "context of situation, the language- and culture-contact situation in India." (137) Although she does not suggest the adoption, let alone the imitation, of Western critical theories, her expatriate status and her obvious distance to the Indian critical scene explain perhaps why she advocates Stanley Fish's concept

2 K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "Literary Criticism", ed. The P.E.N. All-India Centre, *Writers in Free India: Proceedings of the Second All-India Writers Conference*, Bombay: The P.E.N. All-India-Centre 1955. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar sums up his remarks on "Indo-English Literature" (181-189), on the hopeful note that "... the career of Indo-English literature is not ended, and ... the best is yet to be", at the same time requesting his listeners to "look upon Indo-English literature as an Indian literature among other great Indian literatures..." (188) Cf. also K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar (ed.), *Indian Writers in Council: Proceedings of the First All-India Writers Conference*, Bombay: The International Book House 1947, and Sir Bomanji Wadia's contribution to the Jaipur conference in 1945 on "The Indispensability of English to Indian Culture." (243-246)

3 K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "Literary Criticism", *Writers in Free India*, Bombay: International Book House 1950, 99

4 Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 2nd enlarged ed. 1973, 22 [Lectures, University of Leeds 1962]

5 Feroza F. Jussawalla, *Family Quarrels. Towards a Criticism of Indian Writing in English*, New York: Peter Lang 1985, 43

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of the ‘interpretive community’ that, being itself contextualized, “could draw both on the important native Indian traditions in criticism and on contemporary linguistic analyses.” (X) Mention should also be made here



of the fact that Jussawalla’s critical survey of the development of Indian criticism is not any longer nationalist and thus concerned with questions like: “Should we use English?’ or ‘How can we Indianize English?’, but rather ‘How best can we use the English language to reflect our society and culture?’” (17)

Having necessarily digressed into linking up important methodological tenets of the post-war period and the beginning of Indo-English criticism in the early 1960s with a critical position of the mid-1980s grounded on socio-linguistics and culture studies, I must return to a second non-university institution which was instrumental in promoting Indo-English literature and criticism, viz. *The Writers Workshop* founded in Calcutta in 1958 by P. Lal and

a group of writers who agree in principle that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writing and transcreation. Its task is that of defining and substantiating the role by discussion and diffusion of creative writing and transcreation from India and other countries.<sup>6</sup>

The position of *The Writers Workshop* on the role of English voiced rather adamantly here and substantiated unequivocally in a number of critical analyses of Indo-English writing, especially of poetry, in its main outlet *miscellany*, must be held responsible perhaps not for setting up but for bringing to the fore the two opposed critical camps of the defenders and the opponents of creative Indian writing in English: the ‘localists’ and the ‘internationalists’. The controversy itself ranges across the diametrically opposed camps of those who defend or deny the creative use of an acquired language. Ferozewalla’s conclusion about the Indian critical scene and her view on the ‘localist’ camp neatly sums up the situation:

... questions regarding the use of English and the identification of the Indianness of the subject matter have been the main concerns of the critics. Nationalistic rejection of English was coupled with an acceptance of the Whorfian hypothesis that a consciousness conditioned by an Indian language could not be conveyed through English. Indian critics seemed to accept Whorf’s hypothesis about language determining the ‘house’ of one’s consciousness all too readily.<sup>7</sup>

Lal’s position, shared by many Indian writers in English,<sup>8</sup> was first taken

6 P. Lal, *The Concept of an Indian Literature: Six Essays*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1968, VI

7 Feroza F. Jussawalla, *Family Quarrels*, 33. See also the chapter “Family Quarrels”, *ibid.*, 1–37, for a succinct though not uncontroversial presentation of the Indian critical scene

8 Cf. P. Lal (ed.), *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1969; a comprehensive anthology complemented by poets responding to a questionnaire Lal had sent out to them. Cf. also statements made by Anand, Narayan and Rao on the creative use of English: Mulk Raj Anand, “Pigeon-Indian: Some Notes on Indian-English Writing”; and R.K. Narayan, “English in India: The Process of Transmutation”, ed. M.K. Naik, *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*, Delhi: The Macmillan Company of India 1979, 24–44 and 19–23 respectively. Raja Rao, “Foreword”,

to task in the journal *Quest* in 1959; it was subsequently defended in several of his essays and also discussed in a *Writers Workshop* symposium held in 1960 as well as in the Indian press in 1961/62.<sup>9</sup> His emphatic insistence at the time on “the private voice” and the appeal of creative writing “to that personality in man which is distinct, curious, unique and idealistic”,<sup>10</sup> clearly went against the grain of views held by more traditionally-oriented critics because it openly professed affinities to European Romanticism. Incidentally, it also rejected such tenets of Sanskrit aesthetics which were later to be suggested as forming part and parcel of the “Indian critic’s equipment and training” in a 1984 Seminar on “A Common Poetic for Indian Literatures” organized at Dhvanyaloka in Mysore<sup>11</sup> by C.D. Narasimhaiah, one of the most eloquent advocates of Indian writing in English. As was argued there, “the expression of personal emotion in art, *except as transmuted into artistic terms, when it becomes impersonal*, [my emphasis] has not been of any interest to the Indian critic...”, while “the way a work affects the reader” occurs in the following manner:

The reader enters into a dialogue, *hrdayasamvada*, with the work of art before him, and as the engagement with the work advances by stages variously described as *ahlada*, *rasollasa*, *cittavistra*, it matures into an absorption, *tallinatha* in it: for the duration of this condition, the reader has achieved his detachment or release from his egocentric predicament.<sup>12</sup>

Yet while Narasimhaiah pleads for

taking you back to Bharata and his followers [...] not only because they are Indian and help to recover our *svadharma* but because they provide us with a poetic which could stand up to the menace of realism which has circumscribed Western thought...<sup>13</sup>

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*Kanthapura*, London: George Allen and Unwin 1938

- 9 P. Lal, “Indian Writing in English. A Reply to Mr. Jyotirmoy Datta”, [orig. 1959], P. Lal, *The Alien Insiders*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1987, 9–19; “Workshop Symposium”, *Writers Workshop — a miscellany of creative writing*, 2 (October 1960), 13–22; *Indian Writing in English — a Symposium*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop n.d. [1962]; P. Lal, “Indian Writing in English”, P. Lal, *The Concept of an Indian Literature*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1968, 41–49
- 10 P. Lal, “Indian Writing in English”, 19
- 11 Dhvanyaloka, a research centre founded by Narasimhaiah, became in the 1970s the heart and hub of Indo–Anglian and Indian criticism in the country
- 12 “Appendix: Towards the Formulation of a Common Poetic for Indian Literatures Today”, eds. C.D. Narasimhaiah and C.N. Srinath, *A Common Poetic for Indian Literatures*, Mysore: Dhvanyaloka 1984, 167
- 13 Narasimhaiah, “Introductory”, *op.cit.*, 8

the critical movement towards the re-appropriation of traditional Indian aesthetics, as given voice here,<sup>14</sup> in spite of a differing critical methodology, seems to share with Lal and *The Writers Workshop* the belief in Indo-English literature as an Indian literature. And still, Narasimhaiah's opening remark in this context "that the mainstream of Indian thought is Hindu and the *mainstream* of literary sensibility is Sanskrit as the back-bone of the country's cultural unity"<sup>15</sup> appears to contradict this view unless, as I would suggest here, Indo-English literature is now being marginalized and assigned a place at the periphery of Indian culture.

Interestingly, while Narasimhaiah's critical preoccupation with defining the 'Indianness' of Indo-English writing and the 'Indian sensibility' of its authors, pursued by him from the beginning of his career,<sup>16</sup> appears to have led him towards an unequivocal centre-margin relationship of Indian and Indo-English writing. As opposed to him, Lal seems to have moved from his earlier romantic perception to, on the one hand, a contextualizing approach placing those Indian writers who have stayed on in the country and their "self-search, quest for tradition and myth knowing..."<sup>17</sup> more closely to their own cultural background. On the other hand and more importantly, Lal now implicitly subscribes to the multicultural composition of this literature when he calls attention to the motley crowd of writers in English and their vastly differing ethnic, linguistic, educational, religious and geographic background.<sup>18</sup>

14 See also R.B. Patankar's summons: "Let us look for our roots where they are most likely to be found — in India as it was just before the British advent. It is only if we start from there, that we shall discover/create a common poetic for modern Indian literatures." R.B. Patankar, "The Three Alternatives", *A Common Poetic for Indian Literatures*, 63

15 C.D. Narasimhaiah, "Introductory", *op.cit.*, 2. P. Lal has already taken up this point in 1974 in his essay "What is Indian in Indian Literature?" by arguing that there "has never been an 'Indian' literature for the simple reason that there never has been a very clearly defined sense of Indian nationhood." P. Lal, *The Lemon Tree of Modern Sex and Other Essays*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1974, 24

16 Cf. his statement in: "Raja Rao: The Metaphysical Novel (*The Serpent and the Rope*) and its Significance for our Age", C.D. Narasimhaiah, *The Swan and the Eagle. Essays on Indian English Literature*, Delhi: 2nd ed. 1987: "... I had during those years [i.e. the early 1960s] a special interest in Indian fiction, had been looking for a great Indian novel, and reading *The Serpent and the Rope* I remember I felt a sudden thrill that here at last was the finest and fullest possible expression of an essentially Indian sensibility." (159)

17 P. Lal, "The Alien Insiders", P. Lal, *The Alien Insiders*, 33

18 "The only pan-Indian language, English attracts the most diverse types. *They are all Indians* [my emphasis]: a Chinese-Sikkimese Catholic schooled in Darjeeling now working in a Bombay advertising firm; an Indian Jew who lives in Bombay...; a young woman novelist with a German mother and a Bengali father married to a Gujarati; a Mohammedan woman novelist from Lucknow; ... a young Bengali poet from a traditionally anglicised family; an Anglo-Burmese novelist...; a Kannada novelist who speaks and writes in French as fluently as he does in English; ... a Tamil-

While I will have to return to the Dhvanyaloka project of “constructing a critical framework” based on the assumption that the “*Rasa-Dhvani* theory is more widely known in Indian literatures than any other critical system and its concepts are in vogue in our arts and literatures”, which makes it “more capable than any other existing theory of serving as the basis of a common poetic for Indian literatures”,<sup>19</sup> *The Writers Workshop* activities in the early 1960s need some further elaboration by calling attention to the involvement, incidentally, for the first time, of foreign critics in the debate on the binary of English and Indianness. In contrast to several, mainly British critics who had responded favourably to the early Anand and Narayan novels and their linguistic and literary achievement,<sup>20</sup> the historian Michael Edwardes, author of a *History of India*, the writer John Wayne and David McCutcheon, Reader at Jadavpur University near Calcutta in the 1960s, took a rather critical stance, with Edwardes praising only Rudyard Kipling (!) and R.K. Narayan as having

given me a genuine feeling about the country, [whereas] Indians writing in English are merely Indians writing in a foreign language. I do not think that they are Indian novelists at all [...] Indians writing in English are writing specifically for a foreign market. They are, therefore, more inclined to supply what they feel the market requires rather than writing something from their experience or out of their heart.<sup>21</sup>

While Edwardes obviously holds the view “that a consciousness conditioned by an Indian language could not be conveyed through English”, David McCutcheon, as sceptical of Indians making creative use of English as of the vagueness of the term ‘Indianness’, believes that the use of English quite generally and “inevitably brings with it the association of English literature and an English context.” Thus while “Indian imagery and Indian tradition is experienced by most Indians only through the regional

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speaking Indian Christian woman novelist married to a Telugu-speaking Hindu now teaching in an American university...” P. Lal, “The Alien Insiders”, *op.cit.*, 33–34

19 “Appendix”, *A Common Poetic for Indian Literatures*, 164, 169

20 For early European responses to Mulk Raj Anand, cf. Saros Cowasjee, *So Many Freedoms*, Delhi: OUP 1977, esp. 41–82, where he discusses Anand’s *Untouchable* and *Coolie*; see also his “Select Bibliography”, 196–198. Critical response to R.K. Narayan’s early novels can be found in Hilda Pontes, *R.K. Narayan*, New Delhi: Concept 1983, 37–39

21 “Baldoon Dhingra interviews Michael Edwardes”, *Indian Writing in English — a Symposium*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop, n.d. [1962], n.p. [2, 3]. See also C.D. Narasimhaiah’s critique of John Wayne’s statement that “the Indian’s use of English has been at the level of a *lingua franca* and lacks the fineness of nuance that makes literature possible.” C.D. Narasimhaiah, *The Swan and the Eagle. Essays on Indian English Literature*, Delhi, 2nd ed. 1987 [1968], 2



languages [...] English will create a scholarly remove — the language of universities and museums.<sup>22</sup>

While this is a rather static view of language which erases the dynamism inherent in language-contact situations, such as ‘English in India’, ‘Indianness’ and its defenders come in for the type of dynamic criticism lacking in McCutcheon’s reflection on language. Who, he ironically asks, “is to say in what ‘Indianness’ consists, or where it is to be found: in the sutras or on Howrah Station, in Kalidasa or with the Swatantra Party, in a village mela or at the Lokh Sabha?”<sup>23</sup>

His final suggestion, somewhat surprising though, points in the direction of Lal’s conjecture of the multicultural character of ‘Indianness’, present in Indo-English writing when there is a reflection of “the conflicts and reconciliations of European and Indian traditions [... which is] the most outstanding feature of contemporary Indian culture.”<sup>24</sup>

Although McCutcheon repeatedly returns to the bone of contention of Indo-English criticism,<sup>25</sup> and confirms his conviction that “there seems to be no *a priori* reason why great literature should not be written in English by Indians”,<sup>26</sup> he noticeably begins to shift his attention to aesthetic considerations, as to whether, for example, “Indian literature in English [is] going to set itself standards or not.”<sup>27</sup> The question of literary value remains important because neither “critical standards at home and patronizing approval from abroad” nor “Iyengar’s loving survey”<sup>28</sup> will shake his conviction “that so much Indian writing in English is second-rate”,<sup>29</sup> and that the “language is characterized by a mixture of pretentiousness and vulgarity, generally bathetic, and complete insensitivity to metaphorical undertones.”<sup>30</sup> “The problem of literary value, our aesthetic response, still remains.”<sup>31</sup>

In the 1960s then, the stage for the critical reception of Indo-English literature was set with opposed though mixed factions of Indian and European critics who had institutionalized a discourse on the binary

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22 “Workshop Symposium”, *miscellany* 2 (October 1960), 18

23 *Ibid.*, 22

24 *Ibid.*, 23

25 David McCutcheon, *Indian Writing in English*, Calcutta: Writers Workshop 1969

26 *op.cit.*, 34

27 David McCutcheon, “The Indianness of Indian Criticism”, *op.cit.*, 75

28 “Indian Writing in English”, 28, 29

29 *Ibid.*, 10

30 *Ibid.*, 19

31 *Ibid.*, 17



opposition of language and sensibility, English and Indianness, and who claimed that the validity of their arguments and judgements were rooted in uncontroversial aesthetic assumptions readily at the disposal of practicing critics.<sup>32</sup> The general debate has continued into the 1990s and, perforce setting aside contributions of the late 1960s and the 1970s, I want to turn to methodological considerations proposed during the last ten to fifteen years.<sup>33</sup>

The discourse has finally shifted from non-academic to academic institutions, the beginnings of which were noticeable with Narasimhaiah's, Lal's and McCutcheon's affiliations with university departments in the late 1960s; new centres of Indo-English literary studies sprang up at the universities of Mysore, Dharwar, Pune, Hyderabad, Gulbarga and New Delhi and at Indian Institutes of Technology in Madras, Bombay and New Delhi. Besides, university journals made their appearance, among them *The Literary Criterion* and the *Literary Half-Yearly*, *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* and *LittCrit*, or *The Osmania Journal of English Studies*. Finally, we notice the world-wide dissemination of studies in the new or post-colonial literatures in English and their gradual integration into university study programmes; the founding of research associations and the occasional collaboration between Indian and Western researchers. Concomitant with the entry of Indo-English studies into the university, there has been a shift in discursive practice in that for one, the problems of the creative writer has receded into the background and cleared the way for methodological considerations directed at devising an aesthetic theory of the relational integration of language, sensibility and artistic value.<sup>34</sup>

32 It should be added here that Bruce King, in his exhaustive study *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Delhi: OUP 1987, relativizes the importance of the methodological reflections pursued by *The Writers Workshop* by arguing the influence of the 'Bombay poets', viz. Nissim Ezekiel and a whole group "marginal to traditional Hindu society not only by being alienated by their English-language education but also, more significantly, by coming from such communities as the Parsi, Jews, Christians, or by being rebels from Hinduism and Islam, or by living abroad." 3-4

33 Vasant A. Shahane in a brief survey praises the efflorescence of Indo-Anglian criticism and argues that "the genesis of criticism of Indian writing in English has been 'academic.'" He omits, though, the contributions of the *Indian P.E.N.* and *Writers Workshop*. Useful is his reference to a number of hitherto virtually unknown Ph.D. theses and critical texts of the 1920s and 1930s, while his comment on the achievement of non-Indian critics remains ambivalent. On the one hand he praises the ease with which they lay their hands "on what is 'Indian' in our sensibility", on the other he calls them "liable to be misleading due to their innate incapacity [my emphasis] to realize the 'Indianness' of Indian literatures [sic!] in English." Vasant A. Shahane, "Criticism of Indo-English Writing: Achievements and Failures" *Littcrit* 8, 1 (1982), 13-19; here 14

34 Cf. "Towards an Aesthetic of Indian English Literature", M.K. Naik, *Studies in Indian English Literature*, Delhi: Sterling 1987

For another, by opening up to the global Indian criticism has begun to relativize its often close affinity to the T.S. Eliot / F.R. Leavis 'school' and has returned to its own philosophical and aesthetic tradition.

In this context, the 'angle of attack' naturally differs with regard to epistemological categories like 'Indianness' or 'text' of variegated central concern. Iyengar, for instance, in a short note, felt called upon to define 'Indian sensibility' as "the 'rasa', the quality of our confrontation of Reality", which he perceives as a sufficiently flexible and 'open' concept to be concretized by specific Indian attitudes. But although he does not regard these as monolithic and rejects their equation with Hinduism, he seems to posit an unhistorically pure and static *rasa* which in its 'historical manifestations', though, and especially nowadays, might suffer fraction and fragmentation from the "challenges of an emerging planetary civilization" and thus will make it "more than Indian."<sup>35</sup>

Indian critics in a seminar on "Identity of Text: Problems and Reliability of Reader Response", again organised at Dhvanyaloka in 1986, attempted to relate Indian aesthetic concepts of the poet-reader relationship to Western reader-response theory, by giving attention to the 'text'. S. Laxmana Murthy, for instance, argued, and he did so in contradistinction to the deconstructionists' 'infinite referral' of meaning or signification, that in traditional Indian aesthetics

[i]t appears that the Intentional and the Affective are accommodated in recovering the poetic statement in full  
[.] exercising caution not to let these dwindle into fallacies.  
[Accordingly] 'a stable identifiable literary text' [is posited]  
squarely between *kavi* [poet] and *sahridaya* [reader]

He further held that the establishment of this 'rapport' between the two depends on the shared knowledge of "the norms of linguistic community."<sup>36</sup> Obviously then, one of the logical conclusions of this tenet for the reception of Indo-English literature would lie in the difficulty, if not incapacity of English to achieve such a rapport, since it is to be doubted that *kavi* and *sahridaya* share throughout "the norms of linguistic community." Such a posited textual identity thus relativizes the status of Indian writing in English.

35 K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "Towards an Indian Sensibility in Indo-English Fiction" *Littcrit* 8, 1 (1982), 42-46; here 42, 44

36 S. Laxmana Murthy, "Reader's Response: An Indian View", *The Literary Criterion* XXI, 4 (1986), 10-16; here 15. Cf. also Swapan Majumdar, "Is there a Reader in the Class?", *op.cit.*, 58-62, who briefly alludes to Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and the "Konstanz School" and suggests that "classical Indian literary criticism has a lot to contribute to the consolidations of the premises of the Response theory" (61), without, however, substantiating his assertion

In response to Murthy's advocacy of the *rasadhvani* concept, C.N. Ramachandran pointed out that this school would, like the 'Vakrokti' School of Kuntaka,

flounder unless [both] fall back upon the 'given' of highly trained and initiated reader[s], [who, however, hardly exist], especially [not] in the modern world with its spread of literacy to all sections of the society and its clearing off the linguistic, cultural, and geographical bounds of readers.<sup>37</sup>

Yet in spite of his reservations, Ramachandran does not follow deconstructionism in its critique of Saussure and its denial of "the 'essence' of a text" and "a distinctive status to [sic] literary works",<sup>38</sup> but maintains that "a text has no identity of its own except the one given it by the reader." This, of course, is a far cry from considering the reader's realization of a text as "release from his egocentric predicament"<sup>39</sup>, as maintained in the "Common Poetic"-seminar in 1984. Though objections were raised against Ramachandran and Murthy,<sup>40</sup> the conclusion to be drawn from this seminar is that against the epistemological problem of a suppositious constant, viz. 'Indian sensibility' — which, of course, relates to the central Hindu philosophical concept of *Brahman/atman* and *maya* — 'text' in its 'historical manifestation(s)' has been more strongly foregrounded in the more recent methodological debate. An impression confirmed, incidentally, by Kapil and Ranga Kapoor's note on "Third World Poetics. The Indian Case", and their "proposal to revive Indian poetics" in "terms of revival of Sanskrit poetics." This is being translated as revitalizing those 'schools' which based their aesthetics on "the scientific study of language", resp. "the special use of language as medium of art."<sup>41</sup> Circumventing the issue of poet-reader-relationship, 'text' with these critics is given the status of an autotelic entity to be submitted to descriptive linguistic and rhetorical analysis. This is an unexpected relapse, it appears, into the pre-reader-response era of New Criticism, although paradoxically, the Kapoors castigate Indian critics for not having used "frameworks" such as "hermeneutics, structuralism, post-structuralism [and] deconstruction."<sup>42</sup>

37 C.N. Ramachandran, "In Search of the Text: A Comparative Study of Western and Eastern Concepts", *The Literary Criterion* XXI, 4 (1986), 69–79; here 77, 78

38 *Ibid.*, 73

39 Cf. note 12

40 *The Literary Criterion* XXI, 4 (1986), 101–106

41 Kapil Kapoor and Ranga Kapoor, "Third World Poetics. The Indian Case", *ACLALS Bulletin*, 7th series, No. 5 (1986), 48–57; here 52

42 *Ibid.*, 48

While lack of space prevents further comments on the recent general Indian critical discourse,<sup>43</sup> a few remarks on the non-Indian contribution<sup>44</sup> must suffice.

Klaus Börner's essay "The Reception of Indian Literature in English in the West",<sup>45</sup> refers in its main argument distinctly to the Indian aesthetics discourse of the 1980s. Attempting to explore the question whether "the new literature (in English) call[s] for a new criticism" (307), he spells out a series of reception situations, among them one in which "the reader is German, author and reality are Indian, [and] the text is Indo-English." (312) Setting aside here the problematic situation of the German reader, Börner's discussion on the possibility of mediating such texts cross-culturally concentrates on the by now familiar discourse of the use of English — which, as he indicates, must be tackled socio-linguistically — and of 'Indianness'. Here he seems to corroborate implicitly "the nationalists or regionalists who think that English only superficially affects a deep rooted Indian identity" (314), and to follow Narasimhaiah's and other traditionalist Indian critics' validation and valorisation of Sanskrit aesthetic theory as constituting a tenable modern Indian poetics. His argument is that "the utterly non-western synthesis of religion, philosophy and aesthetics that constitutes the eastern modes of perception" has remained dominant, because "in the eastern reception of art the fatal secularization or dissociation of sensibilities has not taken place." (318) Börner thus posits the continuance of a distinct Indian sensibility, when reflected philosophically, has obviously found its 'objective correlative' in Sanskrit aesthetics, especially as regards the poet-reader-relationship articulated in *rasadhvani*.

In contrast to Börner, a rather different methodological approach of non-Indian critics has set great store on relating Indian writing in English to, as Syd Harrex and Guy Amirthanayagam have put it, "the complex process of cultural hybridization" with its historical roots of imperialism and "multi-ethnic creativity in spoken and written English."<sup>46</sup> Accordingly,

43 Cf. also Vasant A. Shahane, "Indo-English Literature: Its Major Concerns and Its Academic Rationale", ed. A.K. Srivastava, *Alien Voice. Perspectives on Commonwealth Literature*, Lucknow: Print House India 1981, 9–30

44 Cf. Kirpal Singh, ed., *Through Western Eyes: Foreign Responses to Indian Writing in English*, Calcutta 1984, which is based on a "Special Double Issue" of *The Journal of Indian Writing in English* 8 (1980)

45 Klaus Börner, "The Reception of Indian Literature in English in the West", *German Studies in India* 9, 4 (1985), 177–190; repr. in: ed. Abhai Maurya, *India and World Literature*, New Delhi 1990, 305–321

46 S.C. Harrex & Guy Amirthanayagam, "Introduction: Notes towards a Comparative Cross-Cultural

the catalyst for many writers here “is the *cross-cultural* [my emphasis] character of their situations and identities.” (3) Nonetheless, both critics are careful in pointing out that, although Indian writers share in this process, they are yet “heir to a number of major cultural traditions” (17) that continue to shape them.

While a methodological exploration, for example, of the linguistic processes giving expression of the experience of cultural hybridisation, is not being attempted here, it is given some scope in John Oliver Perry’s “Is Indian English an ‘Alien Tongue’?”<sup>47</sup> He pursues some of those linguistic aspects of the multi-functional nature of Indian English Börner may have had in mind. Discussing socially, culturally and historically differing Indian English varieties, Perry admits that

it cannot reasonably be claimed that the full panoply of India’s multicultural traditions can be captured in Indian English, [but adds that this] limitation [...] also applies to all the geographically identified regional languages; none can incorporate all the rest. (49)

On the other hand he claims — probably much to the chagrin of the ‘localist’ defenders of one and only one Indian ‘reality’ — that

Indian English can and does embody many different distinctly Indian realities; it is a more multi-cultural language medium in its many effective uses, poetic and practical, than probably any other language used in India. (40)

In this context even Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin’s study of the new, or as they prefer to say, post-colonial literatures, *The Empire Writes Back*,<sup>48</sup> represents a fundamental theoretical non-Indian intervention into the Indo-English critical discourse. Viewing the Sanskrit aesthetics debate of the 1980s as “in part at least [...] a debate about decolonization” (117), the three Australian critics bracket it with the worldwide post-colonial process of abrogating Western cultural hegemony and appropriating one’s own cultural identity, but warn us at the same time, that its outcome in India is “difficult to predict.” (121) Referring to the

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Criticism”, eds. Guy Amirthanayagam and S.C. Harrex, *Only Connect. Literary Perspectives East and West*, Adelaide/Honolulu: CRNLE and East-West Center 1981, 1–27; here 1

47 John Oliver Perry, “Is Indian English an ‘Alien Tongue’?”, *The Literary Criterion* XXV, 3 (1990), 38–55

48 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge 1989

practice and theory of Indo-English writing, they confine themselves to affirming Meenakshi Mukherjee's generalizing evaluative statement made in the mid-1970s, that the Indian writers' choice of English "is in no sense a bar to this work being profoundly Indian in concern and potentially as rich a means of reproducing Indian society and thought." (123)<sup>49</sup>

The discourse of post-colonialism has, with a very few exceptions, hardly drawn in Indo-English critics. Among them, Arun P. Mukherjee's intervention, "The Exclusion of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable': A Case Study";<sup>50</sup> deserves attention, as it represents a basic critique of the theoretical assumptions of this discourse. Questioning the validity of post-colonial constructs, such as "the binary oppositions of colonizer/colonized, domination/resistance" (30), the positing of a "unitary subject" (34) and "a unitary 'colonised consciousness'" (44), Mukherjee generally accuses the post-colonial theoreticians (including Diana Brydon, Abdul R. JanMohamed, Leslie Monkman, Benita Parry or Stephen Slemon) of re-introducing a "universalist' aesthetics, albeit from the left this time" (29) by suggesting a

'postcolonial' essence [...] that is supposedly shared by geographically dispersed and historically, culturally, linguistically, politically, and racially different societies and the texts produced by their members. (29)

Mukherjee rests her counter-arguments on at least two premises; first, that there exists in post-colonial societies the

Bakhtian 'heteroglossia' [...] of social discourses [...] that arises from conflicts of race, class, gender, language, religion, ethnicity, and political affiliation and forms, in Jameson's terms 'the social ground of a text' (34),

and secondly and concomitant with this heteroglossia that

our cultural productions are also created in response to *our own* [my emphasis] cultural needs and desires to interrogate 'our class structures, our familial ideologies, our management of bodies and sexualities, our ideologies, our silences'. (33)

Deconstructing Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), "one of the canonical texts of Indo-English literature", (35) Mukherjee then proceeds to illustrate

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted from Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Considerations*, New Delhi: Allied 1977, n.p.

<sup>50</sup> Arun P. Mukherjee, "The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's 'Untouchable': A Case Study", *ARIEL* 22, 3 (July 1991), 27-48

that, far from being a post-colonial novel, “the textual discourse can be called patronizing” (38) in that it represses and denies the “actions and discourses of the untouchables themselves.” (38) Historically speaking, they were very well in a position to act at the time Anand wrote this novel, which Mukherjee calls an “embourgeoisified version of [the untouchables’] story” (36) and aligning itself with the “version of nationalist historiography.” (39) “The ‘heteroglossia’ of the novel is, ultimately, constituted of middle class voices alone.” (40) Rejecting a “homogeneous postcolonial consciousness” (33), Mukherjee emphatically implores post-colonial critics to realize the “pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of the ‘socio-ideological’ discourses of postcolonial cultures.” (45)

To conclude: The more audible voices in the concert of Indo-English literature and its critical reception, however, will most probably be found among a younger generation who, setting aside their continued response to the work of the founding fathers of the Indo-English novel, will increasingly be concerned with the after-effects of the paradigmatic change in the Indian literary scene brought about by Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. A collection of essays edited by Viney Kirpal, *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, and Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock’s “Introduction” to their *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World* are just two instances of a fresh response to Indo-English works which differ from their predecessors in more than merely their non-realistic narrative mode.<sup>51</sup>

Commenting upon the newness of quite a few works of the 1980s, Kirpal notices their openness to new forms and themes, their “vast emotional, political, cultural, geographical and historical sweep”, and “protagonists [who] are insecure, anxious, tense, sceptical people sitting on the edge of the world.” (xvii) Affirming the post-colonial outlook on the Indo-English novel, the critic does not only relate the 1980s novel to the “mixed Indian tradition” (xxi), including the presence of minority communities, but implicitly also advocates a shift in the theoretical discourse to correspond to the shift in literary practice.<sup>52</sup> Still, readings of Rushdie’s works for example, illustrate that the new critical task is not as easy to accomplish as a programmatic outline may suggest. Neither Makarand R. Paranjpe’s sweeping generalizations about the novel of the 1960s and 1970s, or his cursory pro-

51 Ed. Viney Kirpal, *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers 1990; eds. Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock, *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*, Jackson & London: University Press of Mississippi 1992

52 Cf. also Novy Kapadia, “Narrative Techniques in the New Indian Novel”, Kirpal, *op.cit.*, 239–250



nouncements on Rushdie as a hoax and *Midnight's Children* as phoney and “one great, big, confused bluff”,<sup>53</sup> nor Jussawalla's diatribe against *The Satanic Verses* because of the author's alleged ‘Orientalism’ and, interestingly, the novel's lack of “a good story, a moral vision, and a narrative technique that keeps the reader engrossed”,<sup>54</sup> quite fulfil the high expectations raised in Viney Kirpal's “Introduction”.

Looking back at the long tradition of Indo-English writing, it is surprising to note that its reception both in practical and theoretical terms has, on the whole, mainly been an affair of a comparatively small group of Indian and an even smaller number of non-Indian critics. Besides, it has been restricted almost exclusively to ‘high’ literature, thereby denying popular or mass literature the attention it certainly deserves, especially since its reading may offer access to elusive aspects of literary practice in India. Finally, linguistic studies, in spite of the work done by Braj B. Kachru and a few others, are almost non-existent. The field of Indo-English literature needs further cultivation, and since it continues to grow it will, hopefully, invite many more critical readers.

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53 Makarand R. Paranjpe, “Inside and Outside the Whale: Politics and the New Indian English Novel”, Kirpal *op.cit.*, 213–226; here 220 and 221

54 Feroza Jussawalla, “Post-Joycean/Sub-Joycean: The Reverses of Mr. Rushdie's Tricks in *The Satanic Verses*”, Kirpal, *op.cit.*, 227–337 (sic!); here 232 and 236

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