

# R.K. Narayan's Attitude Towards the ENGLISH Language: a Postcolonial Posture, a Utilitarian Gesture

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**Abstract:** This paper intends to examine R.K. Narayan's attitude towards the English language as reflected in his essays. Narayan (1906-2001) was born and grew up in a period when English, education was already institutionalised in the Indian Sub-continent. Like other Indian writers in English, such as Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand, he received English education and used to write in English from the beginning of his literary career up to the end. However, he is seen to have used the English language through his fiction to scrutinise colonialism and depict the Indian society continually under change due to the colonial rule. A part of this endeavour seems to be evident in Narayan's attitude towards the English language. Narayan's position in this regard is deemed quite ambivalent and complex - he is aware that English is the language of the colonist, yet he is found to have accepted it for practical reasons. That is, his attitude towards the English language appears to have resulted from and shaped by the reality prevailing in the postcolonial setting.

## I

The study of the English language and literature in the postcolonial context seems to be "a densely political and cultural phenomenon" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffins 1989:2-3) and consequently comes under the purview of the postcolonial writers. One of the fundamental assertions of post colonialism is that the English language and literature have played a very significant role in propounding colonial ideology aimed at the survival and consolidation of the colonial rule (Walder 1998). In other words, the construction of English literary education is part of the colonial cultural design (Viswanathan 1995). Many postcolonial writers have attempted to address the issue of cultural domination through the English language and literature. For instance, Thiong'o (1995) opines that the central position given to the study of the English language and literature in Africa emanates from the assumption of the cultural superiority of the West. This is why, he prescribes that the English departments should be abolished from the universities in Africa. Indian novelist Raja Rao (2000: v) states that English is the language of the intellect, not of emotion, and, in India, English should therefore be appropriated to the level of "a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American." Hence, postcolonial

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writing uses the language of the colonists but adapts it to the discourse of the colonised. It is performed by two processes: abrogation and appropriation (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989). Abrogation stands for challenging the notion of universality as claimed by the colonists with regard to the language. Appropriation, on the other hand, is the use of the imperial language to express the cultural experience of the colonised. This is a process by which imperial English is made to encounter vernacular languages. Standard English words are used in many new meanings, and, in turn, the English language receives many new words from indigenous languages. Besides, postcolonial literature emerges out of the tension between these two pulls. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:39) rightly maintain that

...in one sense all post-colonial literatures are cross-cultural because they negotiate a gap between 'worlds', a gap in which the simultaneous processes of abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and determine their practice.

Thus, challenging and overhauling the Eurocentric notion of language become an essential part of literary decolonisation (Loomba 2001).

As Boehmer (1995) illustrates, almost all the aspects of the world of the colonised including the language of instruction and commerce were dominated by the empire. The colonial education of the middle class people then tended to create 'mental colonization' among them: "English-language and-literature instruction played a key role in naturalizing British values" (Boehmer1995:169). By the early 20th century, students from the colonies were heavily influenced by the excellence of the English language and literature. This factor seems to account for the "syncretic" nature of the postcolonial society, which cannot be compartmentalised into either a purely traditional or a purely alien. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989:110) contend, "The construction of 'pure' cultural value is always conducted within a radically altered dynamic of power relations." Therefore, a postcolonial reading of R.K. Narayan's works, especially his essays with regard to his attitude to the English language would likely to reveal that he endeavours to formulate a synthesis between the Indian element and the colonial one.

## II

The colonial education that Narayan received might have influenced his views on the English language since in the classroom Narayan had to see English as the first language, his native language being a second language (Walsh 19082). English was the most prestigious subject due to political, administrative, social, economic and scientific reasons. Although Tamil, the language of Narayan's province, and Sanskrit, the classical language of India, were taught in the school, they were considered inferior in status and provided occasions for jokes. Narayan (2001b:464) admits this in his essay, "English in India":

But in the classroom neither of these two languages was given any importance; they were assigned to the most helpless among the teachers, the pundits who were treated as a joke by the boys, since they taught only the 'second language', the first being English as ordained by Lord Macaulay when he introduced English education in India.

Besides encountering textbooks in English in his school and college, Narayan extensively read English literature outside his syllabus. His father's library at home and his school library were crammed with books on English literature (Narayan 2001b). Narayan took the full opportunity of the libraries and enthusiastically read Marlowe, Pope, Scott, Dickens, Hardy, Rider Haggard, Marie Corelli, and Moliere and Tolstoy in translation (Narayan1995). He was also in touch with the current literary scene through various magazines such as *Little Folks*, *Nineteenth Century* and *After*, *Cornhill*, *Strand Magazine*, *Mercury*, *Spectator*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Manchester Guardian*. The cumulative impact of this massive reading of the literature was that he became very well versed in the English language. As a writer Narayan opted for the English language simply because it suited him better than his mother tongue. In an interview, he says-

I never had any idea that I was writing in another tongue. My whole education has been in English from the primary school, and most of my reading has been in the English language...I wrote in English because it came to me very easily. (Sundaram 1988)

It was then very unlikely that a writer like Narayan who learned the English language to such an extent as to produce his works in it, would reject or censure it easily on nationalistic grounds.

### III

India became free from the colonial rule in 1947, but the linguistic and cultural impact of colonialism still remained operative, serving two conspicuously unavoidable purposes: unifying linguistic agency for administration and a means of wider international communication (Kachru : 1995). In the meantime, the issue of either the acceptance or the rejection of the English language became one of the hot debates since the beginning of Indian nationalist movement in the 1920s. Gandhi's 'Swadeshi Movement' was aimed at embracing all that was swadeshi (indigenous), and hence English being a foreign language came under the scrutiny of this movement. The use of the English language by the Indians was often denounced, and Hindi was seen as a possible substitute. In his novel *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Narayan (2001a:27) has made Gandhi declare that he will not deliver his lecture in English because "It s the language of our rulers. It has enslaved us." As Leela Gandhi (1998:147) points out, Gandhi's rejection of

the English language stems from his belief in "the legitimate cultural primacy" of the Indian languages.

Nevertheless, the attempted ban on the English language created two contradictory positions among the Indian writes. The first group consisting of the writers using the indigenous languages protested against writing in English on nationalistic grounds. The second group constituted of the Indian writers in English continued writing in the English language to express their Indian experience. These polarities existing at the end of the colonial period surfaced with renewed vigour and extended dimensions after the independence of India (Dharwadker and Dharwadker 1996). Indian lawmakers framed a fifteen-year time limit to upgrade Hindi to the position of the official language of India. However, this project of expelling English within a fixed period yielded almost no result. Iyengar (2000) presents sufficient statistics of 1957 to show that there was no spectacular advance of Hindi, and the position of English as an Indian official language remained the same—English was still the language of inter-state communication or the sole *lingua franca*, the language of higher administration, law courts, education and examination. Resultantly, parliamentary enactment gave English the status of "an associate language" with Hindi.

That Narayan (1988a:14) was aware of the debate on the position of the English language in his country is evident in his essay "Fifteen Years," where he says that

...various causes, practical, political, etc. have demanded the abolition of English from our midst. It is almost a matter of national propriety and prestige now to declare one's aversion to this language, and to cry for its abolition.

There was a time when many people blindly admired English, and the ability to talk and write in the English language earned great prestige for a person. Notwithstanding the fact, at present the patriotic fervour of the people made the language a hot cake for debate. Narayan (1935; 2000) depicts the same situation in his first novel *Swami and Friends* dealing with the effect of the colonial rule on the Indian people. The novel discloses that while people feel antipathy towards the British, they are also attracted to the paraphernalia of the colonial power. As a result, the colonial language has been the signifier of power and dignity. In the Albert Mission School, English is the most prestigious subject. Sankar's name is well known because he can speak to the teachers in English in the open class (*Swami and Friends* 7); and, likewise, Rajam's friends respect him because he speaks very good English, "exactly like a 'European'" (*Swami and Friends* 12). In "Fifteen Years" Narayan (1988a) takes a postcolonial view on this issue, showing his awareness that English is an alien language, yet advocating its use in India for practical purposes. According to him, the day-to-



day reality has made it impossible for the Indians to castigate the English language.

Narayan (1988a) presents an imaginary conversation between an Indian judge and the personified English language. The judge puts forth the verdict that the English language must leave the country:

When we said, 'Quit India', we meant it to apply to Englishman as well as their language. And there does not seem to be much point in tolerating you in our midst. You are the language of the imperialist, the red-tapist, the diabolical legalist, the language which always means two things at the same time. ("Fifteen Years" 15)

In reply to the judge, the English language points out that, on the contrary, it has been firmly rooted in the Indian soil. In other words, having been practised for two hundred years, the English language has become part and parcel of the Indian society including its education, cultural activities, government machinery, law courts, business, trades, sports, aviation, navigation, agriculture, science technology and so forth. In the essay, although the judge feels that the language must quit India, he cannot present any solid ground why it should be so; rather he remains confused and his advocacy inconclusive.

Hence, Narayan (1988a) is found to claim that the English language has been an integral part of the Indian reality. In fact, in the Indian context, it has been turned into the Indian English rather than the English of England. Narayan's (1988a 8) position seems to echo the statement of Iyengar (2000): "English has become ours, it is not less ours for being primarily the Englishman's or the American's."

#### IV

Narayan (1988a) obviously objectively thinks over the case of Hindi, that is, the demand to establish it as a state language within a limited period of time. And in the essay, "To a Hindi Enthusiast" he suggests that it is impossible to impose Hindi as a state language in a set time limit. Quoting the aphorism from Shakespeare that "ripeness is all," he argues ripeness cannot be forced by a government order or by the prescription of a commission. Like a sociolinguist (e.g. Hudson 1981), he maintains that the growth of a language is a natural process, which cannot be artificially stopped. Narayan (1988a: 26) then advocates the cause of English by adopting a postcolonial view:

For me, at any rate, English is an absolutely swadeshi language. English, of course, in a remote horoscopic sense, is a native of England, but it enjoys, by virtue of its uncanny ability, citizenship in every country in the world. It has sojourned in India longer than you or I and is entitled to be treated with respect. It is my hope that English will soon be classified as a non-regional Indian language.

It is thus evident that Narayan (1988a) is not advocating the servile imitation of the English language or the culture represented and spread by it. Rather, his intention is to absorb it into the grand procession of the Indian languages. The English language would be treated as one in the long list of the Indian languages and dialects, and its inclusion would not at all affect the total pattern of the language habit of the Indian people.

## V

While Narayan (1988b: 28) seems to accept the presence of English in the day-to-day Indian reality, he also analyses the cause of its popularity, commenting in "To a Hindi Enthusiast" that "half the charm of English was engendered by the manner in which its schoolbooks were produced." The high quality print and colored frontispiece exhibiting some London Bridge, rivers and the carefully selected contents with relevant black and white pictures have played a significant role in establishing the English language in this country. Narayan's experience is consistent with that of Anita Desai (1996:222) who writes in her essay "A Coat in Many Colors":

Hindi texts we were given to study were, in contrast to the English ones, dry, pedantic, unimaginative, and unrelated to the simplicities of everyday life. They were also unattractively printed and published, a not unimportant factor to a child who, at that age, judges by the feel, the touch, and the taste of things.

It is then evident that both Narayan and Anita Desai are of the opinion that the highly sophisticated and impressive appearance of English books is responsible for their popular appeal to the people in India.

On the whole, Narayan's position respecting the issue of the English language is rather complex. He seems to say that it could have been better if Hindi had taken the place of the English language in India, but presently it seems impossible to put Hindi to that exalted status and, therefore, it will be wise to accept the position of the English language. Again, when Narayan speaks in favour of the English language, he does not mean the King's English; rather he means the language that has been coloured with the Indian context and filled with the vocabulary from the native languages and dialects. In his essay, "A Literary Alchemy," Narayan (1988c:197) puts forward his idea of the Indian English which, he thinks, is the inevitable outcome of a natural process:

We have fostered the language for over a century and we are entitled to bring it in line with our own habits of thought and idiom. Americans have adapted the English language to suit their native mood and speech without feeling apologetic, and have achieved directness and unambiguity in expression.

That is, Narayan is suggesting that the Indian people should violate the "purist" conception of the English language and insert some new expressions suiting the Indian context. To Narayan, expressions like "Please do the needful" and "And oblige" are very much pertinent to the Indian context. Although inappropriate according to the "purist" standard of the English language, these expressions are a "masterpiece of economy and contribution to the English language" ("A Literary Alchemy" 198). While Narayan is considering the use of the Indian English, he is, at the same time, proposing to reconstruct the universal criteria of the language. In other words, he is abrogating and appropriating the language.

Narayan (2001c:480) seems to be mocking at the idea of adhering to the principles laid down by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) which, in his essay, "After the Raj" is described as "a sacred cow for us in India." He expresses the same attitude in his essay, "English in India" where he asserts that for maximum benefit the English language must reach the grassroots level of India. And here too he is speaking not of standard English but of its Indian variety: "the language must be taught in a simpler manner, through a basic vocabulary, simplified spelling, and explained and interpreted through the many spoken languages of India" (Narayan 2001c: 468).

## VI

Narayan shows his awareness of the complex issues regarding the position of the English language in the colonial India. He is conscious of the foreign origin of the language and its imperial connotation. Notwithstanding, he clearly depicts how the English language has established a firm root in India and become an essential part of its social reality. Thus, Narayan's voice is rather polyphonic.

That is to say, Narayan seems to believe that it is impossible to eliminate the English language from the social reality of India. And he pragmatically suggests the acceptance of the language in its Indianized form. Hence, Narayan's attitude towards the English language is formed by the postcolonial reality and utilitarian value. To sum up, as Iyengar (2000: 359) comments, Narayan

uses the English language much as we used to wear *dhoties* manufactured in Lancashire - but the thoughts and feelings, the stirrings of the soul, the wayward movements of the consciousness, are all of the soil of India.

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