

Perspective

English Language, Postcolonial Subjectivity, and Globalization in India

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A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. . . . To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.

FRANTZ FANON, *Black Skin, White Masks*

A definition of language is always, implicitly or explicitly, a definition of human beings in the world.

RAYMOND WILLIAMS, *Marxism and Literature*

[T]he *sowars* attended by a number of *badmashes* of the place, began to parade through the streets armed with swords and latties, and put to the sword every Christian and every Bengalee whom they could suspect of an acquaintance with English.

EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE 1857 INDIAN "MUTINY,"

RANAJIT GUHA, *Dominance without Hegemony*

THE STUDY OF English in India has always been linked with the precedence of Sanskrit and Persian located in the colonial and postcolonial power structures, in which the forces of globalization have come to form an intrinsic component. Because of the penetration of English in the state structures in colonial India and its continuation, reinforced by the proclivities of the English-oriented, indigenous elite in post-Independence India, it is not a question now whether having or not having English is an option. What is more important is to study the effects of English on the production of postcolonial subjectivity, on the one hand, and assess its impact, good and/or bad, on the survival

and prosperity of the regional languages and their users, on the other. As a corollary, it is also equally important to help create a condition in order to regulate its spread and harness its potential in ways that, instead of forming an antagonistic and damaging relationship vis-à-vis the regional languages and their users, English can become a complementary force for their enrichment and turn into a supportive tool and agent for India's transformation. Like the phenomenon of modernity itself, English possesses a double-edged sword in India — possessing the potential for a liberatory future while at present creating and abetting the production and reproduction of a hierarchical world.

In India's long history, there never was a language in official use — not even Pali, which came closest to the language of the people — that was not hierarchical by virtue of its confinement among the elite and distance from the masses. The common speech of the people may have been a source of resistance to colonialism (Partha Chatterjee 7; Guha 187), but it was never a language that ran the state machinery. In other words, the Indian vernacular masses have always been ruled by the ideology of an elite language, whether indigenous or foreign. English, with all its own complexities rooted in the nature of colonial modernity and capitalism, forms nonetheless the latest node in the elite language chain in which Persian and Sanskrit form the other two milestones. Therefore, one cannot speak about the hegemony of English in India without putting it in a continuum with Persian and Sanskrit. Sanskrit — the so-called *Dev Bhasha*, the language of the gods — derived the source of its legitimacy and exclusivity from the Hindu scriptures permissible only to the high castes; it was programmatically confined in the hands of the Brahmans and, by virtue of its scriptural emphasis, was never meant to be used by the common masses. The fact that in the classical Sanskrit plays, such as those of Kalidas and Bhas, Sanskrit is spoken by the king and the nobles and Prakrit by women and the rest of the population further speaks of this division. Similarly, Persian, the language of administration in Mughal India until English took over in the mid-nineteenth century, had its sources in the court ideologies of the Mughals,

which stressed refinement and class in personal conduct and language use. Partly a borrowing from Persia but mainly a home-grown ideology designed to rule the Indian masses, Persian still figures in a north Indian proverb about its importance: *Padhe Farsi beche tel dekho re takadirka khel* "It's only the fellow's bad luck that's to blame. Despite his schooling in Persian, he earns his living by selling edible oil." And English had its own sources of legitimacy in the secular as well as Christian modernist ideology of British colonialism, an ideology that emphasized the conversion of the Sanskrit- and Persian-oriented traditional elites (caste, class, land-bound) into colonial elites. Through them, English ruled the Indian populace very much as Persian and Sanskrit had done before. None of these languages grew out of people's speech and daily use in India nor were they easily accessible to them; all three were imposed from above in order to help conduct the business of the state or hierarchical religion.

While Persian remains confined to the old legal documents, the shelves of the old libraries, and the classrooms of *madrassas* and colleges in post-Independence India, Sanskrit more or less remains the exclusive preserve of the Brahmins, and that too mostly high caste scholars of Sanskritized regional languages. It is English that presents the current challenge of understanding its complex operations in India. It is considered, as Braj B. Kachru writes in "The Alchemy of English," "attitudinally and linguistically" neutral (292), a language with a pan-South Asian acceptance (293); it continues to be a language of "power and prestige" (291), "power and opportunity" (292), allowing access to "attitudinally and materially desirable domains of power and knowledge" (295).¹ Yet, as Kachru himself points out, only five percent of the Indian population is capable of using English (*Tongue* 68).

It is therefore difficult to characterize whether English is a source of domination or a language of liberation, although it has possessed both possibilities (Viswanathan 165; Pennycook 53). But its exclusive, class-based limited dissemination has for the most part played the role of an ideology of keeping the vernacular masses in a perpetually subordinate place. As a result, it

has functioned mostly as a source of elitism in postcolonial India, perpetuating the workings of the Filtration Theory² of T. B. Macaulay and John Stuart Mill (Viswanathan 116) and instituting a structure of what Robert Phillipson calls linguicism (55) — antagonistic to vernacular linguistic and cultural life and therefore responsible for its impoverishment. Whatever liberatory possibilities English contained, which were evident in the inspiration the Indian nationalists received both for the freedom struggle and literary enrichment, and even now possesses, these possibilities have been belied by its confinement to the elite sectors of the metropolitan as well as landowning rural Indians. Because of its exclusive use as a language of government and technology, and of economically and politically powerful groups in India, English has left the ninety-five percent of the Indians who cannot use it high and dry.

Sanskrit and Persian, because of their alienness and hierarchical nature, combined with the lack of external support and sustenance, ceased as an influential force once the rulers who imposed them ceased to rule India (Sanskrit's case is a little more complicated here because of the continuing prevalence of the caste ideology and Sanskrit's role in Hindu rituals. Recently, the rise of Hindu nationalism — of which more below — has further complicated the picture). But the case of English is altogether different from either Sanskrit or Persian because of its vehicular function for contemporary global forces. As Alastair Pennycook points out in his essay "English in the World/The World in English," the "potential meanings that can be articulated in English are interlinked with the discourses of development, democracy, capitalism, modernization, and so on" (53). In many respects, the spread of English is therefore like the phenomenon of globalization itself about which President Clinton said, in his address to the UN General Assembly, in 1997, "The forces of global integration are a great tide, inexorably wearing away the established order of things. But we must decide what will be left in its wake" (1387). Similarly, the Indians must decide how the indispensability of English is going to affect and shape the Indian languages, impoverish or enrich the experiences of its majority in the twenty-first century.

Referring to Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* and Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* and other such works in the field of postcolonial studies, Harish Trivedi, a Delhi-based scholar in English, critiques the tendency in these writers "to study plans and projections of imperial intervention rather than the reality of the native reaction to imperial intervention" (viii). In his meaningfully titled book *Colonial Transactions*, rather than colonial dominance or conquest or even rule, and through the suggestive cover of a suited Englishman and a dhoti-clad, paste-smearing Brahmin looking up to the Englishman in a gesture of collaboration, Trivedi offers an extended evidence of mutual exchange between the British and the Indians in such section and chapter titles as "English Literature in India," "Shakespeare in India," "T. S. Eliot in Hindi," "India in English Literature," "T. S. Eliot's Use of India." While one would agree with Trivedi that transactions have taken place, and Bhabha has built his scholarly career by exploring the dual exchange between the colonizer and the colonized through such key words as "hybridity," "ambivalence," and "mimicry" (see especially chapters four and six in his *The Location of Culture*), Trivedi fails to see the imbalance and material nature of this exchange. But in another way, the symbolic cover photo of exchange between a Brahmin and an Englishman speaks of the collaboration between historically differentiated but functionally identical roles of both Sanskrit and English that I have been suggesting in this essay: both belonged and still belong to the ruling elites of India, whether religious or secular. And this is where my problem with the role of both Sanskrit and English in India begins.

In the following pages, by examining the role of English in the constitution of postcolonial subjectivity, I am going to argue that English, already a handy world linguistic infrastructure available among the upper echelons in India, needs to be reoriented and regulated. A new attitude needs to emerge that neither totally resists nor blindly succumbs to English so that English may function as a complementary resource rather than a cannibalizing force.

How does education — the way it is defined and structured, the way knowledge is produced and disseminated — affect the

construction of postcolonial subjectivity? More precisely, what is the role of English, whose tainted and suspect origins lie in the ideologies of colonialism? And, more important, given its role in colonial India, what is its role now in the era of globalization in producing structures of feeling and hierarchies in the Indian public sphere? And what is the relationship of such a public sphere to the production of postcolonial subjectivity? Pennycook points out that "if we accept the argument that subjectivities are constructed in discourse (see, for example, Weedon), then we can see how the spread of English is not only a structural *reproducer* of global inequalities, but also *produces* inequality by creating subject positions that contribute to their own subjectification" (53). English is a medium of communication when transferred and transposed through the history of colonialism into the globalized postcolonial space through education — indeed, it is a language rooted in caste, class, and gendered locations, enabling certain acts and disabling others.

In *Masks of Conquest* (1989), Viswanathan has shown us how the study of English in India had a colonial project to carry out. This project entailed the production of an Indian subjectivity suitable to the governance of the colonized country through the colonizer's language and literature — indeed, the production of colonized subjectivity of, in Macaulay's notorious words, a "class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (430). What the colonial project through English involved was the operation of the Filtration Theory of Macaulay and John Stuart Mill, by which the colonial ideology of the supremacy of Western civilization and hence the inferiority of the colonized native population was to be imparted to a small number of leisure-class Indians, and from them the colonial ideology would, it was hoped, filter down to the masses (Viswanathan 116, 149). The cultural premises of the Filtration Theory entailed that the biological categories of blood and color, by which the reference clearly is to the genetic theory of race and colonial ideology of skin color, became the colluding ground for colonial hierarchy. This is the same ground that makes Rudyard Kipling's Kim superior to other Indians even though he has learned his English

at a local *madrassa*, because in the logic of colonialism English is his birthright whether he learns it as a second language or first. But language can also do many other things: if it does not produce skin color and blood, it can create taste, opinions, morals, and intellect — in other words, culture, which could then be taken as a euphemism for race.

Language produces subjectivities, and the more powerful a language is in terms of its imbrication in the institutional power structure, the more complicated becomes the process it generates through which subjectivity is produced. Morals and intellect constitute, in this interpretation, the interiority of the postcolonial subject on the ethical and philosophical axes, manifesting as taste and opinion in affecting the material conditions between the possessor of the language and the one who lacks it, between the colonizer and the colonized.

In the few years' interval since Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest*, three other prominent postcolonial critics from India have brought out three books that, although not focusing entirely on the issue of language, make language the central problematic in their theorization of the hegemonic project of British colonialism. In *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), Partha Chatterjee states that the "bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out; language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world" (7). Spoken Bengali formed the private domain of the nationalists that the colonial state and the European missionaries could not penetrate (9). Ashis Nandy also shows in his collection of essays *Savage Freud and Other Essays* (1995) how by writing in Bengali, the pioneer practitioner of psychoanalysis in India, Girindrasekhar Bose, not only presented an implicit critique of the misuse of the discipline by Owen A. R. Berkeley-Hill and Claud Dangar Daly (the less known counterparts in the field of psychoanalysis to literary Kipling, in demeaning Indian culture) but Indianized and extended Freud's concepts in a mystical, Upanishadic direction with which Freud found himself in

sympathy (96-106). Similarly, the problematic of English versus the vernacular forms constitutes one of the core arguments in Ranajit Guha's *Dominance without Hegemony* (1997) in the formation of anticolonial historiography. In his book, Guha demonstrates that the subversion exercised in the vernacular by Bengali historians was simply not available in English. Ramram Basu's *Pratipaditya Charita* (1801), Rajiblochan Mukhopadhyay's *Maharaj Krishnachandra Rayasya Charitram* (1805), and Mrityunjoy Bidyalankar's *Rajabali* (1808), the first books on history to be published in the vernacular under British rule, were full of defects, such as linguistic immaturity, historiographical flaws, and so on. But despite these shortcomings by the standards of rationalist historiography, these works, particularly *Rajabali*, presented a contested interpretation of the Indian past in answer to the degrading British historiography of the rationalist kind by employing "mythic genealogies, sacred geographies, fantasies of divine intervention, and other Puranic material" (Guha 181). Guha clearly demonstrates that English education, because of its "coupling of a code of culture and a code of power" (166), presented difficulties for the indigenous elite in getting access to the cannibalized Indian past.

Viswanathan, through her analysis of the workings of English studies, Guha, through his archeology of Indian historiography, and Nandy, through his examination of the evolution of psychoanalysis in India, concur that the colonial project of hegemony over India through the imposition of English did not work. Indeed, it is by now a cliché in contemporary postcolonial discourse to suggest the Calibanic function of English in undermining the structures of dominance imposed by Eurocentric colonialism. The formation of counter-discourse through a process of what Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin call abrogation and appropriation has been an ongoing function in which "the myth of the centrality embodied in the concept of a 'standard language' is forever overturned . . . that English becomes *english*" (87). Long before these authors brought out their volume *The Empire Writes Back* in 1989, following Salman Rushdie's coining of the phrase in an essay in the early 1980s, Raja Rao had suggested, in the 1930s, the subver-

sive use of English by writers from the colonies. Chinua Achebe, George Lamming, and Rushdie, in advocating this position, variously call the phenomenon of the ex-colonized writing in English as “the empire writing back” or Caliban’s tongue, following the footsteps of Shakespeare’s character Caliban in *The Tempest*. A spate of Caliban discourse has come into existence since Raja Rao’s preface to *Kanthapura*, first published in 1938, some of whose proponents are George Lamming, Dominique O. Mannoni, Aimé Césaire, Fernández Retamar, Homi K. Bhabha, and others. So the Calibanic paradigm has worked well in India as it is said to have done elsewhere. I have therefore no wish to dispute this paradigm, but I would be remiss if I did not point out the limitations of this function — and the blurring of binary distinction between Calibans, Ariels, and Prosperos in the age of globalization, in which the clear demarcation that was available in the political colonization by Europe has diffused into multiple forms at various sites of empowerment and disempowerment.

About the role of English in post-Independence India, Guha for the most part remains silent, although he indirectly admits the complicity and circumspection of the “spiritual successors to the alumni of first colonial schools” about resolving the conundrum of the English-educated Bengali’s condemnation of the 1857 “Mutiny” and their transformation as freedom fighters by the turn of the century (169). Viswanathan, on the other hand, in the conclusion of *Masks of Conquest*, rightly extends to post-Independence India her thesis of resistance through English, even though its effect has become limited in the face of globalization. As for Nandy, his recent works, including parts of *Savage Freud*, valorize the indigenous Hindu forms without regard to their positioning in the caste and gender hierarchies and their impact on the rest of the Indian society and its future.

But how does English function now from the way it performed its ideological operation in colonial India? What has changed in the complex operation of English in India? In the aftermath of the intervention made by Viswanathan, the publication of two back-to-back edited volumes — Svati Joshi’s *Re-*

thinking English (1991) and Rajeshwar Sunder Rajan's *The Lie of the Land* (1992) — stand as testimonies to the urgency of the issue of English studies in contemporary India. But what struck me most about both these volumes, despite their timely intervention in this vital matter, is the tone of despair and pessimism that underlies many of the essays; these essays seem to have been written from the prison-house of English literary studies.³ They either confine themselves to the issues of literary studies in higher education or, after much analysis of the poor state of English teaching in India's higher education, imagine no clear and sweeping vision for the future. There is no outrage, no tone of urgency about the retrograde ways of imparting liberal education in India, in which English teaching occupies the core. Valuable as these contributions have been in bringing out one of the most vexed questions of postcoloniality to the forefront of public discourse, they nonetheless foreground the limitations of discourse about English in India, particularly when it is not linked with the antecedents of Sanskrit and Persian, on the one hand, and with the existence of the native comprador class and its role in the failure of Indian democracy to successfully address the fundamental issues of education, power, and language. Can it be said that at present it also reflects the discursive limitation of India's discipline-, language-, and class-bound English professors? Even Gayatri Spivak, the outspoken postcolonial critic, in her concluding essay in *The Lie of the Land*, offers a dazzling performance of textual analysis by juxtaposing and interpreting culturally diverse texts, along the same line that Meenakshi Mukherjee suggests in her essay in the same volume about putting vernacular and English texts side by side while teaching literature, but at the end of it all Spivak withdraws from the crux of the problem. She does not point out the structural failure of education in India, particularly the disaster that a faulty English education has caused in the teaching of the humanities. Instead, she excuses herself in the name of the "expatriate English professor," a name given to her by *India Today's* Madhu Jain (Rajan 298), and does so in the name of practice rather than policy, following Ngugi wa Thiong'o's uncontextualized example (276), as though practice and policy, language and literary studies — indeed, institutional structures, ideological

formations, and cultural practices — were water-tight divisions in the dissemination of English in India.⁴

In today's India, it is not how English literature is interpreted in the classroom at the site of higher education that matters so much as how and to whom English is taught that matters. There is no doubt that higher education is in a poor state and that the interpretation of literature is carried out in an unproductive way, as the critics in both the volumes have pointed out. But I would not be so concerned if only higher education were in a poor state. My concern primarily lies with English teaching at primary and secondary school levels, stages of schooling that lay the future foundation of those who are born fortunate enough in India to attend school — any kind of school — and where future possibilities and disabilities of the recipients of education are structurally instituted in the form of linguistic skill and ideology. Language acquisition, ideological interpellation, and subject formation become inextricably linked here in their relationship with class and structural empowerment and disempowerment. But an insidious regime of privilege operates in English education at this vital site of the emergence of postcolonial subjectivity in India. In its 30 November 1998 issue, the Delhi-based weekly newsmagazine *Outlook* brought out a feature article about the rise in cost for sending children to English-medium schools in India's top cities. The price hike does not look different from the underground rise in dowry in many Indian marriages, and one would only imagine the compounded forms of return a middle-class parent would expect from such a costly education of their sons in the razzle-dazzle of global capital.

The opening up of the Indian economy has expedited the flow of capital, goods, technical manpower, and information. These are unavoidable processes in today's post-Soviet world. And for these, English has become a conduit. But the way it is distributed in India remains the same — in the hands of those who can afford private English-delivered schooling, much the same way as those who were by birth privileged to learn Sanskrit and, by cultural and political privilege, Persian. The near monopoly that the missionaries once had in imparting primary

and secondary English-medium education was first challenged by the central government on behalf of the children of its personnel and a few specially “talented” kids from the villages.⁵ And now the private English-medium schools have mushroomed in every small town and even some villages of South Asia, institutions whose sole objective is to make profit and cater to the economic elite and their relationship to the new form of emerging global economy. On the other hand, the majority of the common people, if able, still send their children to vernacular schools, which systematically and unwittingly institute a sort of structural language disability in the learners, as a result of the flawed educational system.⁶

A stark example of this flawed system is Bengal’s connection with the history and role of the Bangla and English languages. Modern Bangla prose prospered and drew accolades from its champion native sons of nineteenth-century Bengal from Rammohon Roy, Bankim Chandra, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar to the twentieth-century stalwart Rabindranath Tagore. In no time, it was considered capable of carrying out all the major functions in Bengali society. Thus, while Madhusudan Dutt said that the “Bengali is born of the Sanskrit, than which a more copious and elaborate language does not exist,” Shyamcharan Sarma Sarkar made a different claim for Bangla. “Bengali,” he said, “is a truly noble language even in its present state, able to convey almost any idea with precision, force and elegance. Words may be compounded with such facility, and to so great an extent that any scientific or technical term of any language may be rendered by an exact equivalent — an advantage which, amongst the dead and living languages of Europe, is possessed by Greek and German” (qtd. in Guha 190). But that was in 1850. From 1850 to the 1990s, we traverse not only the terrain of India’s onward march toward political decolonization and industrialization and entry into a globalized world, but also a fairly long run of production and experimentation in the Bangla language in both India and Bangladesh.

Ranjit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Ashis Nandy have attempted in their recent works, as shown above, to valorize the use of vernacular by showing how works in the fields of psychol-

ogy and historiography in Bengali appropriated and subverted the colonial forms and attitudes of those experts in these fields who were directly complicit with the colonialist ideology. By writing in Bengali, Girindrasekhar Bose not only excavated the indigenous ideas from ancient Hindu texts and gave a mystical twist to Freudian psychology, but also by doing so Bose implicitly critiqued and presented an alternative to the colonial use of psychoanalysis to denigrate the Indian character. Similarly, Guha approvingly comments on the innovative use of Bengali in unwittingly rewriting and appropriating the colonial historiography.

But in 1997, more than a century later, a language mutiny⁷ occurred in West Bengal, in which millions of parents, educationists, and college graduates ran a campaign for the restoration of English in Bengal's government-run elementary schools. One would have assumed that after fifty years of Independence from British colonialism, instruction in Bengali would be a logical step to disseminate literacy among West Bengal's 68 million people, 72 percent of whom live in the villages. And eventually, mass literacy would inevitably further enrich Bengali vernacular literature, leading to what Ngugi wa Thiong'o calls the full "decolonization of the mind."⁸ Opposed to the workings of residual British colonialism and emergent American-led global capitalism, the Communist government of West Bengal removed English from the government-run elementary schools altogether in 1981. As Soutik Biswas of the weekly newsmagazine *Outlook* writes, "The CPI (M) ideologues, egged on by eager-to-please party-friendly academics, abolished English teaching in primary schools. Reason: expanding educational opportunities, arresting the high rate of dropouts and bringing in thousands of first generation learners from Bengal's 36,000 villages" (63). Predictably, the dropout rate decreased sharply. The 1992 Education Commission, headed by economist Dr. Ashok Mitra, found that 78 out of every 100 students dropped out at the end of Class IV. In 1997, however, the dropout rate went down to only 40 out of every 100 students. The experts on early childhood education were vindicated—literacy could be cultivated among the village populace faster and more easily in the vernacular. Before, the

frightening spectre of English had been in the way of the spread of literacy. It was not only an alien, unfamiliar language, but also a language that required a considerable amount of money for its acquisition. Literacy and education, however, are not enough anywhere if they do not help one earn a livelihood. And education in Bengali in West Bengal, a province like many another in India founded primarily on the principle of language in the first place, was not enough.

If the language spoken by sixty-eight million people in Bengal and over one hundred million in Bangladesh with a strong literary tradition could not be the medium of instruction of the majority of its students and if only those who possess more than ordinary financial resources could afford English education (making such people only about two to five percent of the total population) then there is something seriously wrong with India — and the way it is run. There is also something wrong with the way postcoloniality is theorized if these theories do not ask the fundamental questions that concern the structural matters in the postcolonial spaces.⁹ India's policy makers and intellectuals have no excuse but to find themselves complicit in this state of affairs in which more than ninety-five percent of the total population finds itself institutionally locked out from the power structures by the language barrier alone.

What would be the response in the US if US children learned their materials through the medium of, say, German at school while speaking English at home — and only five percent of the US population was able to use German — or if German were financially affordable only for a few who could afford private-school education in the US, and only these pupils equipped with German eventually manned its judiciary, its bureaucracy, its private sector? This is the linguistic situation in India even now after fifty years of Independence from Britain.

One of the saving graces in this whole affair of English education in India, however, has been that a few, primarily from its metropolitan sites, come to the West for education, especially in the social sciences and humanities, and become the agents of critique and advance-guard thinking. From Rammohon Roy to Aijaz Ahmad, whether one acknowledges it or not, the trend

continues, and one hopes that one day English and vernacular languages would be equally disseminated without respect to their class and caste locations in a different educational system so an Indian could systematically develop critical thinking skills in both English and vernacular languages even within India.

The issue of the production and reception of literature in English vis-à-vis the regional languages adds a new dimension to the problem of the institutionalization of English in India, for the dissemination of English as a language is carried out primarily through literature in India's schools. Language and literature are thus inextricably tied here because literature provides an artificial atmosphere of linguistic repertoire for the learners, and the linguistic ability enables or disables the growth of a particular literature. For example, in the course of her verbal assault on the Hindutva-led BJP for its retrograde ways of thought control, the Hindi writer Krishna Sobti says, "Most of all I don't like their language" (74). It is not only that the Hindi Sobti abhors has its source in the BJP's high caste Sanskrit roots but that the publication of her interview in the November 30, 1998, issue of the Delhi-based newsmagazine *Outlook* makes the entire question of suitability of a language for its literature all the more urgent in India yet again at this confluence of the rise in Hindu nationalism (whose driving force and resource is linguistically Sanskrit-oriented) and globalization (whose vehicle is clearly English). In the same interview, Sobti also laments the lack of recognition for Hindi among India's elites. "Hindi will always be considered 'vernacular,'" she says, "because it will probably never be read by the elite" (75). Sobti's lament could be even more urgently applied to any of India's regional languages. And the elites for Sobti are not the hated BJP ideologues of Sanskritized-Hinduized India but the English-educated Indians located in the metropolitan centres and nooks of state and private apparatuses of power. Sobti's comments on both the BJP and the English-educated elites become all the more relevant because they indicate, on the one hand, the power of this elite to lift a language from the degraded level of the vernacular and, on the other, the resistance to the growing hold the high-caste ideology has come to exercise since the re-

cent rise of Hindu nationalism as a competing alternative to this elite in the domination of the Indian public sphere. But English does not derive its strength only from within India, and the Hindu nationalists, despite their avowal of native roots, can and do switch codes easily in English, for English and Sanskrit possess the same genealogy of power.

And now Rushdie, by his provocative statements from the pages of *The New Yorker* (June 23 & 30, 1997) and as an editor of a volume of collected writings in English by writers of Indian descent titled *Mirrorwork*, has rekindled this old debate about the primacy of a dominant language (Sanskrit, Persian, and now English) over the vernacular. Can one speak any more about English in India without saying something about Rushdie's remarks on vernacular Indian literature in *The New Yorker* — about the richness of English and inadequacy of vernacular literary production in the Indian context? In his introduction to *The New Yorker's* special issue, Rushdie writes that the "true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half century has been made in the language the British left behind" (50). One hundred and sixty-two years separate Rushdie's 1997 manifesto from Macaulay's 1835 minute on English education in India. What also separates them are their forums and locale. It is symbolic that Macaulay had to use the British Governor's Council to present his policy about the use of English in interpellating the Indians, and Rushdie used *The New Yorker* to present his views about the first fifty years of post-Independence Indian literature in English and other Indian languages. Between 1835 and 1997, the seat of world power had shifted from London to New York, from the British Parliament as the source of juridical and military action for Britain's colonies to the world's media, finance, and publishing capital. The resonances sound disturbing, because Rushdie in his manifesto sounds like the direct descendant of Macaulay's machinations. At first glance, the Filtration Theory, which was "predicated on the notion that cultural values percolate downward from a position of power and by enlisting the cooperation of the intermediate classes representing the native elite" (Viswanathan 34), seems to have worked effectively in the Indian case. But both Macaulay and

Rushdie, by advocating the supremacy of English, complexified the Indian picture, for they belonged to two different historical moments and represented diverse cultural forces. While Macaulay's efforts were meant to deepen and ease the empire's strike (the hegemonic function), Rushdie's pronouncement comes as part of the moment in which the empire is supposedly writing back (the Calibanic function). We know from recent theoretical discourses that the notions of hegemony as well as anti-hegemony are not clean-cut divisions. But how far the function of writing back by the once colonized will alleviate the situation of India's ninety-five percent population depends on how this debate is conducted in the future.

There is no doubt that the status of English is unchallengeable in India. But what is its role in the spectrum of Indian literatures and cultures? If English is an Indian language, which it is, we have to admit that English is not like any other Indian languages, having roots in the daily speech of millions of educated, literate, semi-literate, and illiterate Indians, the source of India's other languages. What does it mean for Indian English not to have a feeding source in vernacular cultural life? (The case of a handful of English-speaking Anglo-Indians in urban pockets is linguistically insignificant here.) What does it mean for Indian English, and India, to look up to the English-speaking countries and their machinery of knowledge production and consumption for inspiration and guidance? Because English education is affordable only for a very small percentage of the affluent classes, it means that the overwhelming majority in India will forever fail to compete with people in the English-speaking countries, such as England and the US, or in those countries like China and Japan that conduct their affairs in their native languages. Or, is English just like Latin and French in England after the Roman and Norman conquests and French in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia, indeed even like Persian in post-Mughal India, dominating for a while but vanishing in time from the public sphere?

The issue of whether English is fit or unfit, whether it facilitates or hinders local culture and talent in an ex-colony has become a familiar debate carried out with much passion in the

African context by Ngugi and Achebe, two prominent African writers who first made their names by writing in the colonizers' language. Achebe still writes in English and makes claims on it like Rushdie while Ngugi has renounced it for his native Gikuyu. But the question that needs thinking is who sets the standards for English and why?¹⁰ Is it just a coincidence that most known writers of English of Indian descent had to have lived, been inspired by, marketed, and very often published first in England and the US? Now, if this is not a mere coincidence but a necessity occasioned by the power dynamics between India and the English-speaking countries, and English readership in both, then what happens to the writers of other Indian languages, whose linguistic and cultural inspiration and grounding may not be outside India, or who may not have been fortunate enough to go to English-medium schools in India's metropolises or hill resorts? Will we have a Maxim Gorky, a Richard Wright, a Kabir, or even a Faulkner for that matter, among writers of Indian English if this situation continues?

Then there is the question of readership in India. The poor literacy rate already limits the reception of even the vernacular literature, but when it comes to the readership of English texts in rapid circulation, such as books, newspapers, and magazines, the situation becomes even worse. What percentage of college graduates in India, for example, would be able to read Rushdie in the original, much as we make of Rushdie's contribution to the Indianization of English? Not many, as the proficiency in English still remains the preserve of the alumni of expensive English-medium schools, who make up only a tiny fraction among the college students in India.

V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, and Toni Morrison, among others, have spoken about the problem of readership and its effect on writers. Writing in *The Times Literary Supplement* on August 15, 1958, Naipaul laments that the "Americans do not want me because I am too British. The public here [England] do not want me because I am too foreign. . . . I live in England and depend on an English audience. Yet I write about Trinidad, and more particularly the Indian community there" ("London" 9). In more than one place, Naipaul comments on this con-

stricting situation for a writer in which the writer's works are not meant for the community he comes from. With the advantage of hindsight, it can be said that Naipaul's colonial outlook of the Third World was partly the result of this need to cultivate an English-speaking readership in his uncertain early days as a writer. Lamming, too, in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960), acknowledges as much the difficulty of readership in the Caribbean and the need for a Caribbean writer to move to the English-speaking metropolis in order to find an audience and the infrastructure for publishing. But it is Toni Morrison who has clearly put her finger on this issue. In her monograph *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), she acknowledges that "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination. When does racial 'unconsciousness' or awareness of race enrich interpretive language, and when does it impoverish it?" (xii). In the context of Indian literature in English, one can similarly ask, in what ways have considerations of readership, compounded by the absorption of cultural commodities produced mostly in Great Britain and the US and repression of vernacular languages and literatures, affected the formation of writerly selves and sensibilities of the English writers of Indian descent?

In principle, Rushdie is wrong about Indian literature. The body of literature all the languages of India have produced since 1947 would far outweigh a few dozen creative works by English writers of Indian descent. Marathi drama and Dalit poetry, Gujrati and Assamese fiction, fiction and poetry in Bengali and Hindi all put together, let alone works in other languages, would successfully challenge Rushdie's claims. But in practice, Rushdie is right. And that is the postcolonial dilemma. The question again comes around the fissure between the West and India, the chasm that exists not only in the realm of Indian languages and translation between them, but in the larger terrain of infrastructure for book publishing and book reading, indeed the whole economic set up. Literacy is still low in India; higher education is not only underfunded, but is for the most part run

along the same lines as it was run before India's Independence fifty years ago — its goal to produce bureaucrats rather than thinkers, writers, and knowledge makers. Systematic knowledge production in India in the formal sense of publishing books and articles, whatever the number and amount, is much smaller and far deficient in quality because of the flawed educational system. The system of forming syllabi at the central level, the lecture method as a primary means of conducting classes, and the exam and certification system based on rote-learning — all colonial practices — continue to this day in most colleges and universities, whose teachers and planners still perpetuate the shortcomings found in the Sanskrit, Persian, and British colonial education. The overall educational structure is still designed to produce memorizing machines who could carry out the bidding of society, the state, and its rulers, but never systematically question anything or epistemologically dismantle the old, outdated structures and build new ones. That some eventually turn out to be writers and thinkers, even in vernacular languages, is often the result of caste and class. Even now an English writer has to be validated first in the West, mainly England and America, before he or she receives recognition and turns into an object of envy and celebration in the Indian cities. Though it has made much progress, India still falls far short in building the infrastructure that produces, evaluates, and consumes knowledge. And the way an Indian learns English and obtains education in India has only compounded this problem, a problem that dates back to the days of Persian and Sanskrit.

The politics of English in India in the era of globalization is thus only a recent addition to a long-standing problem that stems from two primary sources: one, of course, is the imbalance between the industrialized world and the Third World countries, a legacy of Western colonialism which seems to have arrived at a new juncture with the onset of globalization. The other, as I have suggested, stems from the nature of official language use and its relation to the education and hold on the populace that dates back to the days of Sanskrit and Persian. I have tried to show that English is structurally continuous with

India's class structure that made use of Sanskrit and Persian before it, through a combination of official, religious and cultural discourses, in order to maintain hold over the power structure. Thus, neither imperialism nor the economic extension of colonialism alone accounts for the hegemony of English in India and India's entry into globalization. Internal factors, such as the class and caste structure of Indian society, are equally important.

If English could be taught overnight to people in South Asia, I would have no problem in giving up the languages I grew up in, as we see children of Third World immigrants, and even the first generation immigrants themselves in the US and other English-speaking countries, function exclusively in English. I would gladly champion the cause of K. Anthony Appiah's "rooted cosmopolitans" who believe that the disappearance of old cultural forms will always give birth to new ones, so there is nothing to worry about (176). But there are important questions: Who would be the buyers and who would be the sellers of these new cultural forms, both within and without India? In the hybrid and global cultural formations, whose share would be more, and therefore who will economically thrive and who will be laid off and starve? These are crucial questions that need further investigation and analysis. To begin a serious conversation about them, it is important to understand the divide English occasions, as Sanskrit and Persian did under different circumstances, by its industrially propelled force from without and limited distribution within India, interpellating India's ruling classes, making them for the most part one-way customers and consumers of Western forms, but also perpetually keeping the masses and their languages at a disadvantaged position.

The history of death or survival and spread of a language (and the prosperity or poverty of its users), after all, has been more a matter of political will and circumstances than anything else. And the political will to create parity and complementary relationships in public life between English and other languages is never needed more than now, faced as the Third World is with the rising tide and challenge of globalization. Fortunately, the scenario is changing in the domain of political society as a result of India's expanding democracy among the masses. According

to Prabhas Joshi, consulting editor of *Jansatta*, an Indian Hindi daily, the new generation of politicians comes from a background very different from the background that English-language journalists belong to or the earlier generation of politicians came from. That is why as Joshi says in his interview with Saibal Chatterjee, “the English language press doesn’t understand grassroots politics quite as well as it did 10 or 15 years ago” (Chatterjee 82). The emergence of vernacular, transcultural politicians in the last decade is a positive sign that a radical democracy will one day prevail and structural transformation will occur. In the emergence of these transcultural, grassroots democratic cultural formations, the English-educated intellectuals with training in and experience of the West coupled with an understanding of the ground realities in the Third World countries could have a vital role to play in order to usher in a new era and new form of public consciousness. In the so-called Third World, activism has to go beyond the level of street and organizational politics; indigenous production and dissemination of new knowledge is even more necessary for the structural transformation of the entire society and its consciousness. New songs and music, new screen images and writings in the media, new conversation — in the kitchens, the village councils, the fields, and the classrooms — and new ways of looking at society and culture within the forums of intellectual gatherings and publications can all transform both public and private spheres, making way for an egalitarian life for all. For all this, transformation in the educational system is the first crucial step. In a different educational system, there would be neither exclusive English-medium schools with lip service to the regional languages nor exclusive vernacular schools with defective and disempowering English instruction. Every school would teach their subjects equally, both in regional languages and English. But the West Bengal government *alone* cannot bring about a revolution of any kind.¹¹

NOTES

- 1 Braj B. Kachru, a foremost scholar in the field of ESL studies, through his two volumes *The Alchemy of English* and *The Other Tongue* in their successive editions, has brought together some of the finest scholars and their scholarship on the

status and problems of English as a second language. On the whole, Kachru argues for both the importance of English, given its spread as a result of British imperialism, and the need to allow flexibility in its standards, as it is increasingly being used widely by non-native speakers. While Kachru's is a laudable goal, the question whether English fosters cultural imperialism and hinders the growth of vernacular talent or facilitates the development of the ex-colonies and functions as a cementing force remains important and unresolved, even more so in this age of globalization.

- 2 Filtration Theory is an important cultural concept widely prevalent in societies where it is expected that people lower in the hierarchy would emulate the cultural values from those at the top. Although Filtration Theory works in its blatant form in feudal and colonial societies, other social structures have not been entirely immune to it. Viswanathan points out that the planners of English rule (the Anglicists — Macaulay, James, and John Stuart Mill — and the Orientalist Richard Colley Wellesley) used this theory to deepen the grip of British colonialism in India. A complete decolonization from both within and without, I assume, would eliminate the workings of this theory.
- 3 Although Anglophiles like Nirad Chaudhuri and many traditionalist Indian professors of English lauded the influence of British colonialism on Indian literature and culture (see, for example, the C. D. Narasimhaiah edited collection of essays, *The Awakened Conscience* and, as I have noted, Harish Trivedi's *Colonial Transactions*), the trend has been gradually shifting among the new breed of English teachers in India based mostly in Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad, and Calcutta, the primary sites of frequent contact with the Anglo-American academy. (See in particular *Rethinking English*, edited by Joshi, *The Lie of the Land*, edited by Sunder Rajan, and *Subject to Change: Teaching Literature in the Nineties*, edited by Susie Tharu.) In its colonial, postcolonial, and diasporic sites, the political agenda of postcolonial studies has been to examine the ways in which the West in its encounters with the rest of the world has dominated and impoverished the rest of the world through unequal exchange and representation. The second half of the project of postcolonial studies, which has equal, if not more, significance for the future, is to study and find ways in which ex-colonies or the non-Western countries would come to empower themselves — culturally, economically, and politically. It is good that postcolonial studies have raised the issues of race, canon, and other forms of economic and cultural dominance and inequality between the West and the rest of the world, but much of the discourse seems to have been concentrated in the Western metropolis — whose economies, networks of well-run universities, and high literacy have sustained intellectual activities — and in a few prominent cities in the Third World, where mainly the privileged in the home countries live in relative comfort and do intellectual work. See, for example, Arif Dirlik for a polemical and, in my view, a little too harsh and discipline-centred critique of this phenomenon. Therefore, postcolonial studies, laudable as its emergence has been, seems to have been useful more for the lives of those from the Third World who have been forced into exile or have been able to leave the home countries for economic and professional reasons and have chosen the economies of the First World. How far it will go toward addressing and solving the problems of the Third World remains for the most part to be seen. And the second phase of this scholarship, whose initial signs are visible on the horizon, equipped with Western training and aware of its strengths and pitfalls, somewhat like the second and third wave feminisms, would do well to take up the issues of critique, excavation, resuscitation, and empowerment of the Third World societies themselves. For a radical reappraisal of both literature and history in terms of "literary cultures in history" in the context of linguistic, communitarian, and organic roles and interaction of the aural and visual imaginative products in South Asia in response to the inadequacy of the catego-

ries imposed by European colonization and followed by literary historians in India, see Sheldon Pollock. For a rethinking of the terms "literature" and "history" from the colonial difference in order to reconfigure the concept of literary history and practice of literary studies in the age of globalization, see Walter D. Mignolo. In my view, the difficulties Aijaz Ahmad faces in formulating a coherent concept of Indian literature in his book *In Theory* would be somewhat alleviated through Pollock and Mignolo. Their work would also immensely complicate Rushdie's appraisal of Indian literature that I examine in this essay.

- 4 See Selma Sonntag's "Ideology and Policy in the Politics of English Language in North India," in *Ideology, Politics and Language Policies*, ed. Thomas Ricento, for connections between language policy and politics in north India since Independence.
- 5 There are a number of such schools in India funded mostly by the central government. Various military schools, the Central Schools, and the Navodaya schools (set up during Rajiv Gandhi's prime ministership) all come under special arrangement schools. See Viswanathan's critique of Navodaya schools in "English in a Literate Society," in Sunder Rajan's *The Lie of the Land*. See also Alfred De Souza's *Indian Public School: A Sociological Study* (1974) and Sanjay Srivastava's *Constructing Postcolonial India: National Character and the Doon School* (1998).
- 6 See Manuel Castells's comprehensive analysis of globalization from the perspective of the explosion in information technology. Castells equates this explosion and its impact on all aspects of human society as nothing short of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. In his three-volume work on what he calls the information age and the rise of the network society, *The Information Age* (see particularly Vol. II and chap. 2 of Vol. III), Castells concludes that the majority of the people of the non-Western world, and a few groups in the Western world, have been left out of this network. He also concludes that having been left out of this network means not only getting deprived of its benefits but suffering from the adverse consequences of this deprivation. See also his essay "Flows, Networks, and Identities: A Critical Theory of the Information Society" (55) and the volume in which it appears, for the growing chasm caused by the disparity in education related to technology. The issue of language and literature, I argue, is closely tied with the issue of inclusion into and exclusion from the network society and therefore from a viable position in the global economy.
- 7 "Mutiny" has a deep resonance in the Indian context, not only because of the key event of what the British call the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 but also as a symbolic term used by V. S. Naipaul in his book on India, *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, signifying the contemporary complexities of public life in India. But the theme of India as a fiercely contested site with its countless multiplicities and contradictions has been widely noted and theorized in the scholarly as well as popular works. Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, Sunil Khilnani, Gita Mehta, Vikram Chandra, V. S. Naipaul himself, and a host of others, among the popular writers, who wrote about the fiftieth anniversary of India's Independence from Britain, have emphasized this aspect of Indian life.
- 8 In the realm of language politics, there are two approaches to decolonization. The first, led by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, emphasizes language as a key element in the process of colonization or decolonization. The other believes that language is not that important and that even through the colonizers' language, the colonized can undo the effects of colonization. This is a crowded group. Raja Rao seems to be its early exponent, but after the Second World War, a host of writers from the ex-colonies, including Achebe, Lamming, and recently Rushdie, advocate the subversive use of English, and call this phenomenon of the ex-colonized writing in English as "the empire writing back," following the footsteps of Shakespeare's character Caliban in *The Tempest*.

- ⁹ See particularly the last chapter of Bart Moore-Gilbert's *Postcolonial Theory*, in which Moore-Gilbert assesses the contributions of Said, Spivak, and Bhabha in light of the criticisms their works have invited from both within the discipline and without. By citing instances of repetition and revision in these critics, Moore-Gilbert suggests that the field of postcolonial theory has come to a sort of crisis or saturation point. Whether it is saturation or crisis, it must be said that postcolonial theory has come to a maturity whose initial signs emerge as a result of the number of assessments and summarization it has received along the same line that the discipline of literary theory had done in the 1980s with a number of anthologies, such as those edited by Dan Latimer, David Lodge, Robert Con Davis, Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, Peter Collier, and Helga Geyer-Ryan, to name the prominent samples, and a number of evaluations of various sorts, such as Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* (1980); Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: Introduction* (1983); Vincent B. Leitch's *American Literary Criticism from the 30s to the 80s* (1988); William E. Cain's *The Crisis in Criticism* (1984); Catherine Belsey's *Critical Practice* (1980); Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan's *Literary Theory Today* (1990). Similarly, with the spate of edited anthologies of postcolonial theory, such as Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths's *The Postcolonial Reader* (1995) and *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (1998); Padmini Mongia's *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (1996); Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature* (1995); Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman's *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory* (1994), there have also emerged individual assessments and volumes devoted to single authors, such as the two volumes, *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (1992), ed. Michael Sprinker; and *Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry, and Judith Squires (1997). Robert Young's *White Mythologies* (1990) and *The Spivak Reader* (1996), ed. Donna Laundry and Gerald MacLean. Besides Moore-Gilbert's assessment, Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) and Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1998) have all in one way or another attempted a critical overview of the field of postcolonial theory and criticism. So one can rightly say that the field has come to some kind of crisis or saturation point. But from my point of view, as long as the problems in the Third World remain, postcolonial theory or criticism will also remain alive and valid.
- ¹⁰ Braj Kachru and other ESL scholars have rightly advocated a loosening of rigid standards for English, thus freeing English from the proprietorship of its native speakers (see particularly Kachru's *Alchemy* and *The Indianization of English*). But the global economic and media empire still remains for the most part in the hands of Europe and the United States, and it is not clear so far how the non-native speakers can get away from the taste and judgement of many ESL instructors, inadequately trained composition teachers, New York and London editors and agents of the publishing houses, and, not least, the non-native teachers of English in non-native speaking regions, like South Asia and Africa. So in principle, Kachru may be right, and the celebration of Indianization or Africanization of English in the hands of Raja Rao, Achebe, Rushdie, and, recently, Roy is laudable, but all these writers were able, in John Updike's words in his review of Arundhati Roy's debut novel, to subdue "the colonizer's language" only after being able to write standard English, as good as any, or better than most, educated native speakers (156). And that costs money, turning and perpetuating it into a class privilege in the poverty-ridden ex-colonies. The only exception I know in this is the African writer Amos Tutuola, who is known basically, and condescendingly, as a man able to write English despite an inadequate formal education.
- ¹¹ Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the Globalization from Below Conference, Duke University (1998) and the MLA Convention, San Francisco (1998). My thanks to Gauri Viswanathan and *ARIEL* editors for incisive editorial comments.

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