Chapter 2
Towards a Monolingual World: 
Indian English Fiction and 
Translations in India

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ABSTRACT
The chapter looks into the existing language equation in India through a literary lens. Even though the number of translations from other Indian languages to English has increased, in the national and international market Indian English fiction has come to represent Indian fiction. This complexity is due to the growing status of English in globalized India, which is also reflected in the popularity of Indian English fiction. However, a historical analysis would reveal that the rise of Indian English fiction is a postcolonial phenomenon and this has been at the expense of translations. The chapter substantiates this cultural evolution further through a study of the Malayalam translation of the Indian English novel The God of Small Things and the English translation of the Malayalam novel Chemmeen. The translation strategies and iconography of the book covers are analyzed to discuss the existing equation between English and other Indian languages.

INTRODUCTION
The process of translation has come a long way from the debates of truth and beauty to larger questions of politics of culture and language. That translation is not an innocent act of linguistic transfer is underlined by many scholars such as Tejaswini Niranjana, Sherry Simon, and Gayatri Spivak who consider it as a highly political act which gets reflected in not just what gets translated, for whom and by whom but also in what gets lost or gained, often deliberately, in the process. In a globalized world where economic interests evoke equal measures of excitement in anything that can be made a tool to manage and maximize profit, culture and language are powerful resources. Scholars have expounded how language and literature were used by the British in India (Viswanathan, 1989) and elsewhere (Ngugi, 1986) as an effective tool to propagate the cause of colonialism and how far it was successful in creating "Macaulay's
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minute men” (Rushdie, 1995, p. 367) who, according to Macaulay, “are interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay, 1972, p. 249). Colonialism has been a successful project which long after the masters have physically left maintains its hold on its erstwhile colonies through many different ways of language and culture. This chapter traces the rise of Indian English fiction as against other Indian language writings and goes on to analyse how this has changed the cultural and literary scene in postcolonial India. This will be substantiated further by an analysis of two translations: the Malayalam translation of the celebrated Indian English novel The God of Small Things and the English translation of the iconic Malayalam novel Chemmeen.

BACKGROUND

Indian English fiction, which began to take shape in the late 19th century, was not considered superior to Indian language fiction. Writers such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Madhusudan Dutt started their literary careers as Indian English writers and later turned to their own mother tongue. In fact, the first Indian English novel, Rajmohan’s Wife (1864) was written by Bankim Chandra. The 1930s and 40s are considered to be the take off period of Indian English fiction with writers such as Raja Rao (1908-2006), Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) and Bhabani Bhattacharya (1910-1988) displaying a keen interest in the politico-social life of the nation. Writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Ahmed Ali were also part of Progressive Writers’ Movement3. They were Indian born, Indian-grown authors, and their English, an acquired language of a translator’s (see Prasad, 1999, pp. 41-58). However, the bhasha literatures, i.e. literatures written in other Indian languages, were energized by writers who were informed by the literary movements of the West but who could reinvent their knowledge in the backdrop of their own locales that they knew well and identified with, the regional language and its variants being very much a part of their identity. Thus Basheer4, for example, wrote in the rural Muslim dialect that never failed to touch a chord with the masses. The Indian English writers lacked this strong mass support since they had no regional identity and largely remained the poor cousins of other Indian language literatures.

India being a multilingual country, translations have always been part of its daily existence, language and culture. The Indian concept of translation is to consider all languages equal, and that the translator has the freedom to tell someone else’s story his/her way (Trivedi, 2006, pp. 102-119). G.N. Devy observes that Indian literary theory does not attribute a lot of significance to the concept of originality. According to him Indians have a “translating consciousness” and the “very foundation of modern Indian literatures was laid through acts of translation, whether by Jayadeva, Hemcandra, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, H.N. Apte or Bankim Chandra Chatterjee”. He elaborates:

The soul, or significance, is not subject to the laws of temporality; and therefore significance, even literary significance, is ahistorical in Indian view. Elements of plot, stories, characters, can be used again and again by new generations of writers because Indian literary theory does not lay undue emphasis on originality. If originality were made a criterion of literary excellence, a majority of Indian classics would fail the test. The true test is the writer’s capacity to transform, to translate, to restate, to revitalize the original. And in that sense Indian literary traditions are essentially traditions of translation. (Devy, 1999, p. 187).
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