

Violence, Resistance and the Birth of a New Literature

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When Thomas Babington Macaulay, then serving on the Supreme Council of India, presented his 'Minute on Indian Education' to Lord Bentinck on the 2nd of February 1835, arguing for the adoption of the English language as the teaching medium in Indian institutions from the sixth form onwards, he envisaged the birth of a new class of English-educated native, 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (Macaulay 1835). The Indian native of this new class, enlightened, civilised, made less threatening and more recognisable by a reduction of his otherness,¹ curbed through the English language, was envisaged as 'a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 1991:86); these 'mimic men'² would help to lead the rest of the native population by their example and through their superiority. To achieve this, Macaulay's 'aggressive' project methodically sought to discourage the teaching of both *bhasha* or indigenous Indian languages, such as Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and classical languages, such as Sanskrit and Persian, in all Indian institutions of further education and, instead, emphasised the moral imperative of the English language and literature.³

Bengal was an important territory where the immediate results of this new system of education could be measured, for it was then both the administrative and commercial capital of India; consequently, constant interaction between the white rulers and the thousands of people they governed was inevitable. The effects of this system became conspicuous in two main ways in Bengal: there emerged, on the one hand, those anglicised and pro-British *babus* who saw in their newly acquired English education the opportunity to ingratiate themselves even further with their colonial rulers and, on the other, a group of Bengalis of a certain type

¹ Edward Said, in his *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003) discusses how Victorians, at one and the same time, both feared and were fascinated by the 'otherness' of natives, i.e. their radical difference from Victorian norms; imposing their language on natives was one of their attempts to reduce this dangerous and disturbing 'otherness.'

² I borrow this term from Bhabha (1994: 88).

³ Rajeswari Sunder Rajan uses the term 'aggressive' in relation to the Anglicist projects, such as Macaulay's, which imposed unbending Anglocentric views on the native population (Sunder Rajan 1986: 25). In support of his claim for the superiority of the English language Macaulay said:

The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West.[...] It may safely be said that the literature now extant in that language is of greater value than all the literature which three hundred years ago was extant in all the languages of the world together. (Macaulay 1835)

who began to wield the English language as a weapon in their stand against injustice of colonisation, a group whose aim was to counter colonial tyranny with the literature they produced in the colonisers' own language. This was the group who, in the words of Sunder Rajan, 'turned the knowledge of English culture forced upon them into an effective tool for argument, resistance and subversion (Sunder Rajan 1986: 33); the group of Bhabha's 'mimic men', who subverted the very original they were mimicking.⁴ And it is with the passive revolt initiated by this latter category of resisting and subtly coercive literates that my article is concerned. After comparing the various modes of resistance which flourished in the awakening of Indian patriotism, this article will show how nineteenth- and twentieth-century Indian writers not only fully participated in national discourse but also used the medium of a language that had been imposed upon them by Macaulay to express disapproval of colonialism and stimulate nationalistic feelings peacefully.

Prompted by the avant-garde thinker and social activist Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), the Bengali *bhadralok* had already started a regional reform within the state a few years earlier.⁵ This reform is often referred to as the Bengal Renaissance. The Renaissance had witnessed an intellectual awakening that had revolutionised many aspects of Bengali lifestyle and culture, as well as approaches to philosophy, literature, science and politics. Orthodox attitudes prevalent in all these fields had been challenged and altered. The spirit of change and revolt had become nascent within the state. It is also during the Renaissance that awareness of the injustice of colonial subjugation became more pronounced and widespread, for various leaders emerged around this time to organise a collective resistance against colonisation. Their approaches were, however, quite distinct from each other: if, on the one hand, the Renaissance saw the emergence of Swami Vivekananda, who, albeit with a debatable degree of success, strived to rid Hinduism of its rigid orthodoxy and raise inter-faith awareness so as to promote harmony and unity within the different communities in the country (and thus collectively combat the outsider, that is, the coloniser), it also witnessed the rise of violent freedom-seekers like Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–c.1945). Bose's aphorism

⁴ Bhabha explains this process as follows:

Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them. (Bhabha 1994: 91)

⁵ The *bhadralok* is that class which emerged when the urbane, educated and cultured Bengali gentry encountered and absorbed British learning and culture. These were mainly aristocratic and upper-caste Hindus, since 'culture and education [...] were rarely unrelated to social and economic power' in Bengal. (Bhattacharya 2005: 30).

‘*tum mujhe khoon do, main tumhe aazadi doonga* [Give me blood and I will give you freedom]’ aptly summarised his violent ideology, which set him against *ahimsa-vaadi* [propagators of the path of non-violence] freedom-fighters like Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948). Though Gandhi did indeed succeed in gathering more supporters and emerged as the key resistance figure at national level, Bose’s influence was not negligible, as Cohen and Sivanandan discuss: Bose formed and led the Indian National Army, which fought against the British in Southeast Asia during the Second World War and whose commanders included many defectors from the Indian Army (Cohen 1963: 411 and Sivanandan 2004: 54).

Against this background of greater religious tolerance and violent opposition to colonisation emerged a group of intellectuals who were also influential in shaping Renaissance thinking, including Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950). These two were among the earliest writers to articulate in *English* the longing for freedom from colonial suppression. An illustration of this is Tagore’s 1910 poem, ‘Where the mind is without fear’ in *Gitanjali*, the English translation of which brought him global fame and recognition and eventually earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. *Gitanjali*’s poems would excite the spirit of resistance in its readers and ‘Where the mind is without fear,’ would receive much acclaim for its far-sightedness and daring:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever-widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. (Tagore 1962: 16; added emphasis)

The poem throughout points to Tagore’s dream of a liberated (‘Where the mind is without fear’), self-governed (‘and the head is held high’) and united (‘Where the world has not been broken up into fragments’) India. The last line (‘Into that heaven of freedom [...] let my country awake’) especially brings forth the envisaged, quasi-utopian image of his country freed from colonisation. With the likes of Tagore and Aurobindo, the English language thus acquired another function in India: English had made the empire by articulating it; it was now being used to unmake it. This spirit of resistance, teased out by the Bengali poets, was further intensified by the new breed of Indian novelists writing in English who emerged shortly afterwards; Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894), whose novel *Rajmohan’s Wife* was

published in 1864, is generally accepted to be the first of these,⁶ indeed, Mukherjee asserts that *Rajmohan's Wife* 'is probably not just the first English novel in India but in all of Asia' (Mukherjee 2002: 157).

It may seem surprising that it took so long for the first Indian novel in English to appear, given that between 1835, when Macaulay wrote his *Minute*, and 1864, when *Rajmohan's Wife* was serialised, enough time had elapsed for English to have spread and established itself among the natives across India. Indian intellectuals were also still being subjected continuously to literature in English (Mukherjee 2000: 4).⁷ Between these two dates, however, the initial plans regarding the role that English was expected to play in the Indian administration had been disrupted by a violent event. This disruption took the form of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, which led to the dissolution of the East India Company in that same year.⁸ Though the violence of the Mutiny was eventually brought under control, with the British gaining ground within a year of the onset of the rebellion, and though this was also the year in which Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India, there is no denying that the events of 1857 triggered large-scale anti-British feelings which had not been as rife before. Bernard Cohn even asserts that '[t]he end of the empire was marked where it might be said to have begun, in 1857 [...]' (Cohn 1983: 209).

The Christian missionary undertaking had been at its zenith after Macaulay's successful *Minute*. The missionaries, many of whom at the same time also taught in Indian educational institutions, had tried to promote a view of English literature, which they selectively made available to those learning English in India, as being imbued with the spirit of Christianity and interwoven with the words of the Bible; virtues which they marketed to the natives as being fundamental for their moral elevation and success. They had even had considerable success in propagating this idea before the Mutiny. The Christian convert and English-educated, Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1825–1873), who wrote poems such as 'The Captive Ladie' and 'Visions of the Past,' in what he thought of as the style of Wordsworth and other British Romantic poets, was one such native with whom they were successful. The English language and education, Dutt convinced himself, had raised him to a position superior to that of other

⁶ First published in serial form, it did not appear its entirety until 1935.

⁷ Mukherjee points out that the number of reviews in India-based literary journals of the mid-nineteenth century attests to the great influx of books from England, including a 'sizeable percentage of contemporary novels of the popular variety.' These 'eventually found their way to the homes of the English-educated Indians who were otherwise encouraged in their curriculum to read only canonical texts.'

⁸ The Sepoy Mutiny is variously known as the Indian Rebellion of 1857, India's First War of Independence, the Great Rebellion, the Indian Mutiny, the Revolt of 1857, the Uprising of 1857 and the Sepoy Rebellion.

Indians, and contact with England would elevate him to the status of the great poet he was, at least in his estimation. Mukherjee quotes him in a letter to his friend Gaurdas Basak:

I am reading Tom Moore's life of my favourite Byron—splendid book upon my word! Oh! How I should like to see you writing my life, if I happen to be a great poet—which I am almost sure I shall be if I go to England (Mukherjee 2000:45).

Gauri Viswanathan points out how, like Dutt, several native students of the new system established by Macaulay had begun to look upon English literary instruction as 'an instrument of authenticity' which 'places the Indian reader in a position where he renews contact with himself, recovering his true essence and identity from the degradation to which it had been subject through native despotism' (Viswanathan 1989: 141).

But the Sepoy Mutiny upset some of these plans. The idea of the ethical purport of English literature could no longer be sold to a nation which had witnessed the carnage in which their self-proclaimed moral guides had taken part and which had ended with the deaths of so many of their compatriots. Moreover, any claim for greater morality that the English might previously have advanced was weakened by controversy over the new Pattern 1853 Enfield Rifle about which many natives were still outraged, since the introduction of this new rifle among the Hindu and Muslim sepoys had been seen as a 'deception' carried out by East India Company officers towards the native sepoys.⁹ The Mutiny consequently awakened many natives to nationalist sentiments which intensified over the coming decades and would eventually lead on to the independence of the country almost a century later, in 1947. The beginnings of the Indian English novel less than a decade later coincide, therefore, with the beginnings of organised Indian nationalist movements—both of the violent and non-violent kind.

Rajmohan's Wife, written in a florid style reminiscent of Sanskrit *kavya* [epic],¹⁰ does not overtly preach the propagation of decolonisation, but Makarand Paranjape points out how the novel can be read as 'a sort of national allegory' (Paranjape 2010), even more so, given the

⁹ The controversy about the rifle arose when the native sepoys heard the rumour that the part of the cartridge they had to bite open in order to load this new rifle was greased with lard and tallow, i.e. pork and beef fat to which both Muslims and Hindus objected, since contact with pork, in the case of Muslims, and beef, in the case of Hindus, was forbidden to them by their religions (Wolpert 1991:53). The discovery of this fact, therefore, outraged many who thought that they had been deceived by the officers to act against their faith.

¹⁰ Descriptions such as 'Some sorrow or deep anxiety had dimmed the lustre of her fair complexion. Yet her bloom was as full of charm as that of the land-lotus half-scorched and half-radiant under the noonday sun' (Bankim 1996: 3) and other such elaborate metaphors which abound in the writing attest to Bankim's familiarity with the form of the Sanskrit *kavya*.

subsequent contribution of Bankim in shaping the face of Indian nationalism:¹¹ Bankim's poem *Bande* (or *Vande*) *Mataram* [Hail to thee, Mother], which first featured in his 1882 Bengali novel *Anandamath*, personifies the mother-land India as a mother-figure in bondage. The poem was subsequently adopted as the national song of India and '*Bande Mataram*' became the national slogan during the struggle for freedom, a slogan which was used during both riots of protest and peaceful demonstrations of civil disobedience. Paranjape sees in *Rajmohan's Wife* the beginnings of this metaphor of the captive mother. He views Matangini, the heroine of the novel, as the epitome of the free-spirited India, increasingly aware of the discomfort of her oppression:

Matangini [...] is not just Rajmohan's wife, but the 'spirit' or personification of modern India itself. This is an emergent, hesitant, yet strong-willed and attractive India. It is not the India of villages or the old India of feudal times. This India has been born near the capital, Calcutta, and is full of new possibilities. But, this beautiful and powerfully drawn image of India is also shown as burdened by sorrow and anxiety. It is neither free nor happy, but its energies and powers are under the control of an unworthy husband. [...] The restlessness, vitality, charm, and drive of an emerging society are thus embodied in Matangini. (Paranjape 2010)

Thus, though not overt, his support of the resistance to colonisation (which was becoming more and more topical at the time he was writing), is implied by Bankim in the character of Matangini.

Almost a generation later, a more purposefully stated and pointed use of English in resisting the coloniser was to be made by Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), R. K. Narayan (1906–2001) and Raja Rao (1908–2006), the first of the Indian writers to achieve their fame and recognition *purely* as writers in English. Anand, Narayan and Rao had started writing when India was still a British colony but at a time when civil disobedience had begun to touch the lives of Indians from all walks of life, not just those who were politically conscious. At about the same time as these three writers were beginning to make a name for themselves, Gandhi's Quit India Movement had also been gaining ground. One would have thought that taking up English at such a time would have implied a greater sense of affiliation with the British, but all three were, in fact, largely influenced by Gandhi and his philosophy, though Gandhi himself was no great propagandist for the dissemination of the English language in India. Unlike Roy, who assumed that languages were culturally and ideologically neutral, a view which had led him to fight for the acquisition of foreign languages in order to advance Indian society during the Bengal Renaissance, Gandhi regarded languages as 'not only

¹¹ The assumption that literature from third world countries is necessarily 'literature of national allegory' is a hotly debated topic. Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad famously belong to the two opposing camps of this debate (Ahmad 1992).

territorial but civilisational markers' (Robertson 2003: 40). English, the product of a different civilisation, with a different set of cultural, religious, political and historical experiences, could not, for him, speak to Indians of their own existence and even less teach them anything about themselves; Gandhi thus condemned the intensely Anglocentric system of education for its de-Indianising effect and laid more emphasis on religious and ethical education instead, even deeming many of the sciences being taught to Indians to be unnecessary. Material in English books which was worthy of dissemination was instead to be taught in the *bhasha* languages:

Those English books which are valuable, we should translate into the various Indian languages. We should abandon the pretension of learning many sciences. Religious, that is ethical, education will occupy the first place. Every cultured Indian will know in addition to his own provincial language, if a Hindu, Sanskrit; if a Mahomedan, Arabic; if a Parsee, Persian; and all, Hindi. Some Hindus should know Arabic and Persian; some Mahomedans and Parsees, Sanskrit. Several Northerners and Westerners should learn Tamil. A universal language for India should be Hindi, with the option of writing it in Persian or Nagri characters. (Gandhi 2009: 103).

In Gandhi's opinion, the effect of Macaulay's education system had been to make foreigners of many of the resident Indian elite, in that they appeared to have a greater affinity with the English than with the Indians from other strata of society; hence, these elite were indifferent to colonial subjugation. To revive their sense of national pride, Gandhi, who himself came from an affluent family well-versed in the English way and had studied law at University College, London, ostentatiously rejected the symbols of imperialism which, for him, implied subservience. English education, and especially the use of English in teaching, was one of the primary symbols of colonial rule and therefore one of Gandhi's main targets.

Nonetheless, through their writing in English, Anand, Narayan and Rao professed support and fidelity to Gandhi's philosophy and ideals. This was reflected not so much in the anti-imperial content as in the adherence to the agenda of internal national reform which Gandhi advocated. Anand's major work, *Untouchable* (1935) emerged when Gandhi was actively trying to integrate *dalits* (whom Gandhi calls *harijans* [Children of God]) into the rest of the Hindu, and indeed Indian, society. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) is set during Gandhi's Quit India Movement, and Gandhi himself figures as a character in the novel. As for Rao, the figure of the 'Mahatma' (a conspicuous reference to Gandhi) pervades many of his short stories, and *Kanthapura*, arguably the most famous of his works, depicts the way in

which a small village in South India takes up Gandhi's call in the national struggle for independence.¹²

Though it was in English, the work of these three authors was thus a far cry from Macaulay's dream to educate the natives through English so as 'to form [...] a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'. Macaulay had envisaged an enriching of India's 'vernacular dialects [...] with terms of science borrowed from the *Western* nomenclature,' which would have rendered them 'by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population' (Macaulay 1835; added emphasis), but this plan had rebounded on him. Although Anand, Narayan and Rao had learnt their craft from Dickens, Hardy and Wodehouse, the fact that they were writing in India and in an Indian context meant that their writing was not overshadowed by the 'Alps of the European tradition and the Himalayas of [their] Indian past' (Anand, quoted in Gandhi, 2003: 168). Their works reflected the 'compromise between foreign form and local materials' (Moretti 2004: 154), which Moretti adduces as the marking trait of the modern novel from any culture: in terms of content and stylistic features, these texts were celebrating Indian native culture through the imported form of the novel and the English language.

Anand, Narayan and Rao were at that point already defamiliarising English for an anglophone audience by Indianising the language, through a process that Salman Rushdie would later most aptly define as *chutnification*.¹³ The *chutnification* of the English language was their act of passive revolt against the anglicisation of their culture that had been imposed upon them as a result of Macaulay's educational system. Importing syntax, words and variants from the *bhasha* languages into English pointedly set their language against the 'standard' English imposed as the 'norm' by their colonial masters. Their literature, in which 'Caliban's voice' became more audible (though he was still speaking in the language of Prospero)¹⁴ thus became their means of refuting the dominant colonial standards. Narayan, for instance, includes transliterated, rather than translated, words (such as *karma*, *leela*, *sanyasi*)

¹² In 1939, Rao co-edited an anthology of Indian thought, *Changing India*, which included excerpts from various revolutionary figures, such as Jawaharlal Nehru who would lead India to Independence less than a decade later. A few years later, Rao also co-edited a journal of resistance, significantly entitled *Tomorrow*, which made his sympathies with freedom-fighters yet more obvious.

¹³ *Chutnification* is first used by Rushdie in his *Midnight's Children*, in reference to his historiographic, metafictional narrative.

¹⁴ I borrow this analogy from Bill Ashcroft's *Caliban's Voice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009). In this book, Ashcroft uses the case of Prospero and his slave Caliban, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, to illustrate how the colonial master seeks to perpetuate unequal power relations through the imposition of language and how this process eventually is reversed, as the Caliban-figure, by appropriating the language through literary writing, intervenes in the political domination of colonised cultures.

and also preserves a deliberately idiomatic syntax and vocabulary which allows the language in which his characters are meant to be speaking to resonate through the English; in other words, Narayan constructs his English as if it were a *bhasha* language, without any glossing for the non-Indian reader. This is illustrated by the following quotation from ‘Second Opinion’ in *Malgudi Days*, which might well confuse a reader unaware of the convention in India that a wife refrains from referring to her husband by his name, even after his death:

When *he* was alive, how much service he could command within the twinkling of an eye ... I had to breathe ever so lightly what I needed and he would accomplish it. (Narayan 2006: 186; original emphasis and ellipsis).

There is no indication that the ‘he’ might be referring to her dead husband, just as there would have been none in Tamil or another *bhasha* language.

Rao too takes similar liberties: *Kanthapura* abounds with constant allusions to the numerous Hindu gods and goddesses; unrelated women refer to each other as ‘sister,’ as they would in Kannada and most other *bhasha* languages; characters are identified in terms of where they live or work, for example, as ‘Waterfall Venkamma’ and ‘Coffee-Planter Ramayya’. In his foreword to the novel, Rao asserts: ‘We cannot write like the English. We *should* not’ (Rao 2008: 5). This is borne out by *Kanthapura*’s confessional-style narrative, with its interpolations from the narrator, such as ‘so they say’, and the unusual construction of its sentences, long and awkwardly punctured, which take unpredicted turns and often lose sight of their original purport, so that descriptions seem, in the end, like lists:

Our village—I don’t think you would have heard about it—Kanthapura is its name, and it is in the province of Kara. [...] Roads, narrow, dusty, rut-covered roads, wind through the forests of teak and of jack, of sandal and of sal, and hanging over bellowing gorges and leaping over elephant-haunted valleys, they turn now to the left and now to the right and bring you through the Alambè and Champa and Meena passes into the great granaries of trade. (Rao 2008: 7)

Rao’s emphatic comment in his foreword suggests that his objective is to defy Macaulay’s assumed intention of turning the English-literate native Indians into the ‘mimic men’ who would always be neither one thing nor the other. Or, as Bhabha would have put it, breaking away from the standards of the English meant that Indian English writers avoided the uncomfortable position of being ‘almost the same, but not quite’ white (Bhabha 1994: 127).

In this profession of resistance there is none of the violence which Subhas Chandra Bose was elsewhere advocating in India during his striving for freedom. The faithfulness to Gandhi is noticeable, without internalising Gandhi’s unyielding *swadeshi* campaign ideology.¹⁵ These

¹⁵ ‘*Swadeshi*: things pertaining to one’s own country. A many-faceted national movement which arose in reaction to the Partition of Bengal. At the *economic* level it involved the boycott of British imports. At the *educational* level it introduced national educational institutions in Calcutta’ (Gandhi 2009: 21, n.26).

customary freedom-movements were often strictly, and reductively, led by the ideology of anticolonial nationalism, which later proved to be insufficient in leading into a complete 'post-independence state of liberation,' as pointed out by Sivanandan (2004: 43). By striking a compromise between both the use of their form and medium and the content and style of their writing, the literature in English of this generation thus emerged, amidst all the violence and campaigns for non-violence prevalent in the country, as an act of resistance against the established colonial order, without strictly being in line with the customary freedom-movements of its time.

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