

**Canonization and 'Horizontal comradeship': the narratives of Indian literature**Bipasha Som<sup>1</sup>**Abstract:**

Literature of any nation has a sense of national identity spontaneously connected to it. However, the process of connecting the literary narrative with the national narrative of a country takes a fixation of literary tradition or in other words, establishment of its own literary canon. Canonizing Indian literature, by situating the literary practices into modern Indian consciousness, along with its regional counterpart is necessary, as it will refute attempts at its re-colonization with the first-worldist world-view or Universalist paradigm that is part and parcel of globalization. Yet, Indian literature today with its divide between IWE and Indian *Bhasa* writings on the one hand and a problematic definition of nation to represent on the other, is face-to-face with no less than a challenge in this regard. Nevertheless, it's a challenge that it has to take up in order to preserve its relevance in today's milieu.

**Keywords:** nation, literary canon, IWE, Bhasa writing

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Bipasha Som is working as a faculty at the Department of English and Modern European Languages, Gautam Buddha University. earned her PhD in English literature from the school of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kharagpur in 2011. Her area of interest is Indian Writing in English, postcolonial theory and writing and translation studies. She has published research articles in different national and international journals. She can be reached at [bipasha@gbu.ac.in](mailto:bipasha@gbu.ac.in)

For ages, we have been debating whether literature only gives us an expanded perspective of life or it also has the potential to transform us by reflecting on that life. Without going into the debate of art for art's sake vs. art for social purpose, it can be safely said that literature holds an important role in any society. Rationalization about relevance of something as elusive as literature, is a hazardous job. Still it's important we do it, and focus on the potentiality of literary works beyond being the source of aesthetic pleasure, primarily to explore the innate power of it to impact human mind and reasoning, both individually and collectively. In today's time, if we re-phrase Plato's doubts and cynicism about poetry and ask on a serious note, '*is it really relevant?*' It bounces back with the inevitable counter question '*relevant to whom? or in which context?*'. Literature, like any other product of human knowledge and aesthetics has various aspects and benchmarks of judgement. This paper is going to deal with the particular framework of the dialectics of nation-formation approaches and literary narratives in the Indian context, and the challenges faced in this regard.

In the outline of a globalized world as well as multi-cultural societies, where question of identity is often a pressing concern, literature, is known for being deployed for purposes of identity formation. Various forms of social identity, including national or ethnic ones are often discoursed through its literature. If considered from this perspective, in nations like India where nation-building processes are still on or in-fact are already in the course of being contested even before they are complete, the relevance of literature can hardly be overestimated. Literature of a nation, does not only represent the land in it, it also takes active part in discoursing the milieu, creating its image in the imagination of its citizens as well as others. A connection between construction of national or other collective identities and literature or culture in general, is harped upon by many thinkers, philosophers and writers themselves. In fact, cultural practices and languages as well as literatures are some of the earliest things to be nationalized specially in a post-colonial context. However, this process of connecting the literary narrative with the national narrative of a country often takes a fixation of literary tradition or in other words, establishment of its own literary canon. The processes of developing national consciousness and formation of national literary canon have always been associated to each other.

The concept of a literary canon, with all its parallel associations, is one that defies simplification. However, for the sake of discussion, it can be streamlined as having broadly three general meanings. First, as an approved or traditional collection of literary works; secondly, as writings of an author that scholars generally accept as genuine products of the said author, such as the 'Chaucer canon' or the 'Shakespeare canon'; and thirdly, as an entire body of literature that is traditionally thought to be not only suitable for admiration and study but also are situated in a context and tradition and meet a standard of judgment (Abrams 28-31). There can be a canon composed of works from a particular country, or works written within a specific set of years, or within a certain region. In this way, a literary canon establishes a collection of similar or related literary works. This article attempts to address the need to canonize Indian English writing in general and Indian English novel in particular, in the context of postcolonial identity formation and preservation. While doing so, I take the word canon in the third sense of tradition with a benchmark, and with some situated-ness. And by canonization of Indian English novel, I mean achieving both these things by situating Indian English fiction within a context or tradition, primarily one rooted in Indian sensibility. In other words, one needs to locate, position, and therefore define Indian English novel. And the best way to achieve that is by positioning it in the continuum of Indian literature as a whole written in all its regional languages, or the *bhasa* writings as they are often called, as part of an Indian literary tradition. Within that tradition both IWE and *bhasa* writings are to be studied and understood in the yardstick of each other. To put it differently comparative literary study holds a key to the realization of an all-inclusive body of Indian literature. This entire body of writing would meet one standard of judgement. The terms by which they are studied, would be defined too. I would hurry to add here that by virtue of IWE's lineage as English literature, it surely belongs to the world as well. But that cannot be at the cost of its own cultural origin, because on the one hand it is the cultural or national origin that, to a large extent, shapes a literary body and assigns identity to it and on the other hand, a sense of national identity of a nation is also meaningfully connected to the canonized popular literature of that nation. A particular socio-cultural milieu and its literary output are not only connected, but also are complementary to each other's identity and nurture and fulfill each other.

However, this process of connecting often requires making use of various arguably indigenous tools. Though it is difficult to pin down those tools, it can be safely said that

through the use of local legends, myths, histories and folklore, as well as a subjective ideas of collectivity and identity, a framework or pattern can be and often is created by literary writers. And it is such frameworks that create a canon of literature and it is the same framework that enables cultural values, that eventually solidifies as national ideals, to take shape and grow. When a nation state is formed within and on the basis of ex colonial boundaries, like in India, such contextualizing of the issues of identity assumes more urgency. Canonizing Indian literature is thereby a phenomenon of understandably vast importance. And canonization of Indian literature is achievable by situating its literary practices into modern Indian consciousness, without making them national allegories though. It will, on the one hand, aid the process of postcolonial identity formation of the nation, and on the other, refute attempts at its re-colonization with the first-world world view or Universalist paradigm that is part and parcel of modern day phenomenon of globalization. And this is where Indian literature in general and Indian English literature in particular seems to apparently lack, though for different reason. For Indian *bhasa* writings their linguistic difference can be a potential reason, for IWE its alleged lack of 'Indianness' can be termed as a reason. Having said that, the very concept of 'Indian-ness' needs to be thoroughly problematized too before one can go on to either justify or refute that allegation.

However, David McCutcheon once remarked about early Indian English poetry, "There is little that is specifically Indian in the background and imagery; the rivers and mountains are all generalized, and the 'international' flowers are preferred" (Chindhade 14). His opinion was, unless Indian poetry in English fills up the void of tradition of its own, it's bound to be imitative and insignificant. Though the charges laid by McCutcheon find their fitting rejoinders in poets like A. K Ramanujan's works, the fact remains for a considerable portion of Indian writings that, they are yet to form a tradition of their own. And tradition of any body of literary works is inexorably connected to the soil of the land of its production. Absence of something like an Indian thoughts in the writings of India, particularly those written in English may seem liberating to a globalized cognizance. But that points towards one of the many issues that, taken together, contribute to the lack of a national canon of writing here.

Like any other body of writing, Indian writings in English too should have an identity of its own and that identity cannot be thought of sans the identity of the nation of their origin.

As extremist nationalism, manifested in many postcolonial writers glorifying a common past or heritage, does not help in the long run; having a sense of rootedness cannot be done without either. I must add here that for coming across as a body of writing that can be called Indian, it does not take an extremist nationalism on part of the author. Even authors like Tagore, whose rejection of an intense consciousness of the separateness of Indians from others in the world is well-known, has written works that are inevitably Indian in spirit. So, it is actually a reflection of the soil that can make a work be rooted in its milieu. Not only in the field of literary creativity, in the realm of criticism as well, India, as prominent thinkers like C. D. Narasimhaiah, U.R Ananthamurthy, and Rabindranath Tagore said, would benefit more from a balanced blending of the best of Eastern and Western theories rather than being uncritical receivers and applicators of Western ideas. Intellectual subordination is one of the many impediments in the way of canon formation. James H. Cousins in 1918 said, "...If they (Indians) are compelled to an alternative to writing in their own mother tongue, let it be not Anglo-Indian, but Indo-Anglian, Indian in spirit, Indian in thought, Indian in emotion, Indian in imagery and English only in words ... let their ideals be the expression of themselves, but they must be quite sure that it is their self" (179).

Cousins's dictate was allegedly one-sided and sweeping. Also the very term 'Indian' is too problematic and multidimensional to be dealt with in an unqualified way. Nonetheless, it makes a signal towards the fact that positioning one's writing in one's *self* is required in order to maintain the identity of that writing intact and that is needed because identity of a literature is associated to the identity of the nation of its origin. It is especially true for our nation, India. India, its culture as well as literature, are yet to fully recover from the onslaughts of colonization. We can't help mentioning globalization here, though that has by now become much of a clichéd term.

Globalization, as we all know, is an umbrella term for a huge number of things happening simultaneously in the world. Among multitude of other things it hastens or increases the already in-process flows of people, ideas, cultural habits etc across national borders—mostly to the land of former colonizers. Consequent issues are like hybridity, loss of identity, multiculturalism and disappearance of rigid national identity. Today's writers with multinational citizenship in a globalized world are cosmopolitan in outlook and even celebrate it in their writing. They celebrate the fluid condition of their individuality

possessing multiple identities transcending national barriers. Now is it a matter of concern? Isn't it good in one sense because globalization has an identity of its own? It's the fulfillment of the dream of humanity to integrate itself breaking the unnatural barriers of nationality, race etc. created by ignorant human mind. Yes, it is so to a great extent. But for postcolonial nations like India where processes of nation building projects away from the clutches of imperial cultural domination is yet to be complete and is already plagued by fragmentary powers, from within as well as without. The scenario is a little different, a little more problematic. In countries like ours it becomes a question of legitimate national cultural or even geopolitical identity. That is why there are Indian critics and writers who opine that the local and the culturally specific are also significant. They should at least co-exist with the trans-local and the transnational. Cultural nativism, local traditions that battle globalization, as well as philosophies of specific national distinctiveness need to be kept active because it is they who will create a postcolonial space for our nation and its literature that won't be subjugated by globalized and largely notional cyberspace. And as postcolonial literature, particularly novel, plays a major role in the process of what we call nation building, that is creating and expressing a national consciousness by providing particular images of national life, such a space is very much required for Indian writing in English in general and Indian English novels in particular. It is difficult to ignore the fact that, there is an attempt at recolonizing Indian literature with the first-worldist world-view or the Universalist prototype that is part and parcel of the method of globalization. Western approach in criticism of so-called third world literature seems, to many Indian thinkers, to be similar to colonial mission of 'civilizing the savages', one of the many strategies for discoursing an Orient as uncivilized, barbaric and backward 'other'. In order to resist such attempts, a self-canonization of Indian English literature is very necessary. In fact it is the need of the hour to situate Indian English literary practices and traditions into the modern Indian consciousness and culture as an expression of 'nationness', or in other words creating an Indian canon. As Makarand Paranjpe has put it, "Indian novel cannot be seen as a purely aesthetic product in the Western sense, nor as a pure commodity in contemporary capitalist sense, but a work that reflects and interrogates the larger civilizational and national enterprise of the community in which it is produced"(11).

Those who decide whether and how a work will be canonized include influential literary critics, scholars, teachers, and anyone whose opinions and judgments regarding a

literary work are widely respected. For this reason, there are no rigid qualifications for canonization, and how a work or a body of works will be canonized remains a subjective choice of all concerned. Still for the sake of argumentation, we can say that canonization can be done by placing or situating a body of writing in the continuum of some literary, theoretical as well as cultural or political tradition. And as I mentioned earlier in this paper, the best way to situate Indian English novel is by defining it as a construct situated in the collectivity called Indian literature. And it is best understood in the wider context of literary creativity in all Indian languages. By doing so, we can situate it in larger Indian social economic and cultural background which produces it. One needs to judge Indian English novel from the perspective of its representation of nation and while doing so one cannot afford to forget that Indian English literature is only a part of a huge frame of Indian literature as a whole in different Indian languages.

However, there are many challenges to the process of a probable formation of Indian literary canon. I would like to focus on two major challenges in this paper. First is the deep gulf between Indian writing in English and Indian writing in different regional languages called as Indian *bhasas*. The second and perhaps the more important of the two is the problematic concept of nation itself in India. Let me discuss the issues one by one.

There is a sense of rigid opposition between Indian writing in English and *bhasa* writing. Not only that the *bhasa* writings often occupy a position low down the ladder of popularity compared to Indian English writings, there is acrimony between the two groups based on their authenticity of representation or so called 'Indianness' of expression. Though generalization is a perilous job, these two groups of writing seem to be poles apart regarding their involvement in the milieu they represent. Tabish Khair marks this in his *Babu Fiction* while contesting the proposition that there was "reciprocal influences between the novel in English and the novel in regional languages"(47-48) and states that "until the 1930s and 40s there was effectively no reciprocal influence between Indian English literature and regional literature in general"(48). Indian English fiction and Indian *Bhasa* fictions rarely draw much from each-other. In-Fact, barring some outstanding ones, their works are rarely read by each-other. Khair points out two reasons for which the IWE writers were not being so much influenced by the *Bhasa* writers. Firstly the obvious linguistic reason and secondly, to quote him, "IWE writers were automatically inclined (trained?) to look Westward"(50) for their

models and inspiration. Richard Cronin observes that: "English Indian novels have more in common with each-other (also across the racial divide) than with novels set in India written in any of India's native languages. Salman Rushdie has much in common with Rudyard Kipling than with Premchand"(5). Successful formation of a national literary canon will require addressing this issue seriously. The divide between the two territories needs to be at least problematized by locating the overlaps and points of convergence between them. While translation of *bhasa* texts into English and vice versa as well as translation of one *bhasa* text into another in wide scale have the potential to help in removing a sense of division and work towards creating a continuum, inclusion of translated texts in different university curriculums will also help in bringing them in discursive contact with each-other. Sahitya Akademy's role is commendable in the first context. To put it in simple terms, in a multilingual and multicultural nation like India, massive translation projects are the only thing that can create a body of 'Indian literature' out of the comparatively little bodies of Hindi, Tmil, Marathi, Bengali or Gujrati literatue. It will create a knowledge and more importantly a holistic sensitivity about each other's language and literature. After the creation of such a body of writing it would be comparatively more feasible to situate Indian English novel in the same continuum as part of the Indian canon. As academics play a vital role in the creation of a literary canon in any nation, translation as serious academic engagement as well as re-designing of university literature curriculum is essential in this regard. University comparative literature departments are doing a vital job in this direction already. Different departments dedicated to literatures in different Indian languages, should also have translated works of major authors of each-other as well as Indian English ones in their curriculum. As far as English literature departments are concerned, inclusion of translated Indian *bhasa* texts in the syllabus can be another hugely important step towards creation of an Indian sensibility. When it comes to sensitize a student towards positioning IWE in the continuum of world literature in English, such a step has already been taken by including other bodies of English writings like Australian, Caribbean, African, Canadian as well as Indian English texts in the syllabus of typical (British) English literature courses in India. We only need to replicate the same pattern in Indian context too. Also While we are fully aware of the hazards of translation and the possibility of loss of some essence in the process, we cannot deny the fact that with the give and take of such sensibilities, an overall Indian sensibility will emerge, because ours is not a homogenous nation based on the erasures of fissures but an

incorporative one standing on the basis of shared pluralities. In other words, the horizontal comradeship required for the canonization of Indian literature in general and Indian English literature in particular is potentially achievable with large scale translation of various Indian language-literatures into each other and also with incorporation of translated texts in the university syllabi of English as well as other literature departments.

Now, having talked at some length about what I consider the first issue, let me come to the second one. A national literary canon can be made by locating the representation of national consciousness in its works. So, a clear perception of what national consciousness is, or simply what nation as a construct means, is the pre-conditional of formation of a national literary canon. And here is a prominent stumbling block that any writer, thinker or even an ordinary individual can rarely avoid. According to the definition given in various dictionaries, it refers, more or less, to an ethnic group, sharing a common history, culture and language. Going by this traditional definition of nation as an ethnic group based on commonality or homogeneity, India often fails as a nation because of its inherent and deep rooted internal diversity. This is clearly pointed out by critics like Montserrat Guibernau who floated the idea of ‘state without nation’, for the third-world nations such as India and Japan where “there was no sense in which a nation preceded the emergence of the state” (Guibernau 116). His contention points towards a political country without the basic qualities of nation within. And he says this because of the variety of cultural, religious and linguistic identities of the groups falling within its boundaries. In fact, for him nationality or nationhood within the context of these postcolonial nations were artificial and imposed (4). Theorists like Benedict Anderson propagate the concept that nation as an idea was invented in the West and the rest of the world has largely borrowed the idea and has tried to fit in. The notion of a horizontal comradeship based on shared commonality as the basis of a nation-state is stressed by him too. Undoubtedly it is such pieces of Western hegemonic conclusion that lead many to assume that a sense of nation and belongingness can only be achieved by silencing the differences within a territory and acquiring homogeneity at the cost of the identity of various marginal or not-so marginal groups. While on the one hand the malevolent face of such nationalism is only too prominent for any sensitive thinker to ignore, on the other hand the postmodern tendencies of disbelief towards meta-narratives have their impact on them as well. Together they prompt many modern Indian writers in English to dismantle the very concept of ‘Indianness’ in their texts instead of trying to discourse it. Fiction being a

comparatively 'realistic' genre, tend to display more of this trend. Novels pointing at the porosity of national boundaries and celebrating rootlessness and floating identity of individuals like Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* or Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight's Children* set the trend today. Such a trend is a major impediment not only in the way of national canon formation, but also in the way of politico-cultural identity formation of a post-colonial state. *Bhasa* writers, on the other side of the story are often said to be too rooted in their regional soil to have a pan-Indian appeal. Ashokamitran or Arupa Patangia Kalita are more Tamil and Assamese writers respectively than 'Indian' in the eyes of majority of Indians. This notion also owes its origin to the basic misconception discussed above, namely 'regional is less than national'.

Under this situation, the perception of nation is something that needs urgent attention of intelligentsia in India. India is blessed with thinkers and theorists like M.K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and more recently like Partha Chatterjee, K. Sachidanandan among others who have endlessly insisted on the basic difference from West in the concept of nation in Indian context. Partha Chatterjee, in his book has provided apt rejoinder to the concept of nationless state with his idea of an "inner domain", or a soul to the body of nation (6) as the centre that can hold without exploitation. Gandhi's idea of spiritual nationalism is also perfectly in harmony with the internal diversity of postcolonial nations. These thinkers and many other like them have brought about a significant rupture with the existing knowledge about nation with their original ideas about the collectivity called nation. Sachidanandan has insisted on maintaining a balance between an inherent pluralism that resists homogenising process from within and a sense of belonging that keeps us from falling apart. Such indigenous concepts of nation refuse to give into the post-modernization of knowledge about it, which makes nation a meta-narrative and the concept of unity a fall out of oppression. Indian thinkers have often refused to see the pre-colonial past of their nation as un-historic, as is claimed by the proponents of colonial hegemony. In fact, it was our belief in the historicity of the pre-colonial past and its potency to deliver the modern India, which made Nehru and Gandhiji downplay the role of colonial agency, locating the existence of India before the arrival of the colonizers:

The English have taught us that we were not one nation before and that it will require centuries before we become one nation. This is without foundation. We were one

nation before they came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same. It was because we were one nation that they were able to establish one kingdom and subsequently divided us. (Aikant 172)

But after all said and done, the fact remains that India as a nation is still yet to theorize its own concept of nation and nationality properly. It's ironical that these indigenous ideas are still merely talked about abstraction; yet to be properly theorized and inculcated in the academic circle. Indian thinkers have not seriously attempted to negate the Western epistemic claims, though they had always wished to reclaim their pure indigenous selves. Till today a common man, steeped in the Western idea of multiplicity as a problem to deal with, finds it hard to inculcate the idea of oneness in a multicultural context of India without oppressing the multiple mini narratives within its territory. Till today an average dictionary or even a political science book describes state and nation with the definition of it as one single community, leading to the idea that political and cultural marginalization of the minorities is the only way of having a unified and collective nation. And that in turn leads to more separatist tendencies on part of the marginalized ones. The need of the hour in this case is to develop these concepts of collectivity into a fully-fledged definition of modern nation state, a definition that will be able to define and defend the unique condition of India as nation defying the likes of Gubernau and many other Western critics who simply deny the existence of an Indian nationhood because India does not fit in the idea of the universal definition.

Mahashweta Devi's famous novella *Mother of 1084* can be referred to in this context. Devi addresses the issue of identity in multiple layers and has reflected in her text the multi-layered strands that constitute its heterogeneity in a subtle and rather uncommon way. She has pitted the apparently flawless institute of united and homogenous nation against those who had a 'burning faith in faithlessness' (Devi 20) and has documented their attempt at resistance to state oppression. She has considered re-inscribing the boundaries of nation with their inclusive representation. Probably it is high time for India to get this re-inscription done, to get rid of its colonial shackles in the form of borrowed terms of discoursing and understanding the concept of nation and nationalism and assert itself with its own discourse that will suit its nature the best.

Actually the aforementioned two challenges are interconnected. As Gayatri Spivak has pointed out "The relationship between the writer of vernacular and Indo Anglian

literature is a site of class cultural struggle. By class cultural struggle is meant a struggle in the production of cultural or cultural political identity” (Spivak 126-27). Among many other points of difference, the major one is about their representation of nation and therefore creation of ‘nationness’ in their respective texts. Meenakshi Mukherjee too once stated that it is the IWE’s use of India as a global discursive space and its engagement with different theoretical experimentations of Western idea that alienates it from the *Bhasa* writers’ down-to-earth representation of nation:

India may be a ‘discursive space’ for the writer of Indian origin living elsewhere, but those living and writing here, particularly the *Bhasa* novelists, would seldom make figurative use of something as amorphous as the idea of India because s/he has a multitude of specific and local experiences to turn into tropes and play with. (Mukherjee 2000:181)

While the IWE authors often allegedly seek to dismantle the grand narrative of nation in their attempt to give voice to multitude of mini narratives in the boundaries of it, *bhasa* writers on the other hand go on to re-draw the boundaries of the nation with representation of these sub-nations. Here in, question may be raised as to does it really take the dismantling of the whole idea of nation to give voice to the margin? Or does it actually depend on how we define terms like ‘nation’ and ‘representation’? As Meenakshi Mukherjee has rightly pointed out these dilemmas along with the problematic relation of language with national identity have thrown almost all literary creations into a sphere of the ‘anxiety of Indian ness’ in this country, most of all the IWE, whose association with the language of the former colonial masters has made it especially vulnerable to nationalist critics and nativists. This interconnectedness of the problems calls for potential keys that are multidimensional as well, and a few of those potential keys are briefly discussed in this article. However, one has to remember that as literature is a reflection as well as creator of its milieu with its political, economic and cultural background, literary canon and formation of it, is also not a process devoid of many extra literary factors around it. It is almost impossible to draw the outlines of a literary canon in one article especially in case of Indian literature with all its internal diversity.

In conclusion I would like to say that English writings of India have two lineages. One as English literature, by virtue of that it surely belongs to the world and deserves to be understood in the context of world literature in English. But another lineage of it, is as Indian

writing as well and that aspect stresses the fact that it has to be accepted in and understood in connection with its soil and fellow literary products of that soil. It should consistently evoke a sense of place and time in it, something that literature of any place has the potential to evoke almost spontaneously and impulsively unless the flow is consciously stopped by any theoretical baggage. In short, Indian Writing in English is naturally a part of Indian literature and should be perceived as such. If it wants to have a voice and an identity that is distinct, it should be meaningfully integrated to its milieu. That identity will be inescapably Indian. That surely does not mean homogenization and exoticization of national culture or glorification of its history. Rather it means a spontaneous profoundness of representation that will incorporate national identity within the global, cultural, or even individual identity and will encompass multitude in it. In the formation of both a literary canon and a national sensibility, such perceptiveness of representation is most needed.

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