

Whose identity is it anyway?

Questions about the Indian diaspora are irrelevant to literature



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When I published my first novel, *An Angel in Pyjamas*, some years ago, an Indian critic took me to task for being a "diasporic Indian" who had written a typically "clever" novel. It was a strange mode of criticism, made even more so by the fact that I had lived in a very small Indian town for most of my life, emigrating only a few months prior to the publication of my novel, while the critic lived in one of those big Indian cities from which places like my home town tend to be invisible.

Where does one write "Indian English" from? And does it matter? This is a debate that goes on and on. Writing in these pages in August, for example, William Dalrymple warned that Indian writers in English will soon be faced with competition from "their own cousins born or brought up in the west". This sounds a bit like a retroactive prophecy, since almost all the big names of the Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi generation had already been "brought up in the west".

Even in the 1940s Raja Rao had spent years abroad. His *Kanthapura*, sometimes simplistically considered the quintessentially "Indian" novel of an Indian village, was written in a castle in France. And among the trinity of Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and RK Narayan, who laid so much of the groundwork for future generations, only Narayan did not have extensive experience of the west before becoming a novelist. But even he achieved his breakthrough here, partly through the support of Graham Greene.

We can keep going back. Toru Dutt, the 19th-century poet considered by many to be the first important Indian poet in English, spent years in Europe; the first book in English by an Indian was written by Dean Mahomed, who had emigrated to Ireland and England; GV Desani, to whom Rushdie owes quite a few of the ingredients that went into his chutney English, hardly ever lived in India; there is a 1942 photo, famous in post-colonial circles, of Anand, JM Tambimuttu (the Sri Lankan poet who also edited *Poetry London*) and Narayana Menon recording for the BBC in London with, among others, William Empson, George Orwell and TS Eliot. Most of the more visible Indian English writers have always been based and sometimes educated - if not brought up - in the west.

What, then, is the difference Dalrymple identifies? Is it just the technical matter of the writer's place of birth, or the more useful matter of the writer's formative experiences?

When someone like Hari Kunzru defines himself as a British writer, he is only speaking the truth. What else would he be? What else can Zadie Smith be? What makes them British is not, however, the place of birth inscribed on their birth certificates. It is the influences that shaped them. In that sense one can be "British" while continuing to live mostly in India, and one can be "Indian" while living mostly in the "west".

Speaking for myself, it is true that I lived and studied for 24 years or so in Gaya (Where? No, not Goa), worked as a lowly staff reporter in the Delhi office of the *Times of India*, and only emigrated (for personal reasons) at the ripe old age of 30. I do not physically live in India any more, but those 30 years mean that in many ways my mind still dwells there. Perhaps more importantly, my universe is not framed only or largely by English: I see the world through the windows of Hindi, Urdu, smatterings of Bhojpuri, Sanskrit, Farsi, Punjabi, Bangla. I am not speaking of a drawing-room acquaintance, something anyone can pick up from six months of a Linguaphone-type course. I have in mind a

deeper seepage.

What was truly shocking about Dalrymple's article was his failure to see this aspect of the issue - especially since I have read his *The City of Djinns* and *White Mughals* with great appreciation, and know that he is aware of and sensitive to the linguistic and cultural variety of India. Yet it seems he fell at the most predictable hurdle of all: in British and American publications, our "cousins" born and brought up in the west hog much of the limelight. They are more likely to see India and the world as most English and American readers imagine them: their Bombay will be, by definition, "Bollywood", while for people like me "Bollywood" is a post-1960s tag and leaves out not only earlier films but also later art films and middle cinema (Gulzar, Hrishikesh Mukherji, etc).

They will write the English, even when "defamiliarised" into "Indian English", of the majority of British and American readers. This will not make them worse writers than those of us who choose to write from and of elsewhere, but it will not necessarily make them better either. Yet they will grab the biggest chunk of the global market and by far the richest share of the international reviewer cake. They already do, in spite of the odd and always partial exceptions - Narayan then, Pankaj Mishra now, Arundhati Roy in between (though *The God of Small Things* does narrate the stories of a very Anglophone family). That is the way it was, the way it is, and the way it will be.

Perhaps it is also the way it should be. I write for South Asians who read English and for the significant minority of western readers interested in going beyond the west's dominant discourses. And I would further argue that the work of writers like me, if it deserves attention, will only survive if a critical space for it is created in India. But can this be done in a land where a long and rich cultural heritage, grass-roots political activism, and a working democracy are assailed by gross inequality, populist politics, banal print capitalism, and much illiteracy? That is what should worry us, not our cousins abroad.

• Tabish Khair's second novel, *The Bus Stopped*, is published by Picador.

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