

essay

## India and World Literature

By Salman Rushdie

Continued from Aug 12

WHEN the Marxist Government of West Bengal announced in the mid-1980s that the supposedly elitist, colonialist teaching of English would be discontinued in government-run primary schools, many on the Left denounced the decision itself as elitist, as it would deprive the masses of the many economic and social advantages of speaking the world's language: only the affluent private-school elite would henceforth have that privilege. A well-known Calcutta graffito complained, *My son won't learn English. Your son won't learn English. But Jyoti Basu (the Chief Minister) will send his son abroad to learn English.* One man's ghetto of privilege is another's road to freedom.

Like the Greek god Dionysos, who was dismembered and afterwards re-assembled - and who, according to the myths, was one of India's earliest conquerors - Indian writing in English has been called "twice-born" (by the critic Meenakshi Mukherjee) to suggest its double parentage. While I am, I must admit, attracted by the Dionysian resonances of this supposedly double birth, it seems to me to rest on the false premise that English, having arrived from outside India, is and must necessarily remain an alien there. But my own mother-tongue, Urdu, the camp-argot of the country's earlier Muslim conquerors, became a naturalised sub-continental language long ago; and by now that has happened to English, too. English has become an Indian language. Its colonial origins mean that, like Urdu and unlike all other Indian languages, it has no regional base; but in all other ways, it has emphatically come to stay.

In many parts of South India, people will prefer to converse with visiting North Indians in English rather than Hindi, which feels, ironically more like a colonial language speakers of Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam than does English, which has acquired, in the South, an aura of *lingua franca* cultural neutrality. The new Silicon Valley-style boom in computer technology that is transforming the economies of Bangalore and Madras has made English, in those cities, an even more important language than before.

Indian English, sometimes unattractively called "Hinglish", is not "English" English, to be sure, any more than Irish or American or Caribbean English is. And it is a part of the achievement of the writers in this volume to have found literary voices as distinctively Indian, and also as suitable for any and all of the purposes of art, as those other Englishes forged in Ireland, Africa, the West Indies and the United States.

However, Indian critical assaults on this new literature continue. Its practitioners are denigrated for being too upper-middle-class; for lacking

diversity in their choice of themes and techniques; for being less popular in India than outside India; for possessing inflated reputations on account of the international power of the English language, and of the ability of Western critics and publishers to impose their cultural standards on the East; for living, in many cases, outside India; for being deracinated to the point that their work lacks the spiritual dimension essential for a "true" understanding of the soul of India; for being insufficiently grounded in the ancient literary traditions of India; for being the literary equivalent of MTV culture, of globalising Coca-Colonisation; even, I'm sorry to report, for suffering from a condition that one sprightly recent commentator, Pankaj Mishra, calls "Rushdie-itis" (a condition that has claimed Rushdie himself in his later works).

It is interesting that so few of these criticisms are literary in the pure sense of the word. For the most part they do not deal with language, voice, psychological or social insight, imagination or talent. Rather, they are about class, power and belief. There is a whiff of political correctness about them: the ironical proposition that India's best writing since Independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists is simply too much for some folks to bear. It ought not to be true, and so must not be permitted to be true. (That many of the attacks on English-language Indian writing are made in English by writers who are themselves members of the college-educated, English-speaking elite is a further irony.)

Let us quickly concede what must be conceded. It is true that most of these writers come from the educated classes of India; but in a country still bedevilled by high illiteracy levels, how could it be otherwise? It does not follow, however - unless one holds to a rigid, class-war view of the world - that writers with the privilege of a good education will automatically write novels that seek only to portray the lives of the bourgeoisie. It is true that there tends to be a bias towards metropolitan and cosmopolitan fiction, but, as this volume will demonstrate, there has been, during this half-century, a genuine attempt to encompass as many Indian realities as possible, rural as well as urban, sacred as well as profane. This is also, let us remember, a young literature. It is still pushing out the frontiers of the possible.

The point about the power of the English language, and of the Western publishing and critical fraternities, also contains some truth. Perhaps it does seem, to some "home" commentators, that a canon is being foisted on them from outside. The perspective from the West is rather different. Here, what seems to be the case is that West-

ern publishers and critics have been growing gradually more and more excited by the voices emerging from India; in England at least, British writers are often chastised by reviewers for their lack of Indian-style ambition and verve. It feels as if the East is imposing itself on the West, rather than the other way around. And, yes, English is the most powerful medium of communication in the world; should we not then rejoice at these artists' mastery of it, and their growing influence? To criticise writers for their success at "breaking out" is no more than parochialism (and parochialism is perhaps the main vice of the vernacular literatures). One important dimension of literature is that it is a means of holding a conversation with the world. These writers are ensuring that India, or rather, Indian voices (for they are too good to fall into the trap of writing nationalistically), will henceforth be confident, indispensable participants in that literary conversation.

Granted, many of these writers do have homes outside India. Graham Greene, Anthony Burgess, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Doris Lessing, Mavis Gallant, James Baldwin, Henry James, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Muriel Spark, were or are wanderers, too. Muriel Spark, accepting the British Literature Prize for a lifetime's achievement in March 1997, went so far as to say that travel to other countries was essential for all writers. Literature has little or nothing to do with a writer's home address.

The question of religious faith, both as a subject and an approach to a subject, is clearly important when we speak of a country as bursting with devotions as India; but it is surely excessive to use it, as does one leading academic, the redoubtable Professor G. D. Narasimhaiah, as a touchstone, so that Mulk Raj Anand is praised for his "daring" merely because, as a leftist writer, he allows a character to be moved by deep faith, while Arun Kolatkar's poetry is denigrated for "throwing away tradition and creating a vacuum" and so "losing relevance", because in Jejuri, a cycle of poems about a visit to a temple town, he sceptically likens the stone gods in the temples to the stones on the hill-sides nearby ("and every other stone/is god or his cousin"). I hope readers of this anthology will agree that many of the writers gathered here have profound knowledge of the "soul of India"; many have deeply spiritual concerns, while others are radically secular, but the need to engage with, to make a reckoning with, India's religious self is everywhere to be found.

In the end, the writing gathered here will either justify, or fail to justify, our claims for it. What is un-

questionable is that the cheapening of artistic response implied by the allegations of deracination and Westernisation is notably absent from these writers' work. As to the claims of excessive Rushdie-itis, I can't deny that I've on occasion felt something of the sort myself. On the whole, however, it seems to be a short-lived virus, and those whom it affects soon shake it off and find their own, true voices.

In my own case, and I suspected in the case of every writer in this volume as well, knowing and loving the Indian languages in which I was raised has remained of vital importance. As an individual, Hindi-Urdu, the "Hindustani" of North India, remains an essential aspect of my sense of self: as a writer, I have been partly formed by the presence, in my head, of that other music, the rhythms, patterns and habits of thought and metaphor of my Indian tongues. What I am saying is that there is not, need not be, should not be, an adversarial relationship between English-language literature and the other literatures of India. We drink from the same well, India, that inexhaustible horn of plenty, nourishes us all.

IRONICALLY, the century before Independence contains many vernacular language writers who would merit a place in any anthology: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, Mirza Ghalib, Bibhutibhusan Banerjee (the author of *Pather Panchali*, on which Satyajit Ray based his celebrated Apu Trilogy of films), and Premchand, the prolific (and therefore rather variable) Hindi author of, among many others, the famous novel of rural life *Godaan*, or *The Gift of a Cow*. Those who wish to seek out their leading present-day successors should try, for example, O. V. Vijayan (Malayalam), Surya Prasad Tripathi Niral (Hindi), Nirmal Verma (Hindi), U. R. Ananthamurthy (Kannada), Suresh Joshi (Gujarati), Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Qurratulain Haider (Urdu) or Ismat Chughtai (Urdu), and make their own assessments.

The first Indian novel in English was a dud. Rajmohan's *Wife* (1864) is a poor melodramatic thing. The writer, Bankim, reverted to Bengali and immediately achieved great renown. For 70 years or so there was no English-language fiction of any quality. It was the generation of Independence, "midnight's parents", one might call them, who were the true architects of this new tradition (Jawaharlal Nehru himself was a fine writer.) Of these, Mulk Raj Anand was influenced by both Joyce and Marx but most of all, perhaps, by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. Raja Rao, a scholarly Sanskritist, wrote determinedly of the need to make an Indian English for himself, but even his much-praised portrait of village life, *Kanthalpura*,

To be continued

## Poems on Rabindranath Tagore

Translated by Andalib Rashdie

### Jubilee

Sattyandranath Dutt

If the king can celebrate jubilees  
Poets can celebrate too  
The king is adored in his own country  
Poets are in countries all.

Chanakya leaves this ancient word  
A word in a million  
If the king can celebrate jubilees  
Poets can celebrate too.

If I don't get an instance to show  
Yet there is nothing to be sorry  
The jubilee for the poet will be created  
In a fancy full of Bangladesh.

If the king can celebrate jubilees  
Poets can celebrate too.  
I have set the rules in these lines  
And signed at the bottom.  
The best of all poets is Rabi of Bengal  
I bow down to salute him.

### Rabindranath

Buddhadev Bose

You were not a deer in the forest, or a grass flower  
Inside the cave of cloud, you were not a ray of light.  
Even you were not a lad. Sharp eyes were overcast all the daylong.  
The toy in hand got heavier and hand dropped on hand.  
Yet you were there to fill up the leisure.

You could not meet the blue eyed beauty in Napoli  
There was no reply to letters. There was a body like ours.  
Perhaps there were prickly heat or mosquitoes around.

Hours are on the opposing stream of winds  
The black bell pounds down on the ground  
Yet there was competition in rest in other world  
Engrossed in white. As if you have never tried  
The pitcher has floated away  
You are only water  
That is what I have received in silence  
In a few moments from you.

Sitting in an intimate evening today I kindle a sleepless night  
On the fallacious book, in the pale fire of thought  
When the jealous riot of words, meanings and relations end up.

### To Rabindranath

Shamsur Rahman

In these days I can effortlessly slide away  
From the scorching sun to the shadow of dream  
Only the other midday I was leafing through *Gitabitan*  
Very difficult it was to ascertain the time  
When I stepped on the seashore.  
The conch disgored by the sea spread  
The mythical heavenly songs  
Along the seashore. I go on walking.  
Sometimes a *baul* and sometimes a Troubadour,  
I see a silvery fountain ahead  
Ducks and lyres remain on the sands side by side  
A deer at a distance basks the shade of a silk-cotton tree

The next moment a unique garden of flowers illuminate  
Where Bidyapati, Chandidas, Sri Madhusudan Dutt, Lalan Fakir  
Kazi Nazrul Islam and Jibananda Das and  
The other poets of the thirties  
And shadowy few others are couched on silvery seats.  
Rabindranath is different, sitting on a golden chair  
With a crown on the head  
Stars dance on the in the assembly of poets and drops down there  
A hundred *parijat*.

When I advanced approaching the assembly of poets  
A tall figured man shouts a rigid voice at me.  
Stiffness on his face  
'Go, go away, there is no room for anyone.'

The obstruction disdains my spirit.  
I restrain myself and pour down my humble submission  
'I do not need a chair to sit on, I long for a little space  
Closer to the kind feet of Rabindranath. I wish he would be  
Kind to allow me there.' I could not make out till late if  
I had the permission or not.

The cloud approaches and covers my face.  
I go far away from myself.  
On this floating body and mind I smell the  
Olden wrath of water, broken boats, snails and aquatic plants.  
A brown-red tunic trembles on the horizon  
In the crazy winds of Baishakh  
And it seems a self-engrossed flute goes on signing to keep me awake.

### Rabindranath

Al Mahmud

How dark it is for Bengal that stops rising up  
The spell of silence does not allow birds  
On the branches of trees,  
Rivers are grief-stricken,  
There is no green coverage anywhere  
But there is growth of mushroom on the barren earth.

I wonder why on earth Rabindranath reared for him  
A wild dream of a rebirth in Bengal as tree  
There are no trees, no rivers,  
Only a cryptogamic passes on  
The practice of having a rebirth has come to an end.  
Everyone opposes a return to a life.

Listen Rabindranath, if I plant all your poems  
Underneath in Bengal soil  
And water them day and night  
I am certain and I believe that  
Not a single plant will grow.  
So barren and unproductive  
Is your Bangladesh, Tagore.

There blows the unfaithful wind,  
There is no expression of words  
One or two birds are still sitting on the banyan branch  
With a resonance they exchange words in fear  
On the silent twenty-fifth day of rainless Baishakh.

To be continued

lecture

## Khushwant in Karachi

Khushwant Singh went from Delhi to Karachi in late March to address a seminar on "Peace, Goodwill and Fellowship", organised by Rotary International.

Continued from Aug 12

MY suggestion has been repeated many times—that if our countries be like civilised countries, you would accept this possibility: give the Muslims of Kashmir the right to decide their own future. Unfortunately, it is too small an area to be an independent state. It is only 70 miles long and 30 miles broad; it cannot be viable as a separate state. Its only possible existence as a fully autonomous state depends on the support by India and Pakistan. And do not think it is such a big problem, that we cannot get together and say we will give the Kashmiris total independence of you or us. They will allow anyone they want in the state. If they don't want an Indian to come in, they will not give him permission, and if they do not want a Pakistani, they will do the same. This is the quote I use to support this point of view.

'Jo bhi aye, meri ijazat hai aye,  
yeh koi jannat nahin hai, mera watan hai.'

Let the Kashmiris decide for themselves. If it is such a big problem for us to get together, then let there be a dialogue not between two, but three. If this is acceptable to the Kashmiris, we will set up a council of Kashmir with two people from the

valley, one from Pakistan, one from India and with an official from the UN presiding. But with an undertaking from this autonomous state that there would be no migration of minority communities from the state.

We have already had large numbers of Kashmiri Pandits who have gone away to Jammu and also the recent incident of a massacre of a whole village of Sikhs. There can never be a one-way traffic—migration of populations are very dangerous. We learnt that lesson in 1947, 10 million people had to be changed hands across the borders and one million people were massacred. We cannot afford to have that situation repeated even on a small scale. This autonomous state I keep proposing should give a guarantee to the Kashmiri Pandits and the Sikhs that they will be rehabilitated in the state and given complete security.

I do not know if there any takers for this. We go on and on having endless talks. Pakistan is right that India is dragging its feet. I would say we are open for a dialogue, but Pakistan's dialogue only means "you give us the Valley", and the Indians know that only too well.

I would like to make one another point that may offend some, but this is my pet aversion or obsession—intolerance of other people's opinions.

I think the main 'culprit' is the way we interpret our religions. Instead of being a unifying force, a force of love as it was meant to be, a force to solve social problems, religion has become a divisive and backward-looking force. We hear about your problems, the predominance of the mullahs, the madrassahs and what they teach, their constant declaration of jihad against non-Muslims like me, but we too have similar problems in our country.

We have had a resurgence of Hindu fundamentalism, after containing Sikh fundamentalism. We had that madcap Bhindranwale, who said kill all Hindus because he felt they were anti-Sikh. I have a recorded speech, and I'm not exaggerating, in which he spoke about the length of the beard we should have, and whether we should colour it or not. He prescribed the kind of dress you had to wear; you could not enter the Golden Temple wearing a sari because that's a Hindu dress, you must wear a salwar kameez, but it did not occur to him that it could also be a Pakistani dress. This kind of pernicious thing caught on even amongst the educated classes and that was the amazing thing.

We could contain (Sikh fundamentalism), but Sikhs are only 2 percent of the population of the