

Book Review

Influence of English on Indian Women Writers: Voices from Regional Languages

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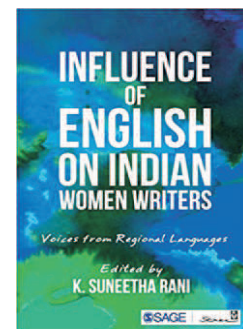
Influence of English on Indian Women Writers: Voices from Regional Languages

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This book provides an alternative viewpoint to the spread of English language and education by viewing it from the lens of gender. It comprises 12 essays and a detailed introduction. Most of the essays are focussed on the colonial and pre-independence era.

The author views language in relation to gender by associating the English language and education with masculinity, since men were the first to access modernity through the advent of colonialism. At the same time, regional languages and their use is seen in relation with women or femininity. This may also

be understood as a symbol of the power which English language wields over regional languages, similar to the socio-political control exercised over women and their writings. Thus, linguistic inequalities are seen as being intertwined with gender inequalities.

The book takes a well-rounded approach towards the multiplicities of perspectives with regard to modernity and English education during the period. It presents multiple viewpoints—the educational access granted to women as part of the nationalist reform project undertaken majorly by men; modernity being used as

a token to re-establish traditional gender roles and domesticating women; exposure to English language and education creating wider gaps between privileged and non-privileged women.

The book also brings forth the viewpoint that some nationalists viewed modernity, encompassed by the English language and education as a corrupting element and a colonial legacy, which was to be resisted especially with regard to women. However, the subversive attempts of women writers to use the exposure and liberation provided by English language and education for writing their own subjective discourse is also given ample space for discussion in the book.

This volume demonstrates that the impact of the English language and English education (it does not make a nuanced differentiation between the two) varies widely from woman to woman, depending on their background, thus adding the dimensions of caste, class, religion, gender and politics to language learning.

The introduction binds the essays into a common thread, and uses multiple references to the writings and lives of various women authors, including women writing in vernacular languages. It gives the reader an opportunity to expand the scope of their readings in regional literatures, both in terms of women's writing in English and alternative discourses in language.

Chapter 1 is titled "Language, Reform and Nationalism: Indian Women's Writing in the Nineteenth Century" by C. Vijayasree. It brings to light some of the Indian women writers of the period, whose lives and works were comparatively ignored by the popular discourse, and which came to fore through historical narratives. Through the description of their works and the influences on these, the essay elaborates on the alternate lens, rather lenses, through which the agendas of the

nationalist movement with regard to women can be viewed. Vijayasree argues that exposure to English education and social reform were crucial factors in bringing out the subjectivity of these women.

Chapter 2 by Uma Alladi, "Women and 'Reform'", problematizes the notion of modernity and English education for women of the 19th and early 20th century. Alladi uses the works of three women writers from three different language backgrounds to bring out how English education was used as a tool by patriarchy to "reform" the women. The aim was to improve the skills of the domesticated women and "liberate" the so called "other" women.

The third essay by Sanjukta Dasgupta, "Colonized: The Bengali Woman Writer in British India", compares the condition of women writers in Bengal in the 19th century with those in British India in the early 20th century, to bring out the similarity in notions against women's education and writing. Women's writing, especially in English, was seen as a revolutionary and subversive act, and therefore criticized. The author also argues that women's education in India was seen as a colonial legacy by some nationalists.

The fourth chapter is by Somdatta Bhattacharya, and is titled "Rokeya's Dream: Feminist Interventions and Utopias". The author uses the life and works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain to bring out not only the problems such as choice of language for writing and patriarchal notions of nationalism which stood in the way of women's education and reform, but also the way in which women's writing paved the way for rebelling against both colonial domination and conservative nationalism.

Meera Kosambi's essay "Marathi Women Novelists and Colonial Modernity:

Kashibai Kanitkar and Indirabai Sahasrabudhe" forms Chapter 5 of the book. It draws on the life of these two women novelists to argue that women's education and reform began majorly as a male dominated nationalist project. However, some women writers were able to develop a feminist discourse through their writings by using that very exposure to education and English language, which was provided by the reformists as a subversion tool.

Chapter 6 is by Omprakash Manikrao Kamble and is titled "Mukta Salve: The Early Emergence of a Protest Voice in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Bombay Presidency, 1855". The chapter delves into Mukta Salve's essay "Mang Maharanchya Dukka Wishayi Nibandh", to draw attention towards the role of English language in the Dalit discourse at the time. It elaborates how access to English education and colonial modernity helped the Dalits question notions of purity and pollution, which formed the core of the varna system. Contemporary voices in Dalit empowerment such as that of Kancha Ilaiah asking for English education for the Dalits almost seem to echo this historical discourse.

Paromita Bose's essay "Writing Self: Writing for Others", combines several interesting discourses. Bose looks at Muthulakshmi Reddi's autobiography, and argues that English education was a crucial factor in her emergence as a reformer, one of the first women doctors in India, and a beneficiary as well as supporter of the Anti-Nautch Movement. The essay thus views language discourse along with social reform movement, professional education, women's upliftment and the "reform" of the "other" women as Alladi describes in the second chapter.

Chapter 8, by S. Jinju "Reconfiguring Boundaries: Education, Modernity, and Conjugality in Lalithambika Antharjanam's

Agnisakshi and Zeenuth Futehally's Zohra" simply sums the lives of the female protagonists of these two novels based in the pre-independence era. The two characters are used to represent the struggle between the binaries of an emancipated aspirational educated self and the traditional roles that women had been confined to under the patriarchal system, especially in the confines of marital homes.

Chapter 9 by H. Nikhila is interestingly titled "Securing Pass Marks: Education for Women in the Early Modern Kannada Novel", and is very well structured. It draws on four Kannada novels based in the context of the 20th century to bring out that women's education was aimed at bringing about superficial modernity to produce modernized domesticated women. These women barely secured pass marks in examinations, rather than becoming free thinking individuals who benefitted from the education that they were exposed to.

Chapter 10, Sowmya Dechamma's essay "Women and English Education in Coorg/Kodagu: A Discussion of Alternate Modernities during 1834-1882", studies the effects of English language and education on the Coorgs/Kodavas as a community, especially with regard to the girl child and women. Dechamma coherently exemplifies the argument that exposure to English education affected different people differently, almost reminiscent of the Dalit empowerment through English as elaborated in Chapter 6 by Kamble. Both the essays argue that for marginalized populations, modernity through English education brought opportunities of empowerment. Dechamma's essay also discusses how the larger discourse of modernity as viewed by the nationalist movement was not the only discourse, and how various contexts experienced modernity very differently.

Chapter 11 by Yogitha Shetty is titled "Nation, Ideal Womanhood and English Education: Revisiting the First Tulu novel Sati Kamale". In the essay, Shetty argues that the novel in question is a nationalist project that portrays English education as being representative of colonial modernity that should be resisted. The essay also problematizes the novel's understanding by bringing forth the varied opinions that existed within the Tulu community with regard to English education.

The last Chapter by Jasbir Jain called "Between Langue and Parole: The Forked Road to Development" steps out of the historical period on which the other essays are based, and looks at various language issues in the contemporary context. The English language, with its relation to education, pedagogical problems, as well as employment issues is discussed with the help of various references and examples.

To sum up, a line from the Introduction of the book says, "the essays in this volume

rightly take the identities and specificities into consideration instead of essentializing the debates around English". The volume takes a subjective approach. It does not have English teaching strategies as an objective. Instead, it is more suited for sociological, gender, or historical analysis of the use of English language in the era that it focuses on. However, it can act as an interesting background read for a deeper understanding of the present issues relating to education and language.

Further, since political, social and economic undercurrents form the basis of our everyday interactions, especially in a language classroom, the volume helps to expand understanding of these with regard to language. It is relevant for broadening one's horizons in alternative understanding of the relations between language and gender, multiple views of modernity and education, and history of English language in the Indian context.