



## Against Odds: Identity and Survival - South Asian Literature in English

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### Abstract:

*South Asia emanates from the great Indian sub-continent and comprises India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan, who have deep rooted connection through a shared history and culture. The experience of sharing a history and culture that is common, yet utterly personal, makes the literature of the region unique and provides the South Asians a common basis for understanding their position in the contemporary world. Critics of South Asian Literature mostly focus on religion, region and nationality within South Asia, but my concern in the present lecture moves beyond this. It addresses the problems of identity and survival, particularly linguistic inside a changing geography and changing society. Colonial oppression, ethnicity, religion and border issues are paramount and have led to rabid linguistic regionalism. The present discussion involves a survey of literatures in English available in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. It is important to look into the connections these offer and to see where they have positioned South Asians in contemporary times and how South Asian Literature in English is going to be shaped in the future against all odds.*

**Key Words:** South Asia, Literature, History, Culture, Linguistic regionalism

“I am Indian, very brown, born in  
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in  
Two, dream in one.”

[Kamala Das cited in de Souza, *Nine Indian Women poets*]

These lines from Kamala Das familiarize us with the predicament of South Asian writers. South Asia emanates from the great Indian sub-continent and comprises India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan, who have deep rooted connection through a shared history and culture. The experience of sharing a history and culture that is common, yet utterly personal, makes the literature of the region unique. It provides the South Asians a common basis for understanding their position in the contemporary world. “South Asia also constitutes a coherent environmental region with a conjoint ecological cycle and a common river, ocean and mountain system . . . . The region indeed enjoys an extremely rich common historical tradition and legacy as well as cultural and socio-economic commonalities” (Amir 61). Critics of South Asian Literature mostly focus on religion, region and nationality within South Asia, but my concern in the present discussion moves beyond this. It addresses the problems of identity and survival of English language and literature inside a changing geography and changing society. The present generations of South Asia and also the diaspora are born into the Eastern culture and are raised in Western ways, bringing with them a hybridity and a crisis in identity and survival. They fight for acceptance in their own homeland as diaspora/expatriates who live outside their native domain. The study observes how colonial oppression, ethnicity, and religion are paramount and have led to rabid linguistic regionalism in South Asia, with special reference to Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

While Literature in English has a distinct place in India, it has struggled through odds to obtain a position of respect inside the other South Asian countries and has often become an afterthought. Therefore, it is important today, to take an overview of the literary scenario in South Asia and understand the crisis of identity and survival that South Asian Literature in English is undergoing at present. The present discussion involves an analysis of the linguistics tensions and its impact

on literatures in English available in three South Asian countries, namely, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. It is important to note that language has become synonymous with nationality. In his essay, 'Race and Mankind', Freeman has emphasized that 'Mankind instinctively takes language as the badge of nationality.' Each nation aspires to be a linguistic entity. This presumption is evident in Europe, as native speakers of French, German, and Italian are Frenchmen, Germans and Italians. In the context of South Asia, which is a product of a common cultural history we find a legacy of rich linguistic diversity. In spite of having common origins, common historical experiences, common religions and morals, common customs, complementarily and interdependence the region divided itself according to linguistic unity. Linguistic unity became a more durable policy for survival and permanence than other parameters like religion etc. The single national language theory which is a product of European historical experience is problematic in South Asia, which has shown that, linguistic identity and national consciousness are synonymous. Mother tongue is sacred and is a vehicle for all national endeavors.

One of the reasons for rabid linguistic regionalism can be related directly to the anti-colonial feeling of the people of the region. Colonialism with its dominance and hegemony imposed a linguistic imperialism; imposing that English be the medium of official transactions thereby undermining the importance of the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of South Asia. Prior to 1835 production of literature in learned native tongues were supported and patronized by the rulers, but in 1835 Lord Macaulay in his infamous *Minute upon Indian Education*, stated 'that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia'(cited in Wikipedia). Whereby, linguistic imperialism of English language was established over Sanskrit, Arabic and other regional languages. After independence from the British, South Asian Governments sought to maintain the same linguistic policy in order to dissolve or assimilate fully the indigenous culture of South Asia so as to observe power relations as in colonial times. Here it is relevant to note that the decolonized nations of the British Empire called themselves a 'commonwealth' and included under its umbrella 54 nations

including the countries in the Indian subcontinent; and that by 1960 Commonwealth literature indicated literature written in English or translated into English by writers of the commonwealth.

This has wrought a crisis of identity in South Asian literature and culture, which is very different from Commonwealth literature that privileges the moment of colonial contact and prolongs it through English as the medium of expression. In South Asia there are several languages with indigenous literary traditions clamouring to be recognized but are denied their rightful place due to the dominance and hegemony of English as the language of literature already established in University Departments by that time. Several languages with some degree of literary tradition co-existed but could not claim a distinct dominance or even a place of respect over English. Such a situation is found in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the other South Asian countries and has given rise to “intense antagonism on the language issue. . . Language is thus not only a primary element in nationality formation but remains a significant issue even in the process of nation building” (Karna 84). In the throes of linguistic politics regional language and literature thereof assumed a central place. It became a critical issue in anti-colonial struggles of the South Asian nations and “acted as a symbol of identity and distinction which in turn provided access to their own cultural tradition” (Karna 84). The role of the language introduced by the colonial masters, that is, English, and the conscious standardization of the major vernacular languages led to a crisis of identity and problematised survival of literatures. Literature has always been a vehicle of culture. Syed Mohammed Amir observes rightly that, social, political and economic activities affect human mind and society. Related events and activities change the course of history and cultural evolution as it happens after every foreign invasion that history has witnessed from Aryan invasion in Harappa to British invasion in India (50). Culture, as we all know, is easy to describe; but difficult to define. Man appeared as the result of actions and reactions of the material world. Material world shaped both culture and civilization. Religious ideology and practices, myths and rituals owe their origin to material and social environment which they sub serve and perpetuate. Any

change in this affects civilization and culture of the society. Dilip Chakrabarty observes “that culture is profound insight man acquired through processes and practices which started with his first appearance as Homo erectus millions of years ago. Advancement of culture requires exchange of ideas, knowledge, thoughts, doctrines, observations, growing intercourse, regular exchange of consumables and commodities” (30).

The present paper attempts to look roundabout and study the critical position that English as a medium of literature has come to acquire in the face of such typical anti-colonial linguistic antagonism and cultural revival in nations like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh in particular. To begin with, we can look at the literary history of Myanmar. Culture and literature of Myanmar is deeply influenced by religion. Since the Myanmar language itself is now almost more than 1000 years old, while English is only about 400 years old, Myanmar literature can be expected to be far richer than most of the western languages. In the website Myanmartravel.org, the earliest Myanmar literature has been described to be primarily of a religious nature. Literature during the ancient period was mainly concerned with the Jataka tales told by the Buddha to his disciples in answer to certain questions. It was in the form of drama and epistles or missives, written in verse. Works on law and history were written in prose. Many dramas were written during the 16th to 18th centuries, while in the 19th century, poems, drama, and chronicles were produced. After the British invasion, the country's literature began to reflect the impact of a Western culture; the arrival of the printing press also influenced literature, which previously had been written for a much smaller audience. Plays that had been written for the court became widely available; these plays were not performed on the stage but were meant to be read.

Novels were a later development; the first Myanmar novel was an adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but written in a Myanmar setting. Modern Myanmar literature can be said to have had its beginnings in the 1930s when the University of Yangon was founded and the Department of Myanmar Studies established, and it was anglo-vernacular at that. Vernacular literature was fuelled during the movement for independence. Theippan Maung Wa, Hmawbi Saya Thein, and Thein Pei Myint were original and innovative

writers from the colonial period. But Thakin Kodaw Hmaing was greatly responsible for anti-colonial literature in Myanmar. He spawned this with his powerful *leigyō gyi* and *htika* verses famous for their patriotic and satirical content. Literature in Myanmar after independence in 1950s exhibited western style of writing that it had adopted from the British. But in 1960s with the rule of Ne Win and strict Government censorship literature of the region became mundane. The *Khit san* movement was not completely dead and the voice of the female writer GyanA gyaw Ma Ma Lei was distinctly heard in the postcolonial period.

The politically oriented novels and plays of Prime Minister U Nu, particularly his book, *Yet-set Pabe Kwai* ("Man, the Wolf of Man"), and novels about inmates in U Nu era jails and volumes of ethnic minority folktales written by Ludu U Hla had become popular. However, Myanmar is weak in fiction. It is believed that Buddhist conservatism has significantly influenced writers and they think that fictions are unreal and made-up stories, and therefore they are lies. In orthodox Buddhist teaching, making lies is a serious sin and is strictly prohibited. This has delayed the birth of the first fiction novel in Myanmar language till the early 1900s. Before then, most artistic work and literature always somehow related to religion. They were about last 10 lives or the last 550 lives of Buddha and so on. The literature has a tendency to reflect local folklore and culture. In contemporary times where parameters of development are globalization and communication in English, contemporary writers like Nu Nu Yi and Ma Thanegi are frustrated that Myanmar literature does not enjoy international audience even today. In an article in *Myanmar Times*, writers Thae Thae Htwe and Zon Pann Pwint state the anguish of the writers:

When well-known writer Nu Nu Yi visited Blackwell's Books in Oxford, England, in 1998, she searched for the section where English-language translations of Myanmar authors might be kept.

Aside from Aung San Suu Kyi's Letters from Burma, there was no trace of Myanmar literature amid stacks of translated works by Thai writers. Nu Nu Yi said that as she stood in the bookstore, her eyes filled with tears over the

realisation that there was no international audience for authors from her home country. (Myanmar Times).

In the article Nu Nu Yi, who could not find her book *Smile as They Bow*, laments the lack of English translations of original texts from Myanmar which keeps the international audience in the dark about a country's culture and society, and way of life. Between 1993 and 2013 few books by few writers have been published in English and they are mostly books on Politics, History, Poetry and Short Stories. Linguistic regionalism has so overtaken Myanmar that the present literary scenario of the country in relation to the international readership and research is bleak and challenging.

The South Asian region of Sri Lanka boasts of indigenous literature along the lines of linguistic regionalism and ethnicity. "The rise in ethnic sentiments in contemporary South Asia dates back to the colonial period. Ethno-nationalist movements evolved as part of anti-colonial struggles for affirming the cultural roots and heritage of indigenous groups interacting with each other and with colonial masters" (Silva 202). The literature prior to independence was typically literatures on nationalist movements that were largely 'cultural-revivalist in character' (202) and had waned out by 1948, the time of political independence of Sri Lanka. By 1990s there was again a resurgence of nationalist discourse as the Tamils and Sinhallas engaged in ethno-political activism for access to state power and to redefine their identity in ethnic and ethno-nationalist terms. It is interesting to note that Sri Lankan writing in English came of age only in the 1980s. Although, English is a dominant language in the country, yet it has not acquired a place of respectability in literature of the land. English is considered as the language of the elite and the experiences depicted in English is supposedly outside the territory of the indigenous experiences deemed typical of the country. According to Rajiva Wijesinha, "immediately after independence... there was a downgrading of those few who had in fact written in English in the early years of the century. They were seen as being antinational. Hence, both the aping of English writers and also a sometimes-subtle critique of the anglicized elite, in the work of pioneers such as S.J. Crowther, were ignored, in favor of what was termed as more authentic writings in the indigenous languages"(305). Sri Lankans were

even suspicious of the poet Patrick Fernando. For them he ‘epitomized the alienation that critics assumed marked anyone who wrote in English’ (305).

Sri Lankan literature is a complex of religious and social underpinnings. Given the powerful impetus that Buddhism had and has on scholarship and literature in Sri Lanka, both prose and verse in the country have drawn heavily from Buddhist parables. Even in the oral tradition, complex philosophical concepts and ideas are illustrated using stories from the Buddha’s life as well as the *jataka* stories, i.e. narratives of the past lives of Buddha. Tamil literature is inspired by works from centuries past, but has the added advantage of being able to draw from the literary traditions of the South of India where the language is also spoken. The literary history of Tamil writers in Sri Lanka is far less voluminous than that of their Sinhala counterparts, due partly to a fractured historical presence on the island and the absence of an equivalent temple-based system of education that has been a part of Sinhalese culture, but the oral traditions cannot be said to be any less rich. In recent times, current events and processes whose human impact has been immediate, including the three-decade-long armed conflict that rent the island, have found expression in literary works in both languages.

The post-Independence period has been marked in literature and civic life by nationalistic despair, euphoria, cataclysmic political and social upheaval, and by resilience. The violence that the country has been suffering since the 1971 insurgency has brought about an interesting turn in the linguistic scenario. Hostility towards the English language has waned sufficiently in the wake of civil wars and linguistic rivalries. Wijesinha comments that Ediriweera Sarachchandra, one of the most influential Sinhalese writers wrote an anguished, largely autobiographical account of a professor torn by conscience. This was published as *Curfew and a Full Moon* which he translated into English himself and “helped to restore writing in English to respectability” (305). Ethnic problems of the times required an objective vehicle for communicating the trauma of a people induced by constant violence. English became the medium of objective and dynamic writing. Jean Arasanayagam and Richard de Zoysa, in their poetry conveyed the anguish of a nation divided along linguistic lines. Question

of identity and self-definition are key themes in their poetry. Yasmine Gooneratne, an important poet, who began *New Ceylon Writing* and *Navasilu*, the journal of the English Association of Sri Lanka, migrated to Australia in the 1970s. Some of her poems like, “The Peace Game”, “The Big Match 1983” and “This Language, This Woman”, explore sociocultural issues and ethnic violence that has torn Sri Lanka in the post-Independence history. She also talks about the politics of English in the country. Postcolonial cultural and literary plurality permeates the writings of Sri Lankan expatriate or diaspora writers like Romesh Gunesekara, Michael Ondaatje, and Shyam Selvadurai. Gunesekara’s novels *Reef* and *The Sandglass* depict a Sri Lanka that Sri Lankans do not recognize, some Sri Lankans even pointed out that “the author took a jaundiced view of the country and was equally guilty of exoticising it”(Perera 127). Although Ondaatje has lived all his life abroad, he was moved by his visit to Sri Lanka as an adult and wrote *Running in the Family*, which won him accolades in the West. Unfortunately, this book did not even create a flutter in Sri Lanka.

The hybridity of experience and expression of the diaspora writers make them outsiders to the reality of Sri Lankans residing inside the country. The Sri Lankans reject the writings of their diaspora writers as faulty and superficial, dominated by colonial discourse. Lakdasa Wikkramasinha one of Sri Lanka’s most distinguished English poets, in his *Lustre Poems*, declares that in writing in English he was using the “language of the most despicable and loathsome people on earth” and that for him and the people of Sri Lanka, “writing in English is a form of cultural treason” (51). While performing ‘cultural treason’, Wikkramasinha recounts powerfully about the plight and sufferings of poor women and abuse of female domestic servants in “*The Death of Ashanti*”. One of his poems, “*Don’t Talk to Me about Matisse*”, vividly establishes the violence of colonialism, hinting that “the exploitation of the colonies had contributed to the creation of conditions that enabled the emergence of this culture” (Fernando 310). English language and its mentors were squarely blamed for the post-Independence despair and insecurity of the war ravaged country. The Sri Lankans had been subjected to colonial

plunder and exploitation and had been stereotyped because of their race and colour.

In fact in several colonial situations these stereotypes provided an ideological justification for different kinds of exploitation. Therefore “the relationship between racial ideologies and exploitation is better understood as dialectical, with racial assumptions both arising out of and structuring economic [and linguistic] exploitation. . . During colonial expansion and consolidation, the contradiction between universalism and racist thought intensified as Europeans seemed bent on the supposedly impossible task of washing black people white”. (Loomba 98-99).

Sri Lankans suspect that their own people living as diaspora are exoticising their predicament and thereby, trying to induct the colonial practice of “washing black people white”, that too in the abhorrent language of the colonizers. Mother tongue and national identity were held *sacro sanct* and above all else. Franz Fanon describes this as "efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (233). Holding on to their regional linguistic unity, the Sri Lankans create and uphold themselves as distinct and unique, refusing to give even English language a place of respectability.

The situation is almost similar in Bangladesh where the linguistic hegemony of Bengali language remains undisputed. Tripti Lahiri in her article “Is there Room for English Literature in Bangladesh?” recounts an interesting anecdote. The noted Bangladeshi Writer Tahmina Anam, of *The Good Muslim* fame, is said to have stated that she has faced questions on the fact that she doesn’t write in Bengali. ‘Once a young girl came up to her at the February book fair (in Dhaka) to chastise her for writing in English’ (*India Realtime*) [Parentheses mine]. Anam had to be apologetic for writing in English and confessed before the girl that unfortunately, her Bangla was not good enough. This social censorship attitude is rooted in and can easily be traced back to Partition and rise of Bengali nationalism as a consequence of linguistic imperialism of both English and Urdu languages. After partition from India Bangladesh was a part of the greater Pakistan and was known as East Pakistan, situated at the far corners of the

subcontinent with an intervening stretch of substantially vast Indian territory. Pakistan was imposing the idea of nationhood along religious lines as a homeland of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. But East Bengal refused to conceive or comprehend a nation-state built upon religion as ideology. Geographically and linguistically it was non-contiguous with Pakistan and refused to subscribe to the ideological demands of Pakistan as a nation.

In Pakistan “Islam acquired the centrality that alone could fortify the state, at the same time making the nation an ineluctable part of the *millat* (religious community). As a prominent Pakistani politician argued, “The spirit of Pakistan is Islam or if you prefer it, Muslim. That spirit has to be preserved” (Wilcox 347). And it followed that Urdu, which was supposedly historically the language of the Muslim nobility should become the language of the state. It was believed that, Urdu alone could realize a monolithic nation. But with their roots in the eclectic culture of Bengal, the emerging intelligentsia came out against the hegemony of Urdu as they had against English. “In the course of their long-drawn liberation struggle, the Bengali nationalist identity came to be structured around a strong sense of association with the peculiarities of their language and culture” (Fazal 190). Immediately after the liberation of the country in 1971, use of English in public life was drastically restricted and Bangla was declared as the only official language and the medium of instruction at all levels. In Bangladesh people publish, write and read books in Bangla. “This is a country that has a public holiday devoted to a moment of linguistic history. Known as Language Martyrs’ Day, the holiday commemorates the killing of protesters who defied police orders and took to the streets on Feb. 21, 1952, against the decision to declare Urdu the sole national language for Pakistan” (Lahiri in *India Realtime*).

In the face of this it is not surprising that English literature in Bangladesh is struggling for identity and survival. According to Rashid Askari, Bangladeshi writing in English is in the path of emergence. “Although the stream is very feeble, it exists. There is, however, no chronological list of the writers of this school. . . The first generation of Bangladeshi writers in English includes a few poets” (The Daily Star). Poetry flowered in Bangladesh after the 1970s with the experience of liberation

war and the agony and ecstasy of long cherished independence. Razia Khan Amin, Farida Majid, Feroz Ahmed-ud-din, Kaiser Haq, Syed Najmuddin Hashim, Rumana Siddique, Seema Nusrat Amin and Reshad Rabbany are some of the noted contemporary Bangladeshi poets. Kaiser Haq playfully experiments with English diction like the Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel (Nusrat 27). His poetry depicts contemporary society and culture of both rural and urban Bangladesh. His collections, *A Happy Farewell* (1994), *The Black Orchid* (1996), and *The Logopathic Reviewer's Song* (2002) have earned him respect in South Asian literary circles. Razia Khan Amin's *Argus Under Anaesthesia* (1976) and *Cruel April* (1977) bear the stamp of her preeminence among English poets in Bangladesh. Farida Majid is another distinguished poet and literary translator. Her *Take Me Home, Rickshaw* (1974) is a collection of poems by contemporary Bangladeshi poets translated into English. Rumana Siddique's *Five Faces of Eve: Poems* (2007) reflects the timeless experience of a woman symbolized by biblical ancestor, Eve. Rumana's poems are a mix of the pleasures and pains of life. Nadeem Rahman's *Politically Incorrect Poems* (2004) is a collection of poems dealing with post-liberation war themes. His poetry is typified by highly individualistic attitude, sharp social sensibility, and keen political observation.

Bangladesh sees a dearth in the domain of drama written in English. One noted dramatist, Sayeed Ahmad concerns himself with survival in a natural calamity prone homeland in his plays *The First Thing* (1961) and *The Milestone* (1964). His plays *Survival* (1967) and *The Last King* (1989) combine Bengali folk stories to depict the exploitation of the masses by the rulers. Whereas poetry and drama in English have been mostly written by writers residing inside the country, the domain of fiction is dominated by the Bangladeshi Diaspora in Australia, UK, and America. Adib Khan is a Bangladeshi diasporic author in Australia. His novels *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994); *Solitude of Illusions* (1996); *The Storyteller* (2000); *Homecoming* (2005); and *Spiral Road* (2007) have won global acclaim and are mostly concerned with themes of self-identity, sense of belonging, migration, and social dislocation. His style is characterized by lucidity and sarcasm. Tahmina Anam belongs to the group of writers who were born

after the liberation of Bangladesh. Her novel *A Golden Age* (2007) is set in war-torn Bangladesh. Mahmud Rahman, a short stories writer in his debut publication *Killing the Water* (2010), covers a wide range of themes ranging from the liberation war of Bangladesh to the racial violence against fresh immigrants in the USA. Short stories in English are gaining ground in Bangladeshi writing. Here, among others Khademul Islam, Kazi Anis Ahmed, Ahmede Hussain, Razia Sultana Khan, Shabnam Nadiya and Shahidul Alam deserve special mention. Each year Bangladesh celebrates its major Bengali-language book event — the *Ekushey Boi Mela*, where a host of writing in Bangla is published and showcased. Here, English has no place of respect. Primarily, Bangladeshi literature in English is basically a corpus of translated works.

Similar to the situation in the other two South Asian countries in discussion, creative writing in English is sparse in Bangladesh. The situation needs serious attention by scholars of English. Rigidity of linguistic regionalism is good so far as identity and nationhood is concerned. But in an era where socioeconomic and cultural survival depends upon communication and globalization, nations while respecting their own linguistic heritage should shun polarities and open up to internationalization through a national consciousness. As Fanon states, "the consciousness of self is not the closing of a door to communication. Philosophic thought teaches us, on the contrary, that it is its guarantee. National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension"(233). Equality, dignity and human security is important but it is also important to think about humanity as a whole. 'In order to save mankind we have to learn to live together in concord in spite of traditional differences of religion, civilization, nationality, class and race . . . we have to know each other's past, since human life, like the rest of the phenomenal universe, can be observed by human minds only as it presents itself to them'(Amir 56). Words of wisdom from the great historian Toynbee can be recalled at this point. He says, "We must learn to recognize, and as far as possible, to understand, the different cultural configurations in which our common human nature has expressed itself in the different religions, civilizations, and nationalities into which human culture has come to be articulated in the course of

history... We shall, however, have to do more than just understand each other's cultural heritage, and more even than appreciate them. We shall have to value them and love them as being parts of mankind's common treasure" (Toynbee 56). And the vehicle for this has to be English, which is a common language accepted internationally for all kinds of transactions.

In conclusion I would like to say that this paper offers a perspective on the position of literatures written in English in three important South Asian Countries, namely, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, who wallow in the throes of rigid linguistic regionalism, and opens certain questions. The identity and survival issues of South Asian Literatures in English is explored along the lines of colonialism, post colonialism, class, ethnic distinctions, linguistic regionalism, culture, globalization and migration. It is important to look into the connections these parameters offer and to see where they have positioned themselves in relation to English language in contemporary times and how South Asian Literature in English is going to be shaped in the future against all odds.

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