

ALTERNATIVE FOR THE UNMENTIONABLE

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In India English is generally regarded as the language of the upper class of the society. But even though it is not their first language, it is increasingly being used to give voice to the subaltern sections and suppressed feelings for which the native languages are inhibitive. Indian culture has been suppressive and so are the Indian languages to the suppressed experiences. But in a changing atmosphere, both the subaltern communities as well as the suppressed experiences are eager to get out of the conventional cage of culture. The cultural cage divides the vocabulary of a native language into two compartments – mentionable and unmentionable words. A number of words that express the basic experience are ostracized from the ‘respectable’ parlance and are termed as substandard or ‘obscene’. English language is comparatively liberal to the basic instincts and therefore comes as a great help. One can say many things in English without being branded as obscene but the same thing if said in a native language becomes unacceptable.

Hypocrisy, a characteristic of the Indian cultural cage, is perhaps the main reason behind such inhibition. For example one can very easily say in English – ‘I love you’ but he feels inhibited saying the same thing in Hindi. The Hindi cultural cage does not allow it. The situation becomes worse with words like Rape and sex. Words with sexual connotations are therefore, heavily imported from English even though their native counterpart is available. Owing to its suppressive culture, Indian languages face extreme scarcity of words for many tendencies. That is the reason these languages are forced to borrow words like Lesbian, Gay, Trans-gender, etc from English. Even if there are some local counterparts of these words, they are not used in common parlance and are bookish. English therefore becomes a convenient language of expression if not that of experience.

Another factor that contributes to this phenomenon is the Class bias against folk language. Modern songs in Bhojpuri, Punjabi, Brijbhasha and such other languages present several examples of this Class bias. The folk languages are not as rigid against what the upper classes call obscenity. Folk songs are considered below standard and obscene even though the folk literature describes subaltern dreams, experiences, pain, desires and trauma of the majority. The best example of this bias is the work of Bhikhari Thakur. Regarded as the Shakespeare of Bhojpuri, Bhikhari Thakur could not earn a respect in the upper classes. He belonged to a poor barber family and wrote for the illiterate masses. He castigated the most obnoxious social practices like child marriage and dowry in a scathing language but his theatrical presentations were not what they call ‘classy’.

Women’s undoubtedly is the most suppressed voice in India. And if we take a glance at the writings of Indian women writers, it becomes immediately clear that those writers who write

in English are comparatively more ‘bold’ than their counterparts in native languages. The way Kamla Das describes her experiences in English, is not to be seen in Hindi even after so many decades.

Notice the perfection
 Of his limbs, his eyes reddening under
 The shower, the shy walk across the bathroom floor,
 Dropping towels, and the jerky way he
 Urinates. All the fond details that make
 Him male and your only man. Gift him all,
 Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
 Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
 The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
 Endless female hungers. Oh yes, getting
 A man to love is easy, (*Looking glass*)

But not only the female, even the male writers are comparatively inhibited in the native languages. ‘*Machhali Maree Hui*’ is termed as a revolutionary novel in Hindi about male-female relationship. But even in that novel, the author is quite shy in describing the sexual physicality whereas in a novel like ‘*The White Tiger*’ By Arvind Adiga which is not a novel about male female sexuality, the narrator finds no inhibition in candidly describing his physical change when he sees a young girl in jeans. The novelist enjoys a freedom in English in describing not only the sexual leanings but also in exposing the hypocrisy and duality of moral standards as seen from a subaltern point of view. The protagonist jeers at the so called moral values of the upper classes. Adiga exposes the hypocrisy and the selfishness of the rich and gives voice to the injured subaltern. His protagonist murders his master, takes away a huge amount of money, establishes a business in far off Bengaluru and without any remorse for the crime he has committed, boasts of his success.

..... the author fails in the creation of Munna alias Balram Halwai, the protagonist, because his voice is totally out of character with the person. It is the supercilious voice of a Westernised Indian, detached from his home country by education and station in life that comes through. The street smart Munna who murdered his employer and set up his business in Bangalore will talk in an entirely different way (for example, he will never say "five hundred thousand rupees" - he'll say "five lakhs"). Here, the character just becomes a mouthpiece for the author. (Nanadkishor Verma)

Even though *The White Tiger* looks like a translation of experiences and not a first-hand natural communication, it became immensely popular. On the other side, Bhikhari Thakur could not be as popular among the elite and the so called intellectuals’ classes. Why?

The answer obviously is – English. Though the subaltern communities are still too handicapped in English as the medium of expression for their experiences but that alone promises to be the best possible option because, to begin with, changing the language is easier than changing the culture.

Works Cited

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