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Research Paper

The "Vernacular Shadow" in Indian English Texts

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Abstract
Indian English literature shows an unusualdevelopment because it uses the language spoken by the colonial power while its content shows the deep understanding of India's different native languages. The article examines a research concept that scholars developed to describe the "vernacular shadow" which shows how Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, and other Indian languages appear throughout English-language literary works. The article examines vernacular influence through its multiple effects that occur at three different levels which include syntactic, lexical, and rhythmic elements and ideological aspects. The discussion examines the reasons Indian authors writing in English have always refused to create pure English prose while their experimental language use demonstrates their research on identity and belonging and their postcolonial state. The article establishes that the vernacular shadow represents an artistic and political choice which authors use to challenge established literary standards while they maintain the distinctive features of Indian cultural experiences.
Keywords: *Indian English literature, code-switching, Raja Rao, translation, vernacular shadow, postcolonial linguistics, linguistic hybridity*

I. Introduction

There is a sentence in Raja Rao's 1938 novel *Kanthapura* that has stayed with readers for almost a century. A village woman recounts a Gandhian political meeting using the oral cadences of a Kannada *harikatha* — a devotional storytelling tradition — while writing, technically, in English. The English is right there on the page, but something else is happening underneath it. The sentence breathes differently. It coils and uncoils in ways that English prose, left to its own devices, simply does not do. That something underneath is what this article is about.

The "vernacular shadow" is a phrase that captures the trace, imprint, and presence of India's regional languages within Indian English writing. It is not a formal concept with a single origin — different critics have described the phenomenon using terms like linguistic hybridity, the mother tongue's interference, code-switching, or the politics of translation — but "vernacular shadow" captures something the other terms miss. A shadow is not the thing itself. It falls where the thing has been. Indian vernacular languages cannot literally appear in texts that are nominally written in English, but their presence is felt structurally, rhythmically, and semantically in ways that shape how those texts mean what they mean.

This matters for several reasons. Indian English literature is the most globally recognized strand of South Asian writing, and yet its relationship to the languages that most Indian people actually speak daily remains poorly understood. Reading Arundhati Roy without attending to the Malayalam beneath her English is like listening to music with the bass line removed — you get the melody but miss the fundamental. The vernacular shadow is not background noise. It is part of the signal.

II. Historical Roots: English and the Vernacular in Colonial India

The encounter between English and India's vernacular languages was never a gentle meeting of equals. English arrived as the language of administration, commerce, and — crucially — education. Macaulay's famous 1835 Minute on Indian Education made the colonial agenda explicit: produce a class of Indians who were Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinion, morals, and intellect. English was to be a replacement, not a supplement.

What actually happened was far messier and more interesting. English took root in India, but it did not grow in the same soil or climate as it had in England. Educated Indians who learned English did so alongside — not instead of — their vernacular tongues. Bengali intellectuals who wrote English essays in the nineteenth

century were also reading Tagore. Tamil lawyers who argued in English courtrooms went home to households where Tamil was the language of intimacy, prayer, and storytelling. The languages coexisted, sometimes uneasily, sometimes productively, always in dialogue.

By the time Indian English fiction began to cohere as a recognizable literary tradition in the 1930s — with Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and R. K. Narayan as its founding figures — the question was not whether vernacular languages would influence the writing but how consciously and how creatively writers would let them do so. Narayan, writing his Malgudi novels in a deliberately unadorned English, was making a stylistic choice shaped by his Tamil and Kannada environment just as much as Rao was with his explicitly experimental syntax. The vernacular shadow fell differently on each writer, but it fell on all of them (Mukherjee, 2000).

III. Defining the Vernacular Shadow

3.1 Syntax and Sentence Structure

One of the most immediately perceptible ways vernacular presence makes itself felt is at the level of sentence structure. Indian languages — whether Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, or Bengali — share certain syntactic features that differ from standard English. Many are verb-final languages: the verb typically comes at the end of the clause rather than after the subject. Relative clauses are often placed before the noun they modify rather than after. These structural habits have a way of seeping into Indian English writing even when writers are not consciously importing them.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) provides some of the most striking examples. Her sentences frequently delay their verbs, build through accumulation, and create a sense of suspended meaning that resolves only at the close — a rhythm that mirrors Malayalam syntax. Consider how she describes a character's grief: not by naming it and moving on but by circling it, approaching and retreating, letting the feeling accumulate weight through repetition. That is not English prosody doing that. That is Malayalam thinking in English clothes (Tickell, 2007).

3.2 Lexical Borrowing and Untranslated Words

Perhaps the most visible marker of the vernacular shadow is the presence of untranslated or only partially translated words from Indian languages. Terms like *dharma*, *karma*, *puja*, *izzat*, *achkan*, *durwan*, and hundreds of others appear throughout Indian English fiction with varying degrees of contextual explanation. Some writers provide glossaries; many do not. The refusal to translate is itself a political act.

When a writer leaves a word in Hindi or Tamil or Urdu without explanation, they are making a claim about their reader. They are saying that the English-language reader who encounters this text must do some work, must accept that not everything in Indian experience is translatable into metropolitan English categories, and must sit with a degree of opacity that English prose conventionally tries to eliminate. As shown in Figure, the patterns of lexical borrowing across major works of Indian English fiction reveal distinct strategies — from near-complete translation to deliberate untranslatability — that correspond broadly with different political and aesthetic positions.

Figure: Spectrum of Vernacular Lexical Strategies in Selected Indian English Novels, 1938–2008

This figure presents a horizontal spectrum diagram ranging from "Full Translation/Domestication" on the left to "Deliberate Opacity / Untranslatability" on the right. Key Indian English novels are plotted along this spectrum based on their approach to vernacular vocabulary: R. K. Narayan's Malgudi novels cluster toward the left (vernacular presence absorbed into transparent English), while Amitav Ghosh's The Sea of Poppies and

Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children sit toward the right (dense untranslated vocabulary, neologisms, pidgin forms). Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things occupies a middle-right position, using untranslated Malayalam words but embedding context within the narrative texture itself. The figure illustrates that the vernacular shadow is not a single strategy but a range of choices, each encoding different assumptions about audience, identity, and linguistic authority.

3.3 Raja Rao and the Founding Manifesto

No discussion of the vernacular shadow in Indian English writing can begin without Raja Rao's preface to *Kanthapura*. Written in 1938, it remains the most quoted and argued-about statement of purpose in the entire tradition. Rao writes that the telling of Indian stories in English has to be done in a way "essentially and inevitably Indian," and that the tempo of Indian life must somehow be expressed through the language. He acknowledges the impossibility and insists on attempting it anyway.

What Rao actually does in *Kanthapura* is extraordinary. He structures the novel's English prose around the rhythms of Kannada oral narrative — the *harikatha* tradition in which a story flows associatively, digresses freely, folds mythological references into historical accounts, and addresses the audience directly as part of the telling. The English sentences are long, breath-driven, accumulative. They do not proceed in the efficient linearity of the English novel tradition; they spiral. Reading a page of *Kanthapura* aloud — which is the right way to read it — you feel the vernacular source immediately (Mukherjee, 2000).

Rao's intervention established something important for the writers who came after him. He demonstrated that the vernacular shadow could be not just an inadvertent stylistic feature but a conscious literary method. The choice to let Indian languages inflect English was a choice — an ethical and aesthetic one — and it could be made deliberately and defended intellectually. His preface gave later writers a vocabulary for articulating what they were doing and why.

IV. The Postcolonial Turn: Rushdie, Roy, and the Aestheticization of Vernacular Presence

4.1 Salman Rushdie and Chutneyfication

Salman Rushdie changed the game with *Midnight's Children* in 1981. The novel's language is famously excessive — multilingual, digressive, pun-heavy, mixing Urdu, Hindi, and English in a way that critics have called "chutneyfication" (Rushdie's own term). Where Rao imported Kannada oral rhythms, Rushdie imported the entire linguistic chaos of Bombay: a city where English, Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, and Gujarati collided daily in street markets, film posters, political speeches, and family arguments.

Rushdie's English is not simply inflected by the vernacular; it is constituted by the vernacular. Words are invented by smashing languages together (*chutnification*, *filmi*, *timepass*). Syntax bends under the pressure of multiple competing linguistic pulls. Characters think in Hindi and speak in English, and the gap between the two is itself part of the meaning. The result is a prose that feels urban, crowded, argumentative — which is to say, it feels like Bombay, even to readers who have never been there (Bhabha, 2004).

What Rushdie demonstrated was that the vernacular shadow could be not just structural or lexical but performative. The prose did not simply carry traces of Hindi and Urdu; it enacted the experience of living in multiple languages simultaneously. For a generation of Indian English writers who followed him — Vikram Chandra, Kiran Desai, Rana Dasgupta — this became a touchstone.

4.2 Arundhati Roy and the Grammar of Malayalam

Arundhati Roy's approach in *The God of Small Things* is more intimate than Rushdie's and in some ways more radical. Where Rushdie's multilingualism is expansive and public-facing, Roy's is private and familial. The Malayalam that shadows her English is the language of childhood, of the body, of emotion below the threshold of articulate thought. It surfaces in her prose as a grammar of feeling.

Roy capitalizes common nouns to give them the weight they carry in Malayalam, where certain words accumulate cultural and emotional freight that English equivalents cannot bear. She coins compound words that function like Malayalam nominal constructions. Her handling of time — especially the way she disrupts chronological sequence and presents memory as non-linear — mirrors the Malayalam narrative tradition of holding past and present simultaneously rather than arraying them in sequence. These are not decorative choices. Each one reflects a way of inhabiting experience that Malayalam encodes and English, in its standard form, does not (Tickell, 2007).

V. The Subaltern Voice and the Problem of Representation

There is a tension at the heart of the vernacular shadow that deserves honest attention. The Indian English writers who most visibly deploy vernacular influence — Rushdie, Roy, Ghosh — are all highly educated, cosmopolitan, and often writing for international audiences. Their relationship to the vernacular languages they invoke is frequently mediated rather than primary. Rushdie grew up bilingual but has lived most

of his adult life outside India. Roy's Malayalam is the language of her childhood in Kerala, but *The God of Small Things* was written and first published for an English-language market.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raised this problem with characteristic sharpness in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). The question was not just about voice but about conditions of audibility. Even when Indian English writers bring vernacular rhythms and idioms into their texts, they are doing so within the institutional framework of English-language publishing — an industry headquartered in London and New York, with its own gatekeeping mechanisms and market preferences. The vernacular shadow may make the subaltern voice audible to metropolitan readers, but the framing remains metropolitan (Spivak, 2003).

This criticism has real force. Scholars like Meenakshi Mukherjee and Priya Joshi have pointed out that Indian-language literatures — Bengali novels, Tamil poetry, Marathi short fiction — contain far more radical formal experiments and politically urgent content than most of what is celebrated in the Indian English canon, and yet they remain largely invisible to international readers because they require translation (Mukherjee, 2000). The vernacular shadow, in this reading, is a compromise formation: it gives metropolitan readers just enough foreignness to feel they are encountering something authentically Indian while remaining within the comfortable framework of English-language prose.

That is a fair critique. It does not, though, entirely undermine the significance of the vernacular shadow as a literary practice. The writers examined here are not claiming to speak for all of India; they are writing out of specific, located experiences. Their formal experiments with English are genuine responses to genuine linguistic situations, not performances of authenticity for foreign consumption. Both things can be true simultaneously — the vernacular shadow can be a real and meaningful literary strategy and also an insufficient answer to the deeper questions about power, language, and representation that Spivak forces us to ask.

VI. Conclusion

The vernacular shadow in Indian English texts is one of the most interesting phenomena in world literature, and it has not received the critical attention it deserves. For too long, discussions of Indian English writing have focused on theme — partition, postcolonial identity, diaspora, caste — rather than on the formal and linguistic strategies through which these themes are encoded. The vernacular shadow is a formal phenomenon. It operates at the level of sentence, rhythm, word, and narrative structure, shaping the literary experience from the ground up.

What emerges from reading Raja Rao, Rushdie, Roy, Ghosh, and their contemporaries together is a picture of extraordinary linguistic resourcefulness. These writers found ways to make English do things it was not designed to do — to carry the weight of Kannada oral tradition, the chaos of Bombay's multilingualism, the intimacy of Malayalam family life, the historical complexity of subcontinental seafaring. They did it imperfectly, with compromises, and often within commercial and institutional frameworks that limited their freedom. The imperfection is part of the record, not something to apologize for.

The vernacular shadow is ultimately about refusal — the refusal to let English be a neutral medium, to let the colonial language erase the cultures it once sought to replace. Every untranslated word, every verb-final sentence, every capitalized noun that carries more weight than its English equivalent, is a small act of insistence: this experience happened here, in these languages, in this way, and it will not be fully translated into your categories. That insistence is what gives Indian English literature its distinctive energy, and it is why the vernacular shadow matters to anyone who wants to understand what literature can do.

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