

? Conflict, action, resolution—what problems must your character solve? What stands in his or her way?

? Dialogue—does it sound real or wooden? What purpose does the dialogue serve?

? Characters—are they developed enough? Or do they lack substance? Do you the writer know their essential truth as human beings or living creatures?

? Metaphors and similes—are yours fresh? Or are you relying on tired clichés? If they are clichés, replace them with fresh ones.

Revising allows writers to work through ideas in their own words and thus, gives voice to their own internal vision of the human condition. When writing, focus on the integrity, veracity and verisimilitude of your story, the use of language and image, the precision of words, your keen knowledge of grammar, and overall what it says about the human condition, rather than on publishing success. By paying attention to craft, publishing success will come. Without a right or wrong way to write, individual writers come to the work differently. Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote, “Every creator painfully experiences the chasm between his inner vision and its ultimate expression. The chasm is never completely bridged. We all have the conviction, perhaps illusory, that we have much to say than appears on paper.” Perhaps what separates the masters and the greats from the hacks and the never-beens is that the masters repeatedly attempt to bridge the chasm between his or her inner vision and its ultimate expression. In short, they never give up.

On that note, keep writing.

Indian Writing in English and the (Mis) Translations of Urdu*

Nandi Bhatia

“[I]t is multilingualism, or living in translation, that is the norm for many populations, rather than monolingualism,” asserts Brett de Barry (46). Given India’s 22 constitutionally recognized languages, and its multiple mother-tongues and dialects, one can surmise that Indian writing in English is by no means located in a monolingual frame but bears the traces of conscious or subconscious levels of multilingualism in its stylistic, thematic, and linguistic registers. From Rushdie’s works to those by Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Vikram Seth, and most recently Aravind Adiga’s Booker prize winning novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), Indian novels in English that routinely make it to the syllabi of English departments are steeped in varied forms of multilingualism. The multilingual contexts in Indian writing in English, as G.J.V. Prasad has argued, represent the struggle of the artist who writes in English but translates the regional and vernacular nuances for primarily English speaking audiences in India and abroad. Drawing on a range of examples, including the novels of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and Salman Rushdie (among others), Prasad suggests that their writings become spaces of translations that are mediated by caste, regional and gender-inflected positions which emanate from specific contexts and require a knowledge of those contexts in order for their meanings to be understood (1999). With the resurgence of and a renewed interest in Indian writing in English in the last two decades, critical discussions regarding the “English” of these writers and their implications for vernacular languages and literatures have intensified, receiving both praise and censure from critics, but enjoying a popularity nonetheless that is reflected in increased awards and inclusion of texts in courses devoted to Postcolonial studies, Indian writing in English, or Global literatures. Thus when Adiga’s novel came out and received numerous accolades,

including the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2008, it was yet another addition to the celebration that has marked writers such as Roy, Rushdie, Ghosh, Desai and Seth, among others.

The White Tiger, which takes its readers on a journey from Balram Halwai's village to the urban centers of New Delhi, renders a form of prose that attempts to capture the various tones, registers, and nuances of the English spoken by the "half-baked" villager and the fully schooled Ashok, the master/employer of Balram. And praise for the novel came in part due to Adiga's ability to bring the local into the fold of the global through a critique of the operations of capital and its devastating effects on the village through a language that articulates the voice of the subaltern. Yet texts, as Gayatri Spivak points out, are also "caught in a historical moment" and reflect how much power the English language wields (36). In the case of Adiga's novel, which has been praised to the sky for its prose, such power of the English language simultaneously reproduces an asymmetry between the less taught languages (Urdu, for example) in India and the dominant ones (such as English), which, as Spivak suggests, characterizes the privileged centers of academia (2010).¹ This asymmetry, I argue, is produced through the presence of the past in the present, a past in which Hindi and Urdu developed a rivalry with ultimately more fruitful results for Hindi in terms of its dissemination through civil society structures and spheres, namely educational institutions, newspapers and scholarly journals, and media. Such propagation of Hindi resulted in the marginalization of Urdu by the "keepers of the Hindi establishment (Rai 81) who saw the traces of Urdu as bringing "rusticity" to Hindi (Rai 81) and accorded the top position to English in terms of its promises for economic upward mobility. This past returns to the present, and intersecting with contemporary constructions of Hindu-Muslim divisions, reinforces the association of these communities with languages (Urdu as the language of the Muslims and Hindi as the language of the Hindus) in the popular consciousness.

Locating Adiga's representation of Urdu in this context, I would like to comment on the role and responsibility of the

English language writer as an international translator of such cultural politics. On a trip to Daryaganj in old Delhi, the narrator Balram describes it as one of the "wonders of the world" for the varieties of books it offers and stumbling upon some books in Urdu goes on to describe Urdu as "all just scratches and dots, as if some crow dipped its feet in black ink and pressed them to the page" (216). Indeed, the "half-baked" narrator, in his attempt to portray the "darkness" of India in contrast to the "Shining India" of entrepreneurship and global economy, (mis)translates the meanings of Urdu and its place in India's vernacular literary traditions in ways that further consigns it to the marginality it has been accorded in the national imagination. This is not to suggest that Adiga's novel is aimed at intensifying Hindi-Urdu separatism or a communal sensibility but to emphasize instead that the contexts, which instrumentalize the perpetuation of divisions through seemingly neutral or playful, innovative or experimental levels of language, have to be unpacked if we are to understand the ways in which such an act of translation reinforces popular perceptions.

Scholarship on the Hindu-Urdu political divide shows that the late 19th century agitation towards the demand for Nagari/Hindi as the official language of colonial administration gradually encouraged a deep wedge between the two languages, fostering in the process, a politics of identity based on linguistic divisions, a division that ultimately reduced Urdu to insignificance.² It is noteworthy that in reality Urdu shares its vocabulary and grammatical structure with Hindi—the difference remains that of script—and also shares a vast amount of vocabulary with Panjabi. It is also spoken in a large part of North India—UP, Bihar and Panjab—and also in Hyderabad where it goes by the name of Dakhani. The polyglot nature of Urdu itself cannot be overlooked. The competing nationalisms that reinvented Hindi as the language of Hindus and Urdu as the language of Muslims, embedded this notion not just in the popular consciousness but also made it the subject of debates amongst intellectuals, writers and nationalist leaders. It is a topic that Gandhi addressed in *Hind*

Swaraj (1909), who, disturbed by the communal outcomes of the language divide proposed Hindustani as a “terminological compromise” to suppress such communal mythmaking (Rai 15). And Premchand, the most canonical writer of Hindi, in his essay “Urdu, Hindi aur Hindustani,” proposed the same argument as Gandhi. But the imagined division between Hindi and Urdu has remained an unresolved one and has taken the shape of what Alok Rai calls the “unfinished project of Indian nationalism” whose history remains neglected in the present. This “unfinished” business of nationalism, however, acquires a different form in *The White Tiger*, where Urdu is reduced to a singular and unflattering description; its Otherness is reinforced when the narrator Balram, whose voice in the novel acquires a “truth” value, calls it the language of the Muslims, thus eliding any claims about the shared heritage of Urdu as a language spoken and loved by several communities—of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, for example—not just in several parts of India, but also in Chandni Chowk, a part of old Delhi, which frames the backdrop of Adiga’s reference to Urdu and where Muslims and Hindus continue to coexist. As such, it sustains the ongoing perception about Urdu “as a sectarian language adopted by Indian Muslims, marking their separation from the national collectivity” (Yaqin 120). Published in 2008, the novel, through such (mis)translations of Urdu, reinforces the dominant claims of the nation at the level of language, claims that have by now become so normalized that they have resulted in a near forgetting of the place of Urdu in the nation, and hence passed unnoticed in critical responses to Adiga’s novel.

It is notable that Adiga’s novel did receive as much censure from critics as praise. Those who criticized the novel recast him as someone whose global locations render him incapable of representing India (Mendes). Yet others have faulted Balram Halwai’s use of idioms because they “are not drawn from North Indian vernaculars” but “sound like a mixture of the ephemera the Indian student picks up in his years abroad and an estranged, almost orientalist, take on Indian slang and patois” (Mukherjee 284). On the other hand, critics eager to see his representation of

the effects of entrepreneurial globalization on India, and the representation of a “poor” India as laudable have missed the nuanced mistranslations of Urdu. Between such attacks, on the one hand, and the extreme international praise bestowed upon him, on the other, critics overlooked that Adiga’s staging of Urdu through acts of cultural (mis)translation in a context where Urdu continues to be reduced to a peripheral status demands a careful rethinking of the author’s task as a cultural translator.

However, the representation of the vernaculars and Urdu in Indian writing in English is by no means singular. Anita Desai’s novels, *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *In Custody* (1984), both of which were shortlisted for the Booker Prize, also bring up the subject of Urdu but in ways that establish its place as an important part of India’s cultural and literary landscape. *In Custody* represents the dedicated attempts of a Hindi lecturer, Deven, to save the poetry of Nur, “India’s greatest Urdu poet” who, it seems, has nearly been forgotten in post-colonial India where Urdu itself has been accorded a marginalized status because of the neglect imposed upon it by the custodians of education. Despite being bullied, cheated, and blackmailed by his friend to do an interview with Nur so he can publish it in his journal and in spite of increasingly estranged relations with his wife over this obsession, Deven remains committed to the task. Deven’s prize comes at the end when he receives a package from Nur that contains his poems and the overjoyed Deven becomes the custodian of this poetry. And *Clear Light of Day* attempts to rescue Urdu from the effects of the 1947 Partition, which relegates the language into the realm of the communal. In bringing attention to Urdu, Desai not only reinstates its cultural importance and emphasizes the multilingualism of Indian literature; she also features Urdu as a linguistic and literary heritage that supplies important traditions of poetry, performance and orality to which women such as Nur’s courtesan wife too have contributed. One may argue and even agree that such representation cannot substitute for writings in the original languages. Yet given the paucity of English translations of regional language literatures, Desai’s novels open up the world

of Urdu literature for readers whose access to this language and its literature remains limited.

The achievement of *In Custody* also lies in the fact that it was translated into Urdu and made into a film titled *Muhafiz* (1994) by Ismael Merchant, himself a keen sympathizer of Urdu. The translation of the English novel into an Urdu film makes Urdu poetry available to listeners. But the one aspect that stands out most is the attention to Nur's wife, a poet from the courtesan tradition, played by Shabana Azmi. Here the filmic translation gives acknowledgement to the circulation of Urdu poetry through the courtesans, where it was carefully cultivated in the *kothas*, as Veena Oldenburg has shown in her research on the courtesans of Lucknow (1990). In showing the frustrations of Nur's wife as a poet who is marginalized by the world of men, is accused of stealing Nur's poetry and connives to have her own poetry circulated through Deven, the film highlights the gendered dimensions of Urdu poetry. Even though Desai's novel paints a less than flattering image of Nur's wife and seems to succumb to the stereotypes about the courtesan, and the Hindiwallah's dismissal of Urdu as "the language of prostitutes and the brazen and degenerate urban culture that is associated with them" (Rai 78), its attention to this subject allows for the circulation of the language question through a film made in Urdu and one that is more appreciative of its gendered scope. In this, Merchant's choice of actors lends itself to a most convincing and sympathetic depiction. Through Shabana Azmi, a famous Hindi cinema and theatre actor and a legatee of Urdu traditions by virtue of being the daughter of a famous Urdu poet (Kaifi Azmi) and a mother (Shaukat Kaifi) who participated in the Progressive Writers' movement and the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), Merchant creates a character who is represented as a thoughtful figure.

Even though Amina Yaqin reads *In Custody* as a "nostalgic remembering of Urdu" whose portrayal in the novel "marks an elegiac farewell to a lost tradition" (139), Desai's works may be read as examples of Indian writing in English that brings visibility to the existence of a body of Urdu literature and the politics that

led to its subordination. This is of acute importance given the paucity of translation from the vernaculars, on the one hand, and the transnational reach of Indian writing in English, on the other. For, her novels point out to global readers and the privileged Indian reader the importance of vernacular languages in India's literary heritage. Additionally, by bringing attention to Urdu literature, Desai's novels prise open the category of Orientalist discourse, which, as Aijaz Ahmad notes, has left its mark on the contemporary critical assemblage of "Indian literature," an area that has come to be dominated by the Indian English novel (1994). Moreover, Orientalist scholars, points out Ahmad, constructed a Hindu India by privileging brahmanical writings and paid attention primarily to Sanskritic literatures, thereby leaving a legacy that leaves out Urdu literature, along with other literary traditions (2000). In such an assemblage, suggests Ahmad, the critical enterprise of Postcolonial literature has remained complicit.

By bringing in the question of Urdu and its literary heritage into the fold of her English language novels, and even translating some of these traditions, Desai's works emphasize Indian literature as what Aijaz Ahmad calls a comparative field that needs to be negotiated across a whole range of linguistic, regional and oral terrains that reflect its heterogeneity. In so doing, her novels subvert some of the problems that characterize dominant paradigms about what constitutes "Indian literature." Adiga's *The White Tiger* on the other hand, though praised as "a corrective to the glib, dreamy exoticism Western readers often get,"³ "a witty parable of India's changing society" (Rushby) and "the most acute social criticism yet made of the new Indian middle class" (Krishna), is unfortunately one which, while highlighting the heterogeneity of the English language, erases India's linguistic diversity and the ongoing/underlying political meanings involved in such erasures.

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Notes

¹ Citing Athar Farouqui, Amina Yaqin posits that “the situation of the Urdu mother-tongue speaker has deteriorated in Uttar Pradesh to such an extent that ‘there is not even a single primary or junior high school of Urdu medium. The only two Urdu medium schools are run by and affiliated to Aligarh Muslim University’” (Yaqin 128).

² For recent information and analysis on the history of Urdu and Hindi, see Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*. Hyderabad: Orient-Longman, (2000); Tariq Rahman, *From Hindi to Urdu. A Social and Political History*. USA: OUP, 2012.

³ “Is This Book Worth Getting? A no-frills guide to five just-published first novels.” *New York Books*, April 21, 2008. <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/46203/>

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