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What are They Reading: Readership Discrepancy and Literature in India

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Abstract—The emergence of the post-Nehruvian independent India saw the rise of Indian writings in English, especially the Diasporic narratives have continued to attempt an authentic picture of India abroad. With the tendency to portray *Indianhood* through sensationalist, exoticizing lens; these narratives have curiously garnered an international appeal for its self-consciously righteous and culturally self-deprecative textuality; qualities that have been notoriously attributed to the marketable nature of IWE narratives. While significant concerns have been raised about the disparity of the portrayal of India accessible to the Western audiences, against the ground reality of a cultural multiplicity that thrives on its native soil; implications of such fetishizing and othering stances on the reception of a national identity, also requires scrutiny. This article looks at the consequential conflict of Indias, complicating the relationship and the act of reading *Indianness* in India and abroad; in the context of refamiliarizations of estranged national and cultural identities be it the New Americanized immigrant generations or the Westernized native Indian youth. The paper seeks to problematize the insistence of an overarching Indian culture and the politics of minority erasure that it implicates, analyzing Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* using the method of critical textual analysis, in the light of existing scholarly literature.

Keywords: Indian writings in English (IWE), Indian literature, cultural identity, post-colonial literature, readership.

I. INTRODUCTION

The majority of the polarizing tensions between IWE and the regional literatures, exist mainly due to their diverging intentions with *realism* and challenges that posits within a culture of multiplicity and plurality. This conflict originates from the layered and hybridized portrayal of India and *Indianness,* wherein the customary practice of Indian English writers (hereafter referred to as IWE) accustomed to 'look at' India to engage with the nation; differs vastly from the regional literature and its tendencies to 'look from' India itself. Paranjape, attributes this difference to the geo-cultural proximity from wherein each tradition takes up the stance of representing Indian nationhood (Das and Som 191). Writers of IWE attempt to present India as a unified yet figurative front, what Murray describes as "flattening the messianic", with regional literatures resisting such a unification that is conducted at the expense of erasure of differences (Murray 25 in Das and Som 91).

The existing debate features a variety of stances as that assumed by Figueira where the resolve to locate the realistic and the essence of Indianness, lies at the forefront. However, this tension will continue to exist when the power-balance between the two forms of writing is viewed as being anti-thetical to one another (Das and Som 200). It is important to recognize that both the traditions of IWE and regional literature had throughout history, assumed roles and functions that were not necessarily oppositional but simply diverging in its scope and nature; a diversion that continues to widen along with the growing economic divide. The milieu that shapes these popular literary strains seldom overlap, and the economic as well as the educational background of their respective readership often contribute to this divisive popularity. While this paper no way suggests that these two distinct literary traditions in India are indicative of economic class - there is a growing trend of IWE being predominantly favored and discoursed by the readership that belongs to a similar class to that of the writers themselves – namely, members from the upper-class; a phenomenon that has its poisonous roots in the creation of the Indian colonial 'elite'. As anomalies exist to generalizations of such huge scales, regional literature is nowhere near unpopular amongst upper-class readers of the newer generations with niche reading interests. However, it is often seen that readers from vernacular mediums of education are more likely to engage with regional literatures at level beyond the superficial curiosity of narrative's plot laying. With vernacular mediums of instructions drastically going out of fashion, especially in higher education, this trend has only been mirrored by the dwindling popularity of Bhasa or regional writers, even in their English translations. In a late-capitalist world economy, where market drives popular taste and determine readership demands, this is a growing concern for the future of translating regional literatures to more popularly read languages like English or Hindi.

II. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

The current study seeks to analyze the discrepancy in the readership patterns between the dominant streams of Indian Literature, and propose a few measures for bridging the popularity gap, in the context of the new generation of internet reading culture.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Saswat S. Das and Bipasha Som in "The Play of Contestatory and Contesting Perspectives: Exploring the Debate about Representation of Nation in Bhasa Writing and Indian Writing in English," explore the conflict of representations of Indian nationhood and the difficulties of uniting the the westward looking traditions of Indian Writings in English and Bhasa Literature. They propose that encouraging more representations of India's diversity would contribute to a newer form of national representation, that which might not lead to a mutual consensus between the anti-thetical positions that the two forms of literatures in India hold; but would result in representations of nationhood and nationality attuned to the ground reality of its people (200).

Dorothy M. Figueira in, "How Does It Feel to Be the Solution? Indians and Indian Diaspora Fiction: Their Role in the Marketplace and the University," condemns the practices of performative self-Orientalizing tendencies of contemporary Indian Diasporic Fiction. They also draw attention to the current problematic pedagogic tendencies of approaching cultural familiarizing outside the immediate context of the culture in question. In the context of engaging with cultural diversity, they propose changes to the tokenistic representation of India that caters to the market and popular readership, instead of staying true to it vision of representing India at the stage of world literature (61).

Pramod K. Nayar in "Indian Writing in English as Celebrity", looks into the legacy of Indian Writing in English and its consumerist popularity further cemented by awards, both International and National; drawing parallels between the rising face-value of cinema and the Diasporic Literature, written to appeal to a large, non-ethnic readership. He challenges the exoticizing politics of diversity rewards that often excludes both writers and traditions that are bereft of the status and fame that Indian Writings in English, specifically writers from the diaspora, enjoy. He scrutinizes the factors that lead to the formation of this celebrity status and the cyclical nature of its execution within the popular culture (45).

Amardeep Singh in "The Indian Novel in the 21st Century" looks into the emerging trends and styles that characterize the contemporary novel of modern India. He traces the departure of the current style of fiction from the reputed names of the tradition of Indian writings in English. Singh's focus on Aravind Adiga's work, *The White Tiger*, scrutinizes how the novel looks at Indian modern life and critics the dynamics that form the binaries of class struggle in the contemporary society. Singh describes this pre-occupation and stylistic choice as the 'New Urban Realism', that "…features a highly realistic style that gives precedence to local details and often an emphasis on regional cities…" (5).

Robbie B. H. Goh in "Global Goondas? Money, Crime and Social Anxieties in Aravind Adiga's Writings" attempts to locate the Indian text within the tradition of crime writing that is dominated by a Western canon. He juxtaposes Adiga's protagonist with Doyle's Holmes, drawing interesting parallels between how the central characters in both narratives of crime fiction are hardly justifiable realistic portrayals of the institutions and social structures they represent, and yet are utilized as foils to critique the contemporary moralities and the expectations of the same (150).

III. METHODOLOGY

In the light of the aforementioned works, this analytical study will scrutinize, the problems of readership and its discrepancy using Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Through the scrutiny of the fiction's narrative and its interaction with the readership within the current literary landscape, this study seeks to contribute to the existing debate on discrepancies of reception of the two major stream of Indian literature, Indian Writings in English and Bhasa Literature, and the measures in which these discrepancies might be addressed.

IV. RESULTS OF DISCUSSION

SURFING THE READING AISLES

With the growing economic prosperity and the proliferation of the 'middle-class', the demands to 'fit in' to globalized molds of lifestyle and taste, have been at an all-time high, facilitated by easily accessible and rapidly progressing internet cultures. When the idea of the Indian nation-hood was still in the early stage of finding it's footing on the stage of the new democratic order, the need to adopt foreign customs, and cultures was deemed necessary for the general feeling that world outside paced too rapidly and the newly minted nation, free for the first time to delineate its own national and secular identity, couldn't afford to lag behind. Despite the other systemic and national concerns that continued to plague it, the pressure of being on-par with the rest, reflects

in the writings of the previous generations of writers that grappled with the issues of a national identity amidst political uncertainties. The narratives of India from the margins dreamt of securing a middle-class livelihood, to rise to the ranks of the 'haves', following a long ordeal in the ranks of 'have-nots'. This contrasts with the issues at the forefront in the contemporaneity, an ambivalence to traditional morals, narratives dealing with failing economies against the pervasive backdrop of an ongoing climate crisis; a pre-occupation that has transitioned into re-thinking the idea of self and identity, itself. In In the current neo-liberal setup with the world more receptive to issues of defying gender roles, rethinking gender identities, prioritizing mental health and the diminishing glory of government service; which for the access to the popular culture through social media have also been adopted by Indian youth, responsible for the change in dynamics of readership forever.

There is no denying that social media has heavily altered how readers engage with educational curriculum and reading culture. With quality education becoming more widely accessible on and off the internet, interest in foreign travel and goals of studying abroad have become more attainable realities for the new generations of Indian readers. In the past few years, English-education, especially in the higher education level, no longer retains its aspirational status but has become commonplace; sometimes even a basic requirement if the national examination is to be considered. With standardized testing introduced for admittance to higher education institutes as well as jobs, English has always been a *de facto* requirement. If the present curriculum is consulted, courses irrespective of the streams of study require a language paper, often English, even with the connotations of an addendum or an after-thought. While more languages have been added to this structure of learning, the domination of English, designed to facilitate a linguistic exchange and to keep Indian students on par with their global counterparts; necessitated access to a linguistic culture that would facilitate further access to traditions of epistemology in addition to advancements in learning. With a large section of student population engaging in English at levels of higher education has shaped a readership that leans towards writings in English. The curriculum inculcated interest in Western and Westernized literary traditions in combination with factors like accessibility, availability and palatable relatability, has forged a consumer culture accustomed to a diet of mimetic pastiche of Western authors, characteristic of the IWE tradition. With recent developments in building an inclusive curriculum, works of authors of Indian origin have been inducted into the curriculum of which very few are translations of writings in Indian languages. As IWE's visibility continues to grow with the boom in the internet culture, the curriculum in place still leans heavily towards the more noticeable and widely discussed writers who write in English. The disbalance of interest, and the resulting vicious cycle for propagating only the popular begins here, with the new generation largely naturalized to a canon of hybridity. It contributes to the growing unpopularity of translated or untranslated works from regional literary cultures, traditions that are designated to unfamiliar waters of writing for deviating from this textual familiarity.

The growing decline in the interest in regional literatures over the years have strengthened the post-colonial sentiment in the modern discourse. Staunch post-colonial sentiments upheld by writers like Ashapurna Devi and Mamoni Raisom Goswami, led to authorial practices like refusing to write texts that talk to the foreign reader (Kashyap pg). In what constitutes a literary resistance against spoon-feeding the text's cultural background to the reader, it proposes instead that the reader undertake the efforts to find the text's meaning for himself. This Barthesian intention of heightening *jouissance* as opposed to the *plaiser*, appeals to the inquisitive ideal readership. However, in the context of the new-generation of readers, this post-colonial stance might function as another one of the many factors contributing to the declining popularity of regional narratives. As in the case of texts like Hansda Sowendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, or Aruni Kashyap's *A House with a Thousand Stories*, retain the cultural familiarity that is celebrated by seasoned writers and readers of regional Bhasa literatures. However, despite the text painting a detailed everyday life in a culturally rich landscape, the post-colonial stance of refusing to cater to the colonial gaze by not explaining intricacies of some of the linguistic and cultural elements that appear in the text, would also reader who didn't speak the language nor has access to someone who speaks it, from arriving at the full appreciation of the cultural picture they seek to uphold. This is especially true for readers of the newer generations whose only point of access and contact with a particular culture is through its literary and linguistic productions that have been made available through the internet. A criticism of this claim might be in the form of an argument for the need to study the basics of lexicon of a particular language might be suggested. Such an exacting stance is difficult to implement if not impossible, for the simple reality of the time and effort such a method would necessitate, a path that is hardly favorable in the tides of gratification waves we currently ride. However, the converse is also true in some cases as the delayed *jouissance* as a result of it heightened elusiveness leads to an increasing interest and inquisitiveness in the mind of the reader.

Another factor is the tendency to insist on the existence of a unified idea of Indian culture. While several rituals, beliefs and customs are shared across regional geographical divisions, the widespread understanding of Indian culture is deeply entwined with its religious origins. The existence of a secular culture, that fans across the divisions on religious grounds are often negligible. *Indianhood* and its portrayal heavily draw from the religious culture of the Hindu majority, that finds its way into the

lives of people at both the supposed center and the margins, albeit with considerable transformations. While this might seem like a uniting element, geographical divide and distribution of said cultural markers and elements, contribute to the invisible bordering and segregation, that has led to the erasure of its marginal subcultures as the existing tradition of discouraging linguistic and cultural exchange between these geo-cultural divides continue to exist This undercurrent of unspoken segregation stems from the history of a culture built on differences. In spite of changing circumstances, this cross-border disinterest in being culturally and linguistically informed, contributes to the marginalization of those sub-cultures that don't align with the dominant majority. The higher education curriculum that is implemented across the country to emulate a standardized form of diversified learning and exchange, continue to facilitate the hegemonic domination that certain lines of thinking and fraternizing, affords it. Aside from the scanty representation of Indian writings in the curriculum, the continual iterations of syllabi over the years have seen limited to negligible attempts to facilitate such an exchange. Readers of what is considered 'regional' are largely unaware of the wealth of epistemological and literary cultural material of another localized region; unless the geographical proximity for some form of cultural exchanges, permit it. While movement of people within these sub-divisions of states in India are more common, most of this type of exchange is undertaken for work and requires a thorough assimilation into the host culture's linguistic scenario. However, such an assimilation seldom leads to complete literary immersion, due to several factors ranging from differences in viewpoints, and insufficient competence in the host language prevent literary satisfaction from reading regional literature. This furthers widens the divide of internal subcultures of India strengthening the regional differences. While it is necessary that the identity of the regional sub-cultures remain intact and retain its individual identities, the alarming lack of exchange between the Bhasa regionals, would further plummet these traditions into neglect. As migration in across geographical locations are seldom uniform, the local literature retaining the regional identity is a necessary step to ensure that cultural identity is not overshadowed or absorbed into a more popular culture and its elements. Those designated to the margins have to compete with even stronger oppositions now than ever before.

Problematic representations of poverty and morality, is another concerning point of tension between the regional Bhasa literatures and Indian writings in English. With the former often attempting to renounce the IWE claims of creating an overarching picture of cultural homogeneity. This trend of IWE is on a visible decline, with the newer generations of writers like Adiga, as Singh argues, have unyoked themselves from the responsibility of speaking for a homogenized locale of 'the nation' (Singh 5).

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is an aspirational tale, told 'looking upward' at the upper echelons of society that Balram Halwai, its protagonist wishes to attain. The plot assumes an insider perspective of an Indian in a corrupted political context and follows his transformation from a measly and indistinct village boy to an entrepreneur joining in conversations with the supposed 'elite', who he has conveniently managed to win over with wealth. Adiga's India, and the contrast of darkness and lightness, tells the reader that at the heart of all major cities are people who have managed to hold Mammon captive by his horns, through the sheer force of will enabled by an equally ambiguous moral character. This moral ambiguity is often seen in IWE narratives, that are charged with self-Orientalizing by caricaturing the struggles and difficulties of surviving in a post-colonized economy. However, such charges in the form of discourses and the sensational representation of a picaresque protagonist, who would stop at nothing to gain footing in his life, is not a new trend nor is it uncommon. The shock factor and the complexity of the native character and its unclassifiable nature, reminiscent of Victorian sensational novels is partly what makes IWE palatable not only to the unfamiliar readers of the West, but also the newer generation of readers at home. The accessible familiarity that is afforded to texts like those written by Adiga and Chitra Divakaruni, be it in the form of aggressive marketing or their boisterous presence in both academic and hobby-readership discourses, familiarize new readers while also increasing the likelihood of seasoned readers picking up a book the applause of which have been echoing online, even when shopping in store or in a library.

As reading culture is swiftly being replaced by instantly gratifying methods of engaging with texts such as short-form media and narrated audio content, contemporary trends are formed and maintained by popular media and disappear as quickly as they appear; the tendency being smeared across elements of culture such as music, fashion, and readership of literature and non-fiction narratives. While Indian literature is yet to have its moment of virality on fast-paced trend-backed platforms like Booktok and Bookstagram, engagements with the vast majority of regional literatures are at an even steadier decline. In the current gratification-minded world operating with the currency of attention span necessitates attention-grabbing marketing for commodities to find their place into mainstream media. Thus, it is hardly surprising that loud, boisterous and attention-grabbing literary narratives are debuted by Indian writers, to cater to the hunger for sensationalism, that is significantly read much more than somber, slower reads.

As market takes precedence over art, the art of writing and definition of "literary" too have been influenced by the trend of satisfying over-consumptive literary gratification. The mainstream consumption is often homogenized in terms of stylistic

measures, narratives, and technique. The discrepancy of reading choices between now and a few years ago, is remarkably large. Marketing strategies have evolved and visual aesthetics have become deeply intertwined with not only the writing of the books themselves, but also of the visual elements that accompany it like – cover art, book jacket designs etc. With more access to funds via international publishers that eke out preferential treatment for certain types of narratives, the re-imagination of the cosmopolitan Indian-hood in IWE writings is backed by the new reader himself who is cosmopolitan in his outlook and education, and is as estranged and unfamiliar to his native culture as is the average Western reader.

For a generation that relies on social media's virtualscape in lieu of a tangible third-place; where most of the popular discourses pertaining to new readership takes place, the westernized college-educated reader encounters his culture more intimately through the literature he consumes. An increasingly common contemporary phenomenon, that is indicative of a change in the socio-cultural values. It is difficult to ascertain the direction of such a phenomenon due to its varying implications. New readers get to engage with material and cultural capital that might have been accessible to previous generations in a different format. The most common example is compilations of oral literature accessible through the internet might have otherwise faced the challenge of being wiped out due to orally dissipated nature and changing family ties. This is specifically true for literary cultures in the margins where narratives, in the form of stories, were originally the only form of literary engagement accessible to common people. In the North-Eastern part of India, stories like *Mauruangi*, *Tumchhingi Leh Raldawna* from Mizoram, *Lai Khutsangbi* from Manipur, *U Thlen* and *Ka Noh Ka Likai tales from* Meghalaya, have been told and retold from generations. Aruni Kashyap writes about how stories like *Ukoni Bai* were instrumental in shaping his writing and well as his penchant for narrative building (Kashyap Northeast Indian 290). The measures to make regional literatures accessible to the newer generations bereft of experiencing engagements with their native literary and cultural traditions, would be a watershed endeavor for highlighting the margins, a spotlight that hasn't done them justice for years.

Studying the trends of capitalist readership and the politics of access, attention and acceptance of texts in the contemporary culture of commercial viability, can afford us a lot of insight as to how similar strategies can be adopted to proliferate and facilitate the readership of regional or Bhasa Literature. While a large section of the reading population might not pick up a complex text frequently today, there still exists a population of serious readers on both sides of the national border inquisitive enough to read texts that facilitate the familiarizing with the text original culture to some extent. However, several problems like translation, funding and the practice of reading itself. While the internet can drastically bring down the costs of producing and distribution of texts, the issue of translation can only be alleviated when a culture of regular linguistic and literary exchanges, both without and without the confines of academia. The New Education Policy 2020 that has been proposed by the Indian government at the center, aims to achieve a similar goal of re-orienting higher studies but with the vernacular regional in mind. While the policy aims to bring the marginal languages to the forefront and contribute in the creation of academic discourses, it still falls short of making provisions of facilitating inter-cultural exchange between geographic sub-divisions within the country. However, many post-colonial writers who have been designated to the margins and hailing from vernacular backgrounds of instruction have come up with their own means of bridging this accessibility gap by choosing to write in both English and their vernacular mother tongue. Writers like Kashyap, when faced with the choice of language to make their stories heard, say

…I write Assamese books in two languages—English and Assamese—and I feel slightly unsure when someone brands me, with the slightly flattening term, Indian English Writer. (Kashyap, Translation 10)

V. CONCLUSION

The attempt to resolve the debate surrounding the superiority or accuracy of portrayal of realism is hardly the major concern of the moment. Instead, Indian Writing in English (IWE) and regional Bhasa literature should be seen as complementary to one another has the it provides access to new readerships. This is especially true in the context of re-familiarizing readers estranged from their national and cultural identities, opening doors to Indian culture be it for the new Americanized immigrant generations or the Westernized native Indian youth.

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