

Almost the Same but Not Quite: The Menace of Domestication in Nissim Ezekiel's "Very Indian Poems in Very Indian English"

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that mimicry of the local register of English in poetry becomes a device for expressing a resilient and menacing appropriation and domestication of the colonizer's language. This paper addresses the question: how does mimicry of the Anglophone idiom disrupt the stability of source and target language in inter-lingual translation? While building on Padma Rangarajan's discussion on mimicry viewed as bastardization of the source language, I argue that the mimicry of the source language in Indian poet Nissim Ezekiel's poems "Very Indian Poems in Very Indian English" destabilizes both source and target languages, and makes the colonizer-colonized binary fluid. This kind of mimicry is what Homi K. Bhabha calls a "menace" because it is not quite similar, but also not quite different. The speakers in the poems adapt the Anglo-Indian idiom of English to stress not the flaw of mimicry, but the celebration of this menace. In this analysis of Ezekiel's poems, I contribute to recent conversations regarding the colonial master's language and the colonial subject's *translation* of this language into a local hybrid, thus rendering the Indo-Anglian mimic as the site of menacing appropriation. Indian English is foreignized, while British English is domesticated, and in this dual movement, a new idiom is created, which is the same as English, but not quite.

Key Words: Anglophone Literature, Appropriation, Domestication, Mimicry,

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled- exactly the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.

-Jacques Lacan, "The Line and Light," *Of the Gaze*

Introduction:

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was one of the leading postcolonial anglophone poets from India. In his introduction to *Three Indian Poets: Ezekiel, Moraes, and Ramanujan*, Bruce King described these three postcolonial anglophone poets as the first to write poetry "after an international standard." Their work "directly or indirectly expresses some of the tensions of Indian writing in English" (King, 1991, p. 1). In this paper, I explore one such 'tension,' i.e. the appropriation and domestication of the registers of English into an Indian English idiom. I argue that Ezekiel's poems do not mimic the "very Indian" English to stress syntactic and grammatical deviations. In fact,

these deviations underscore the menacing aspect of mimicry, thus creating a site for creating a globalised idiom of Englishes rather than a standardized English.

Theoretical Framework:

In his influential essay “Of Mimicry and Man,” Homi Bhabha posits a theory whereby the mimicry of the colonial idiom becomes a destabilizing act, an act of “menace” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). In Bhabha’s phrasing, the colonial subject is fashioned into something that is “almost the same, but not quite” (p. 86). Bhabha contends that mimicry is the colonial power’s strategic tool for producing subjects that are recognizable as the “other.” They are Anglicized but can never be English, and are recognizable within the normal identification paradigm, but are still placed at enough of a distance so as to be identifiable as the colonized. Mimicry holds these subjects at a remove from the norm of Englishness to enact Macaulay’s infamous Minute on Education, creating a class of persons “Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (p. 87). The colonial machinery encourages the creation of the mimic because it requires it to act as intermediary between the natives and the masters. The mimic resembles the colonial administration closely, and can thus administer, translate, and reproduce colonial authority. However, the colonial apparatus cannot allow the mimic to presume its resemblance as its true identity. If the mimic acquires the identity of the mimicked, the whole colonial hierarchy would collapse. It is in this area of slippage that the “menace” occurs. The colonizer demands that the colonized attempt an approximation of the colonizer, but this approximation will always be partial and ambivalent. Thus, the expectation of an obedient mimic can conversely overturn into a menace. In becoming “almost the same but not quite,” the mimic also holds a mirror to the colonizer’s self, showing a distorted reflection of what the colonizer has assumed itself to be. Mimicry, to Bhabha, is “at once resemblance and menace,” and exposes the performative and constructed aspect of the original image of the colonizer. This unsettles colonial authority. The “same but not quite” formulation thus shows how the postcolonial self is neither about complete assimilation nor about pure resistance. Menace exists between the two. Elsewhere in my work, I have theorized this as “resilience.” However, here the purpose is served well by the idea of menace. That is precisely what this paper argues. Ezekiel’s characters are mimics who acquire the identity of Englishness, thus destabilizing the accepted norms of standardized English. The characters in these “Very Indian Poems in Very Indian English” challenge the “not quite” space that the white colonizer denies the non-white native, to retain colonial identity as separate from the colonized’s identity. Ezekiel’s characters inhabit the “not quite” and become a menace for the colonized. The mimic does not stand outside colonial discourse. It inhabits and owns it. The model of the colonizer, and the distorted reflection of the colonized, negotiate identity in the interstices of the in-between space.

Building on Bhabha’s seminal work, Padma Rangarajan argues that the colonizer-colonized relationship enacted in the colonial and postcolonial policies of translation was one that was subversive but also benefitted both the colonizer and the colonized. While Rangarajan limits her thesis largely to inter-lingual translation, she devotes a chapter to those aspects of intra-lingual translation that represent the creation of a hybrid language. Using the example of F. Anstey’s *Baboo Hurry Bangshoo Jaberjee*, Rangarajan posits that the Indo-Anglian English speaker’s appropriation of the English language threatened the colonial master’s sense of cultural and linguistic purity during the days of the British Raj.

Translation scholar Lydia Liu has shown the inadequateness of traditional terms like “source” and “target” languages. She proposes “host language” and “guest language” as replacements for these (Liu, 1999, pp. 26–27). Her objection to “source” and “target” languages is based in these formulations privileging the original language as primary, and describing the receiving language

as passive and secondary. The “source” language contains the notions of “authenticity, origin, influence,” while the idea of a target language contains the assumption that a distance has to be bridged before meaning can be reached (p. 26). In Liu’s formulation, the “host language” is the site where meaning is actually made. She describes translanguaging practice as a process through which new words, meanings, and discourses take shape, “arise, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within the host language due to, or in spite of, the latter’s contact/collision with the guest language” (p. 26). Thus, it is not the guest, but the host language, that invites, selects, and reinvents meaning. Meanings, Liu argues, are not transferred between languages, but “invented within the local environment” of the host language (p. 26). She contends that the host language may “violate, displace, and usurp the authority of the guest language” even in the very act of translation (p. 27). This theoretical intervention upends the assumption that non-European languages are inferior or secondary to European languages.

Methodology

This paper explores the menace of that appropriation in some selected passages from Indian anglophone poet Nissim Ezekiel’s “Very Indian Poems in Indian English.” Analyzing the selected passages through the lens of Translation Studies and Postcolonial theory, I contend that Ezekiel’s hybrid brand of Indo-Anglian English destabilizes the identity of language itself, and in the process of translating from one language to another, these poems destabilize the (easy) identity of the mimicked idiom itself. While Bhabha’s conception of mimicry assumes a stable division between the mimicked and the mimic, I argue that Ezekiel’s poetic speakers in these selected passages mimic both the other and the self, creating the subversive hybrid that for Rangarajan, results from the colonial translation policy that has lingered in the postcolony.

Analysis:

A seminal poem that represents Ezekiel’s translation of one register of English into another is “Goodbye Party Miss Pushpa T.S.”:

Friends,
our dear sister
is departing for foreign
in two three days,
and
we are meeting today
to wish her bon voyage. (1-7)

What is being mimicked here? The hybrid English idiom of the Indo-Anglian speaker is not the standardized English idiom that the colonizer imposed, but a new version of English. Translation here is not of words from one language to another, but of speech patterns that are not inherent to English. In doing this, Ezekiel exercises what Simon Gikandi has called for in his rallying cry of “provincializing English.” Gikandi argues that the first step for understanding that global English is not a monolingual phenomenon is “the recognition that there are many varieties of English, each with multiple registers” (13). In locating this multiplicity of English *languages* in the common versions of English spoken by postcolonial citizens outside of literary and academic discourse, Gikandi posits the kind of mutually informed existence of colonizer-colonized languages that Rangarajan finds in the colonial translation projects of William Jones, among others. The Indian register of the opening lines of “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T.S.” domesticates English, which translates from one register of a language to another.

While agreeing with Gikandi, Akshya Saxena posits that the task of provincializing English first needs to recognize that English is already provincial. I argue that in the poems discussed here,

Ezekiel mimics what is already a provincialized idiom, thereby removing the boundaries between foreign and domestic, or what Lydia Liu calls “host” and “guest” languages. Global English, Saxena argues, is always linked with local englishes, and World anglophone literature is only so in relation to local anglophone literatures. She labels this understanding of the global anglophone as a “worldly anglophony,” arguing that our contemporary understanding of English language “can no longer be limited or a privilege” (25). I read in this conception of a transnational “worldly anglophony” an acknowledgement of the power of intra-lingual translation that challenges the assumption that intra-lingual translation is a monolingual exercise. In the lines quoted above, the movement between languages is indeed within the same language, which might sound contradictory, but affirms the already provincialized and domesticated status of English.

The solecisms and grammatical deviations from standardized English are here mimicries of an already appropriated idiom, or as Saxena would call them, they are the expressions of a “worldly anglophony.” As such, once it has been established that these localized, domesticated registers of English are out there for appropriation and mimicry, their ready availability establishes their menace. The positioning of the adjective “foreign” is a deviation from the standardized use of English, because the speaker places it at a place where the noun “abroad” belongs. Yet, within the subcontinental context, as a reader, one can easily surmise what this “foreign” replaces. For the native reader, then, what he recognizes as English includes both the foreignized standard of English’s native speaker, and the domesticated mimicry of the colonial native’s language. Crucially, “our dear sister/ is departing for foreign” blurs the division between which version of English (standardized or creolized) is the foreign one, and which the domestic. Thus, the blurring of guest/host boundaries is an exercise in challenging a stable sense of where one linguistic register ends and the other begins, an act of menacing mimicry as Bhabha imagines it, and as Rangarajan recognizes it in the colonial translation projects like *Babu Hurry*.

The different registers of English here may appear to be the *same* as English, but are *not quite* English, thereby creating a multilingual universe of englishes, which Gikandi calls for. The “foreign” that substitutes for “abroad” in “departing for foreign” is not a solecism, but a translation of the Indo-Anglian spoken idiom, an act of provincializing. The complexity of this hybrid idiom is that it simultaneously foreignizes and domesticates English, and one can no longer tell which register of English is the guest, and which is the host. It seems fair to claim that the postcolonial anglophone poet, in shaping an idiom, anticipated a debate that postcolonial criticism has come to recognize only now. Therefore, I posit that the postcolonial anglophone poet, in his appropriation of a mimicked idiom of standardized English, creates the menace of several English registers.

These provincialized and multiple registers of English exist in the form of hybrids. Jahan Ramazani defines the postcolonial poet’s peculiar brand of “hybridity” in *A Transnational Poetics* as “the knotting together of countless already knotted together indigenous and imposed languages, images, genres,” and claims that this hybridity is “not an aspect but the basic fabric of the postcolonial poem” (Ramazani, 2009, p. 100). The full implication of the hybrid idiom that destabilizes standardized/appropriated identities is that it challenged the conception of who is being mimicked. The syntax of speech in “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.” has the potential to offend a native speaker of the subcontinent, who might well misconstrue this as an elitist mocking of the common man’s English. Trained in the exploration of postcolonial angst, the reader/critic might not be receptive to this seemingly mocking mimicry of the native turn of phrase. If read through Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s famous call for “decolonizing,” a reader might believe that he is being made fun of. However, the comfort native to the speaker in the poem as he delivers his toast belies this claim, and posits the far more threatening possibility that this is mockery. The speaker does not stumble in his speech, which indicates that for him, the idiom of provincialized English has been properly domesticated, and the unfamiliar (foreign) has been translated into the familiar (local).

Similarly, the phrases “our dear sister”, “two three days” are expressions that are peculiar to the subcontinent’s variety of the English language. Turns-of-phrase like “You are all knowing” (8) instead of ‘as you all know / as you are aware’, “external sweetness” (10), “smiling and smiling/ even for no reason” (12-13), and “very high family” (16) are peculiar to this region, and represent literal translations of expressions from the indigenous languages. Ezekiel does not simply mimic a *style* of speaking English, but incorporates a style of translating between languages. Thus the inter-lingual translation of the Hindi/Urdu *bohāt ooncha khandaan* as “very high family” becomes a part of the English language in the poem’s structure. The inter-lingual becomes the intra-lingual, and the monotony of monolingualism is destabilized in this appropriative translation.

Syntactical variations, though incongruent and funny upon reading, are not incorporated in the poem for the sake of ridicule. Rather, they represent the syncretic culture born out of the colonial process, and the syncretized idiom that Ezekiel creates in this poem:

Whenever I asked her to do anything,
she was saying, ‘Just now only
I will do it’. That is showing
good spirit. (29-32)

The Hindi/Urdu *abhi fauran karti hoon* translates here into the ‘English’ “just now only I will do it.” Ezekiel incorporates the domestic idiom of English through solecisms and syntactical idiosyncrasies. The last lines are perhaps an indication of why Ezekiel does not pass judgement:

Now I ask other speakers to speak,
and afterwards Miss Pushpa
will do summing up. (41-43)

The invitation to others to join their voices with the speaker in the poem is the poet’s invitation to his readers and followers to fully realize the menace of mimicry. This is a poem celebrating the confidence of a colonized race that does not consider it beyond its linguistic capabilities to appropriate the language of the master, invert its syntactical structures, and then use it in poetic speech. As such, “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.” is the most Indian of all Indian poems, because it celebrates the subcontinental register of the English language, and represents a pride in the identity asserted in the appropriation of language.

Another “very Indian poem in Indian English” is titled “The Patriot”. The poem, like “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.” explores the same syntactical deviation from the norm of the Queen’s English:

I am standing for peace and non-violence.
Why world is fighting fighting,
Why all people of world
Are not following Mahatma Gandhi,
I am simply not understanding. (1-5)

The syntax and diction are similar to those of the persona speaking in “Goodbye Party for Miss Push T.S.”. The former poem sounds boisterous when compared to “The Patriot”, although it is the character in the latter poem that appears less humble than the speaker in the former poem, who is down to earth and unassuming. “The Patriot” seems to express the views of a character used to speaking from a pulpit, and who takes himself very seriously. This is the postcolonial subject who has successfully provincialized the idioms of the master race, and now blurs the boundary between what is local and what is foreign, which is the “guest” and which the “host.” The earthy quality of the repeated present continuous verb “fighting fighting” assumes the authority of a localized, domesticated register of English. This is not just one English, but as Saxena stresses, it is one of the many worldly anglophonies of English. As Bhabha puts it, this is the same as, but not quite, English.

In the same vein, the speaker in the poem uses a domesticated idiom to localize the currents of national news:

Other day I'm reading in newspaper
(Every day I'm reading Times of India
To improve my English Language)
How one goonda fellow
Throw stone at Indirabehn. (10-14)

Ezekiel has incorporated a compassion for the distorted syntax in this poem. It has a quality of innocence about it. The parenthetical aside about reading the *Times of India* as a method of improving language skills is almost endearing, given the subcontinental and postcolonial obsession with learning standardized English. Lisa Lowe has argued that the colonial exercise of learning a foreign language through dictation leads to the “transformation of the individual into a formal but contradictory subject” (Lowe, 1996, p. 144) whose interpellation as a subject is “not only multiple,” but simultaneously “hybrid, unclosed, and uneven” (p. 146). The postcolonial prestige of reading a local English newspaper “to improve my English Language) reflects what Lowe reads as the hybrid subject formation of a dictated identity.

Indeed, the capitalized “English Language” emphasizes the menace of mimicry in Ezekiel’s “very Indian” poems. Is the English Language a distinct, standardized whole that the *Times of India* represents? A perusal of English newspapers in the subcontinent suggests that the sub-editors working in the newsrooms are mostly postcolonized speakers and writers whose language closely resembles the hybrid idiom represented by the speakers in the two poems discussed here. So, in Ezekiel’s world, the mimicry of the English Language as represented in the *Times of India* is menacing to the stability of a standardized Queen’s English. The speaker’s English (“fighting fighting”), as an approximation of the English he learns from the newspaper, raises the question: has the standardized English of the newspaper not in itself become a domesticated, provincialized register of global English? The question is further complicated because from the perspective of a native speaker of English, language is not being domesticated, but foreignized. To return to Rangarajan and Liu, this is a subversive intermingling of the guest and host languages, where the speaker is both a guest speaker as well as the host who acts as the site of translation.

Unlike “Goodbye Party for Miss Pushpa T. S.,” where the focus highlights the translingual existences of the English language, “The Patriot” tries to capture the character who adapts this erroneous syntax. It is this attention to the character that makes it seem that Ezekiel’s perspective as a poet has undergone some change. The character in the poem plays the part of the semi-educated newspaper-reading local elder, who does not fear misquoting Shakespeare:

Friends, Romans, Countrymen, I am saying
(to myself)
Lend me the ears. (16-18)

Imagined as a performance in a theatre, this is the moment when the audience gently chuckles and applauds the actor for playing this part to perfection. The Shakespearean quotation has been *dictated* through the postcolonial education system to the speaker, as Lowe argues, but in the subtle placement of the definite article “the,” the speaker menacingly threatens the stability of dictation. Whereas dictation presumes a stable and clearly distinguishable identification between the person giving dictation and the subject of dictation, the speaker’s appropriation of a popular quotation destabilizes this boundary. It is now the non-native, *guest* speaker of English dictating the Shakespearean quotation back to the reader.

Ezekiel’s speaker commits another subversive act, which further destabilizes the stability of standardized English. He refers to an indigenous cultural item and uses the vernacular word for it:

You want one glass lassi?
 Very good for digestion.
 With little salt lovely drink,
 Better than wine. (22-25)

However, as the interpellated subject of colonial dictation, Ezekiel's speaker is always too aware that in using the word "lassi", he must also explain and create the context. The word cannot be used in isolation, and appropriation of language requires that the appropriated idiom must have a context that native speakers of the center's language can then use to understand the incongruent word, image or metaphor. English here acts as host for the guest word "lassi," which is then translated as a drink like wine, but "better," and to be taken with "little salt." However, he chooses not to elaborate that lassi is unlike wine in being a drink made by churning yogurt/curd. This withholding of information also rests powers and agency with the speaker, who invites but then also pushes away. Does lassi here belong in the English language? The speaker has provincialized and domesticated the idiom enough for the word to appear to be a part of the "host" culture. The menacing mimicry of standardized English has therefore enabled the speaker to challenge these guest/host boundaries.

The final poem in this series, that helps establish a context for the poet's relationship vis-a-vis the language he has chosen and the idiom he tries to create in that foreign language is "Soap". The character in this poem is an ordinary man like the speakers in the two poems discussed above, and struggles in a multi-lingual society. His plight is the plight of a simple middle-class person for whom English-medium education is an important possession because it sets him or her apart from the lower classes and allows them to dream of becoming part of the classes placed higher on the social ladder to whom the language comes easily. However, as Lowe suggests, this is a language he can only learn through dictation, and being dictated shapes him as a subject of the various Englishes that he is exposed to.

The character goes out to buy soap, "for ordinary washing myself purposes" (5). At the shop, he or she is not satisfied with the quality of the soap. The persona condescends to address the shopkeeper:

So I'm saying very politely –
 though in Hindi I'm saying it,
 and my Hindi is not so good as my English. (11-13)

The syntax of his speech, almost the same, but not quite English, highlights the subversion of the postcolonial subject, who learns a provincialized English idiom, only to realize that his relationship with his native Hindi is now "not so good as my English." The interpellation of the subjectivity of the speaker may seem like the perfect enactment of a hybrid, appropriated version of English, which is always inferior to the standardized host language, but really it threatens and menaces the presumed authenticity of the host idiom.

Conclusion:

This paper has attempted to understand the difficult but enriching way in which a translated interaction between standardized English and local, domesticated, and provincialized registers of English challenges notions of linguistic stability. At one level, all the characters in these three "very Indian poems in Indian English" are characters who are being mimicked for their imperfect mimicry of English. However, with each poem, the ordinary Indian man who chooses English as his medium of expression becomes more humanized. With the boundaries between host and guest, colonized and colonizer, standardized and deviant English being blurred in these poems, Bhabha's notion of the menace that mimicry poses is realized. Ezekiel's "very Indian poems in Indian English" suggest that the inter-lingual transaction between English and vernacular languages has

created a hybrid idiom of English that now facilitates intra-lingual movement between the various versions of English. To subvert Bhabha, then, one might remark that these versions are not quite, but the same, as English.

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