

'AS BROADCAST' SCRIPT

Producer: B. C. Horton

WRITING IN A FOREIGN TONGUE by Attia Hosain

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English is not my mother tongue and yet I write in English. I write in a language other than my own not because I choose to do so but because I must - because I find it easier to express my thoughts in English than in Urdu which is my own language. And this is the case even though I write about my own country. Yet, paradoxically enough, although I have to write in English to express my thoughts I have to contend with countless difficulties when using it for creative writing.

This is not because I am unfamiliar with English - there is no language difficulty for me in that sense. I grew up with the sound of English in my ears - and a language can really be learned no other way. When I was three I was put in charge of an English governess; at five I went to a school primarily for English and Anglo-Indian girls - at that time in India the best modern education was only possible in such schools. From then until I graduated fourteen years later, I was taught entirely in English and was taught the same subjects as in any English school, and with the same standards of examination. I learnt the beauty, rhythm, flexibility and richness of the English language from reading the Bible, Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare.

Where did my mother tongue fit into this scheme of study? It didn't - not in any academic way. French, not Urdu or Hindi, was the second language taught. I spoke my mother tongue and lived with it at home, but I was taught it only in the time that could be spared from studying for the examinations.

This was how I formed the habit of reading, writing and even thinking, in English. In fact I thought in both languages - but there were more occasions to think in English. I wrote more easily in English, not only because I had to, but because I read more English books. My vocabulary in my mother tongue was limited - and more so because the pressure of other studies constantly interrupted my studies of our own classics, of Arabic and Persian.

Many Indians grew up like me, at the best bi-lingual and at the worst almost ignorant of their mother tongue. The climate of opinion and the system of education that created this situation was the result of all sorts of complicated forces - political, economic and social. At that time, too, the relation between rulers and ruled in India was changing rapidly and at the moment that the two cultures began to clash openly, Western influences were beginning to penetrate established ways of living and thinking. There was, no doubt, some snobbery involved - at least in some cases - in the imitation and adoption of English ways and speech: but there was also a progressive element in it because in the struggle for freedom English was both a weapon as well as the key to, what I might call the ideological arsenal.

As far as I myself was concerned, although I was educated in English and my family adopted certain English ways, I was brought up very conscious of our own culture, our feudal background and relationships. I grew up with the English language but not with the culture behind it. I was always outside that and deeply rooted in my own.

*N.B. This was cut from the broadcast, but I would like it in any copy*

The result of this clashing and merging of different cultures was that I, like many others, lived in many worlds of thought and many centuries at the same time, shifting from one to the other with bewildering rapidity in a matter of moments

I have described my background because it explains the paradoxical difficulty I spoke of in writing in a foreign language. Obviously, these difficulties aren't ones of grammar and syntax - I learnt those rules young enough to forget them. No, the difficulty lies here - that unless one is completely part of a culture there are always limitations to one's use of a language because it is not bred in one's tones and so one misses certain subtleties: colloquialisms and dialects remain unfamiliar. And all this means that one cannot be completely at ease, can't play about with words, without self-consciousness coming as a shadow between one and the reader.

In fact, when you write in a foreign language, you begin to realise how much it is given life by the culture behind it. It is born, grows, changes - and dies - with the people who use it to communicate their thoughts and desires. Its words are created as symbols of these very thoughts and desires. And, writing in a foreign language, you come to realise how words create not only a single image but a series of images so that if the image created in the mind of the writer is different from the image in the mind of the reader there will not be complete understanding between them.

And here is another difficulty: what is one to do if a concept or image of one's own culture is so alien to the foreign culture that the word for it does not exist in that language? That is the gravest problem of all. My own difficulties arise out of this, both in the handling of words and in the search for related images.

Of course these difficulties are directly related to the subject of one's work, to its form and content. English is still used on the sub-continent as a means of communication because there is a wide field of common thought. But a great silent gap remains. There was a point beyond which the two cultures could neither clash nor merge nor come to terms with each other. And in writing my novel I have become painfully aware of the inadequacy of the words I am using when I come up against that silent gap. And there is no avoiding it, if one wishes to write with sincerity and truth. For difficulties of expression arise not in dealing with emotions or experiences which are universal; they arise when they are related to the cultural pattern.

So what does one do? Well, if one language lacks the words to express the images of another then one has either to find related images or explain them. To say the least, this is a curb on the creative process, and artistically destructive. An unnatural element is introduced between the writer and the free flow of creative thought. One stops being a creative writer and becomes a translator, and in the process of translation one becomes conscious of the reader at the cost of the characters one is creating. They begin to lose life and become puppets.

Writing dialogue presents its own special problems. I find myself thinking in dialogue in my own language and translating my thoughts literally. That sets off a chain reaction of difficulties. First of all, phrases that sound natural in my mother tongue sound artificial or ornate in translation (they are not natural to the English language and therefore they're unnatural in it). This is partly because the language of a very ancient culture such as ours is compounded of many cultures, and allusions to myths, legends, philosophical and religious beliefs become part of everyday speech.

But most of these are strange to the West. Again, in the society about which I am writing a novel now it is natural for cultured people to quote couplets from Persian, Urdu or Hindi poetry to make a point. Their choice of these quotations and the way they use them are an indication of character and establish their background in the same way as turns of phrase, the mis-use of words or colloquialisms and dialects. But how can I explain these allusions to myths and philosophies or how can I translate these couplets without explanation? If I explain, the artistic expression is destroyed. In fact there are many painful moments when I have to remind myself that I am not writing a guidebook nor a sociological survey, nor a collection of strange and fantastic customs - that a novel is not a place for explanations of this kind.

Then take the example of certain significant words: there is, for instance, an Urdu word which establishes the relationship between two people. But to convey it in English there is only the pronoun "you" - since "thou" has become archaic - and somehow I have to use this for three pronouns each with its special significance. In Urdu "Aap" is used to address one's elders and betters, in a formal sense and sometimes sarcastically. "Tum" is used for those younger, equals and inferiors. "Tu" is used to address inferiors, loved ones, and God. That it is used to express contempt, and also the highest form of love in addressing God, is an indication of the subtle shades acquired by a word in an old language. "Tu" has connotations that relate it to mystic philosophy - the same philosophy which has made wine, unholy in itself, the symbol of the love of God.

This complicated pattern of relationship in a feudal society between individuals, between them and society, between men and women, seems almost impossible to transfer into English speech.

Then there is the relationship of the sexes. In the West "Purdah", or the seclusion of women, is taken to be the outward sign of that relationship. But 'Purdah' is not merely a physical fact. What is important is the structure of thought and social habits behind it. When I write in English that a wife and husband do not address each other by name, do not appear together nor talk to their children in the presence of elders, it appears curious, maybe ridiculous. But all this was part of a pattern of thought and behaviour - how deeply a part of it, can be understood when we consider that in classical poetry it was the convention that the beloved should always be addressed in the masculine gender by poets. It was indelicate to do otherwise. ~~Women poets used the pronoun "Hum", which is also used for "we", for "I" because it gave no indication in verb-endings of the gender of the subject.~~

~~The exception was in folk-songs where it was always the woman who addressed the man. But always the songs were of longing, not of fulfilment.~~

The very different attitude to marriage from the Western one follows as a natural consequence from the attitude to love, and the relationship of the sexes. Somehow I have to explain this. Here is one example. At a point after the marriage ceremony I wished to describe the emotional reactions of the bride when she is leaving her home. In my own language two key words alone would have evoked images I want to project.

One is "Susral". By definition Susral is the home into which one is married, but it connotes a whole pattern of duties, responsibilities and renunciations, and a code of behaviour in relation to the family into which one marries, including its servants and dependents.

The other word is "Babul" - the song sung at the moment of the bride's departure for her "Susral". Literally it is merely a bride's song of farewell, full of pathos and tenderness and deeply moving. But a whole way of life leads up to that moment of departure - and the song is a symbol of it. The parting symbolises more than when a western bride leaves her home. You may understand the implications of parting, in that particular pattern of life, if I say that the word "Jahez" meaning "dowry" is closely related to the word "Tajheiz" used in connection with the last rites for the dead. How can one explain that, as part of the whole complex, there is no cruelty in the concept?

These are a few examples of the problems - the simpler ones - I find in writing of my own culture in English. I can of course help the reader - and myself - by adding a glossary; but I grudge every word that goes into it, as it takes away something from the completeness of the book as a creative work.

However, all difficulties have to be overcome. That they can be, and are, is proved by the increasing number of Eastern writers writing in English. If they are not able to contribute anything to English literature, maybe they can create a new Anglo-Asian one.







