

Bapsi Sidhwa**Writing in English. A Subcontinental Novelist's Perspective**

I will look at some aspects of fiction writing that affect South Asian writers, and try to analyze – if such a term can be applied to so elusive a process – how I handle them as a novelist.

There are many facets to fiction writing that one does not consciously think about, and these translate themselves onto paper almost automatically. The writer does not question this process, or examine it too closely, because creative writing has an element of the magical, and in attempting to dissect the gift of story-telling, the writer is afraid that the magic, the muse, might disappear. I have written four novels, and I assure you that I feel less confident each time I begin one. And in the end I am very grateful that I have 'pulled it off'; as if the novel were a gimmick or a trick. It astonishes me that the chaos of nebulous ideas has taken a coherent and readable shape.

Consequently, writers are superstitious. They don't like to tamper with the muse. Who can blame the writer for being afraid that, in examining this sorcery, she or he will become self-conscious and inhibited? The resulting loss of confidence can kill creativity as surely as the lack of opportunity to dream.

When I decided one day to write a story, I sat down to it blithely. It did not occur to me that I was doing any but the most natural thing; after all I was only doing what my aunts, grandmothers, and ayahs had done so easily. It might be a foolhardy approach to writing, but it is the only one I know that works. If it works, well, you're stuck with it, because spinning yarns, which is the creative process, can become addictive and obsessive. If you discover however that what had begun as a labor of love has turned into a tedious duty, you can simply shrug off the urge and thank your stars that you have not been condemned to the life of a hermit.

So, I'm going to cross my fingers, and look into a few matters, and hope that I will not damage the muse in the attempt.

As a writer from the Subcontinent writing in America, I am asked certain questions frequently. They are pertinent to our status as South Asian writers, and I have been compelled to give them thought. Here is the result of some of these musings.

Number one on the list (and the writers among you will recognize it with a sinking heart): "Why do you write in English? Why not in your mother tongue?" Which, in my case, is Gujarati. Believe me, very few people in Pakistan or in the United States (I live in both countries) can speak Gujarati, let alone read or write it. Like most bilingual and trilingual children in the Subcontinent I started speaking English when I was about nine years old.

Second on the list: "Who do you write for?"

Answer: Anyone who is interested in reading my novels in whatever languages they exist. They have been translated into German, French, Russian and Urdu, and I hope some day to see them in Gujarati. I feel they will truly blossom in the language. The answer I just gave to the second question is very like Khushwant Singh's when he was once asked: "Who are the women you find most attractive?" His answer: "Those who are most attracted to me".

Another question, and this confused me thoroughly: "Which language do you think in?" This question has surprising ramifications and resonances. I found myself delving deep into a writer's psyche, unearthing secrets I wouldn't have bothered to dig up otherwise. For the process of writing is at best sub-conscious, if not unconscious.

That said, let me ask, how many among you have asked yourselves: "Now, let me see: What language do I think in?"

The answer is not as simple as one might initially believe. At least it took me very long to gain a sliver of insight into it, and even then the answer was arrived at intuitively. Every time I remembered to ask myself, "O gosh, what language did I

think in just now?" the thought vanished, together with its language. Sometimes I found I was left with a residue of images.

Then a strange thing happened. In trying to explain the process, in putting it down on paper and pinning it to words, the glimmer of understanding took on substance. The relation between language and thought is truly fascinating. After all what are we in essence, if not a distillation of our thoughts and words?

Like many among you, who need to present the rich heritage of our various cultures to the rest of the world, I find myself juggling with thoughts, words and idioms from several Indo/Pak languages. How this jigsaw, this lavish South-Asian brew, manages somehow to transform itself into essays, poems and novels in English, is the mystery I will try, to a limited extent, to probe.

Let me tackle the question of the choice of language, very briefly, first. Why do I write in English. It is a question that confronts a *desi* writer so often that I'm sick of it. I give you my opinion for what it's worth. I'll quote a passage from my first published novel *The Crow Eaters*; it is set in the 1930's:

A way of life was imposed upon Tanya and Billy by the locality in which they lived, by their independent bungalow, and by their possessions. They made friends with modern couples equally determined to break with tradition. They were not of the masses, this young crowd. If their wealth did not set them apart, their ability to converse in English certainly did (Sidhwa 1992: 27, Chapter 41).

If nothing else, this passage from *The Crow Eaters* suggests the elitist status of English in India. Although the Raj has been banished, and the Empire repossessed, the status of English remains more or less the same: it is still the language of the elite, of the privileged and powerful. India has seen many other languages come and go, but English is a phenomenon; it has stayed. The most important factor contributing to this phenomenon is the emergence of English as a World Language.

I, for one, think that we should thank the Almighty for saddling us – if saddled we must be with an alien tongue – with English, rather than with Arabic, Persian or Portuguese, the languages of other invaders and settlers, all of them very fine languages, with the dazzle of genius in their written tradition. But, and it is an important but, English, besides having its own tradition of genius, is useful. It's useful in terms of commerce, communication and technology, and it is the major link language of the world.

And this useful language, rich also in literature, is no longer the monopoly of the British. We, the ex-colonized, have subjugated their language, and molded it to our requirements. Let the English fret and fume: the fact remains that in adapting English to our use we have given it a new shape, substance, dimension, and in making it ours, we have enriched it.

It is now widely acknowledged that some of the most innovative writers in English come from our part of the world: Raja Rao, Narayan, Naipaul, Desani, Desai, to name a few. This perhaps explains why my use of English in writing my novels has not been seriously questioned in Pakistan or India. Without putting it in so many words, it is accepted that because of British colonization English is with us to stay. Whether we like it or not, it has become a useful tool, a means of communication with the rest of the world, and together with Urdu in Pakistan, and its twin Hindustani in India, a link, elitist if you will, between people who speak different languages within the country. In Pakistan Urdu still remains the official language spoken by the elite, though it is spoken to a much lesser extent than English. The vast majority speaks their provincial languages, which are Punjabi, Pashtu, Sindhi, etc. Ironically, I find this question, "Why do you write in English?" is asked most frequently in Europe.

Anita Desai, in referring to her use of English, puts it succinctly: "I did not feel I was confronted with a choice (of language) but with a heritage".

It is indeed a part of our heritage, and we can no more refute history by refuting it, than we can change history by altering our history text books. The facts

remain unalterable.

Although I speak Gujarati at home, it is after all my mother tongue, and am relatively fluent in Urdu and understand Punjabi, English is the language I choose to write in. I am at ease communicating in it, and I guess that's nobody's business but mine.

Now I come to the third question, and share with you the fruit of my confused labors. Fortunately I dream and think in all four languages, depending on who I am communicating with in my dreams, and the nature of my thoughts. There, I've said it; pinned it down. But it took me quite a while figuring it out and putting it into words.

I feel it is important to point out – even at the risk of stating the obvious – that my reflections and dreams, in whatever language, dwell on people and matters belonging almost exclusively to this part of the world, the Subcontinent. And just because I write in English, it does not mean I am any less of the Punjabi/Parsee/Indo/Pak culture, or that I think and behave at all like an English woman. I never studied in England, or even visited it until quite late in life. I simply use English to write in, as I would Gujarati if it were a language read and understood in as many parts of the world. After all a writer is in the business of communicating, and writes to be read.

As a writer examining these questions, I have become aware that often the very nature of my thoughts, and also the direction of events in my creative endeavors, are influenced by the language I happen to have unconsciously selected to think in, which is the language of my characters. The language my characters speak also influences the action. Parsee characters in my books think and act differently from Muslim, Hindu or Christian characters not only because of the differences in customs or culture, but because the language they speak, and the idiom they favor, predisposes them to certain choices. As such it influences the turn of events, sometimes from paragraph to paragraph. The language also influences the selection of details and incidents I make as a writer.

The following passage from a short story “Defend Yourself Against Me” illustrates this to an extent, but more it reveals the rich cultural mixture of characters and languages that intertwine in stories involving the Subcontinent:

Mrs. Khan and her three sisters also move closer – settling on the rug at my feet. The entire ensemble now combines to enlighten me in five languages: English, Punjabi and Urdu, which I understand, and Kannada and Marathi – contributed by Venketash's mother in earnest but brief fusillades – which I don't.

“Ammijee says the village women ran towards the Chaudhrys' house”, says Mrs. Khan in assertive Punjabi. Being Ammijee's daughter-in-law she is permitted, for the moment at least, to hold center stage. They knew what the Sikhs would do to them; women are the spoils of war no matter what you are – Hindu, Muslim, Sikh – women bear the brunt...

Mrs. Khan casts her eyes about in a way that makes us draw closer, and whispers, “Ammijee says she went mad! She heard her daughter screaming and screaming, ‘Do anything you wish with me, but don't hurt me. For God's sake don't hurt me!’”

We look away, the girls' tormented cries ringing unbearably in our ears. Suzanne and the youngest sister brush their eyes and, by the time we are able to talk again, Mrs. Khan's moment is over. The medley of languages again asserts itself (Sidhwa forthcoming 2013).

I feel, perhaps in common with most trilingual or bilingual writers, fortunate in having access to these languages. I am free to take what I wish from the riches each offers: the earthy gusto of Punjabi, the poetry and delicacy of Urdu, the wealth of choice which makes for exactitude and nuance in English, the comedy, farce, burlesque and sheer energy that erupts so spontaneously out of Gujarati as it is spoken and maltreated by the Parsees, and the body of meaning encapsulated in many of the single words of these South Asian languages – and juggle them to my advantage.

But this advantage also has its pitfalls. The Indianized turn of phrase or choice of native word, that might add originality and freshness to the writing for someone who knows this part of the world, can give a headache to someone who does not. I feel that the poor Western reader has a hard enough time absorbing the different cultures, values, religions, and alien cast of characters – not to mention the subtleties and complexities of our relationships with one another – without being burdened with strange words and tricky sentences as well.

Believing as I do that my primary responsibility is to communicate with the reader, Western and Subcontinental, I am very selective and careful with the use of native words. I will try to share the problems I have encountered in the usage of native words, and the conclusions I have arrived at as a Subcontinental Novelist writing about our part of the world. Certain Urdu words have a tonal quality that communicates their meaning even in English. Words like *badmash*, *hulla-goolla*, *goonda*, if used in the proper context convey their meaning without recourse to translation, e.g. “We exposed ourselves so that only they could see us. But what a hulla-goolla! The woman screamed and cursed. You’d have thought we’d raped them!” (Sidhwa 1991: 132, Chapter 14). Or, “There is a lull in the clamor. The door snaps shut and Imam Din stands on the kitchen steps looking bomb-bellied and magnificently goondaish - the grandfather of all the goondas milling about us – with his shaven head, hennaed beard and grimy lungi” (Sidhwa 1991: 191, Chapter 21). Or an example from *The Pakistani Bride* when the Superintendent of Jails asks a prisoner “I understand you wished to see me. Well, what is it you badmash?” (Sidhwa 2008: 84, Chapter 9).

Now anyone who understands English knows that ‘bad’ is not good, and the reader is not going to think that a *bad-mash* is a good person. Neither is it difficult to guess that someone described as a *goon-da* is an unsavory character. A *goon* is a *goon*, whether in Gujrati, Hindi, Urdu or English.

Sometimes I place the English translation in brackets immediately after a Pakistani word, e.g. “*bollo!* (speak!)”. It is easy and effective, and if sparingly used,

not intrusive.

Articles of clothing, like *dhoti*, *shalwar lungi* and *mathabana* (*mathabana* is described later) require a little more elaboration and embedding, e.g. "Lifting an end of the white dhoti that was tied up between his legs like an oversized diaper, the Pundit moved away" (Sidhwa 1992: 83, Chapter 13). Words like *chapati* require not only a description, "flattened disks of unleavened wheat bread", but also some action of the narrative to show how they are made: "She slapped a chunk of rubbery dough between her hands until it stretched into a round, thin wafer, and tossed it on the smoking griddle" [could be from any book]. A new detail is sometimes added when *chapati* is mentioned again to establish the value of its role within the culture to the reader. At the same time I am careful not to trivialize the atmosphere for the Indian/Pakistani reader.

In the case of titles, like *chaudhry* or *granthi*, I try to describe their status and function simply: "As he talks, he slowly strokes his thick, up-twirled mustache: without which no village headman can look like a *chaudhry*" (Sidhwa 1991: 64, Chapter 7). Thereafter, every time I mention the *chaudhry* again, I show him doing something to his mustache, or running his palm across the "imposing cleft in his chin". As for *granthi*, it's even simpler, "Jagjeet Singh: a plump, smiling, bow-legged Sikh priest, a *granthi*" (Sidhwa forthcoming 2013).

Charpoy is an important word in my vocabulary, and I am at pains to describe it and convey its particular light-weight character, e.g. again from *The Crow Eaters*:

Freddy tiptoed to (his mother-in-law's) bed. The taut strings of the charpoy sagged like a hammock beneath her weight... A laborious upheaval took place on the hammock above him as Jerbanoo turned. The four slender legs of the string-bed creaked and groaned... Freddy broke out in an icy sweat. What if she got out of bed? He felt as exposed beneath the spindly-legged bed as a coy hippopotamus trying to hide behind a sapling (Sidhwa 1991: 38, Chapter 4).

I alternate the use of *charpoy* with *string-cot*, *string-bed*, *cot* or *bed* in order to prevent monotony.

Another case in point would be *paan*: how does one describe this concoction? But to leave it out would be as bad as if in describing the Americans one leaves out their propensity to chew gum. The quotation below is from *The Pakistani Bride*:

“A paan”, the man next ordered, “With crushed tobacco”.

Nikka withdrew a glossy leaf from a sheaf of betel-leaves wrapped in wet cloth and began coating it with a red and white paste.

Nikka handed him the paan saying, “Six paisa”.

The man popped the paan into his mouth, chewed, slurped and declared, “Also stale!”

“My money!” said Nikka, holding out his palm.

“Are you deaf? I told you, the betel-leaf is stale”. He knocked Nikka's hand aside.

“Spit out my paan first”, (Nikka) said, striking the pahalwan on the back of his neck so that the red, syrupy mixture shot out of the man's startled mouth (Sidhwa 2008: 42-43, Chapter 5).

There are several preparations of *paan*, and among them, the *Khushboodar* or *Perfumed-paan*. Anita Desai captures its essential flavor in her novel *In Custody* when the protagonist, Murad, “... stuffed [the *paan*] into his mouth and munched appreciatively, releasing the heavy perfume of their ingredients into the already overloaded air”.

The reader can smell the *kevrā* – essence added to many North Indian dishes - the cardamom and aniseed that distill their scents in the congested air of an Indian Bazar. There is the *Darbari* or *Royal paan*, the *Palang-Tor pann*, which literary means *bed-breaking paan* and includes aphrodisiac properties.

I had used the word *rehra* frequently in a climatic scene in *Cracking India*, but just before it went to print I requested my publisher replace it with cart. Although I had already established the *rehra* as a shallow, two-wheeled rickety cart, I felt that the tension and the rapid flow of the action were dissipated by the intrusion of a word that at best was a strain to the Western reader; it would not matter one way or the other to the Indo/Pak reader. In the following example I feel the word *rehra* would have been distracting: "The carts pour into our drive in an endless cavalry and the looters jump off in front of the kitchen as the carts make room for more carts and the portico and drive are filled with men and horses". (Sidhwa 1991: 190, Chapter 23).

One has to use discretion; whereas one can describe a *rehra* as a cart, I do not like to describe a *tonga* as a carriage. It robs it of its jaunty, two-wheeled, one-horse character. Again, I am at pains to embed its description naturally with the action in the scene, sometimes creating the scene just to accommodate the *tonga*, which has played a fair role in all my novels so far. The following is an example from *Cracking India*:

Dazed with the heat, we pile perspiring into the tonga. Mother and Ayah in back and Adi and I up front with the tongaman. We sit back to back on a bench divided by a quilted backrest. A flimsy canvas canopy shelters us from the sun. The tonga is held together by two enormous wooded wheels on either side of the shaft and is balanced by the harnessed horse. Up front we are more secure - unless the horse falls (Sidhwa 1991: 41, Chapter 5).

In later scenes I recall the description of the *tonga* for the reader with a qualifying word or two, e.g. "Adi pats the horse's rump. The animal swishes his bristly tail and blows wind in our faces" (Sidhwa 1991: 41, Chapter 5). This conveys an idea of the distance between the horse and the passengers, and how they are placed.

All this is not a conscious effort; the writer in me almost automatically embellishes a Gujarati or Urdu word with an added detail, or uses a word which I

think gives the story its cultural flavor.

Now, this consideration of the reader is also born of my own impatience with words which are alien and meaningless to me. The inclusion of French or Latin words aggravates me in the books I read in English. If I can ignore them, well and good; if not, I ignore the book. In good translations I notice the translators use very few native words or are at great pains to establish a word fully if it has to be used.

Words from another language, I feel, are often inserted by the author as a lazy way to add color, or create atmosphere, with little effort to explain or to embed the word. This is particularly obvious and annoying in British writers writing about India. They feel if they use words like *pani* and *khansama* they evoke the atmosphere of India sufficiently. But the *desi* author cannot get away with this nonsense. Because much more important than using native words to impart the flavor of a culture is the use and translation of idioms and proverbs, and the cultural precepts they convey.

In choosing these one has to be as selective as with the choice and detail in, let us say, a particular room or the contents of a drawer in a murder mystery, or the passage of a river that is vital to a narrative. If I come across a turn of phrase, a bit of doggerel, a proverb or an idea that is striking, amusing or uniquely apt in illuminating a cultural insight, I take care to develop it. For example the saying *Hasin to phasin*, common to many Indo/Pak languages, contains an entire way of thinking and behaving – a set of values that goes to the heart of the position of women in this part of the world. I have used it in *Cracking India*, and here is Lenny, the eight-year old narrator:

Already practiced in the conduct they have absorbed from the village women, the girls try not to smile or giggle. They must have heard their mother and aunts (as I have), say: "Hasin to phasin!" "Laugh (and), get laid!" I'm not sure what it means – and I'm sure they don't either – but they know that smiling before men can lead to disgrace (Sidhwa 1991: 63, Chapter 7).

In the above instance I was faced with a choice: to stay with the more or less literal, 'Laugh, and (get) trapped', or to convey the spirit of the homily in its larger context, as in 'Laugh and (get) laid'. I chose the second because it exposes the sexual connotation concealed in the deceptively light-hearted ring of the rhyming words in Urdu or Hindi. One has to grow up as a girl-child in the Indo/Pak Subcontinent to comprehend the chains a glib string of words like these can fasten on women.

Nazar, which combines the benign spirit of 'knock-on-wood' with the envious and ill-willed eye, is another such word. Here is an example from *The Crow Eaters* (note the word *mathabana*). In this scene Freddy, the picaresque protagonist of the novel, has just tried to snip off a bit of his mother-in-law's hair and awakened her in the process. Jerbanoo, the mother-in-law, takes the following precautions:

She took to wearing her mathabana at all times; even during her afternoon siestas. Each millimeter of hair, combed back in a tight knot, was tucked away beneath the square white kerchief as in a steel safe. She blackened her eyes and pressed two large spots of soot on her temples to protect herself from the envious and evil eye. Putli, who diligently blackened her children's eyes, protested, "Mother, no one's going to evil-eye you at your age!"

"You'd be surprised", rejoined Jerbanoo, and in full view of Freddy, handed Putli a tattered bit of meat membrane, dipped in turmeric, commanding, "Here, protect me from evil spells!"

Putli resignedly circled the membrane seven times over her mother's head and flung it out of the window to the crows (Sidhwa 1991: 40-41, Chapter 4).

The use of the actual word *nazar* here I feel would have been confusing. The word

by itself is not of importance, but the spirit and the meaning of the word, the attitude it conveys, the cultural connotations and its place in the culture of the sub-continent, are important.

The shades of meaning and the overtones contained in single, compressed words like *matlab* and *matlabi*, which in many Pakistani and Indian languages convey the same sense, require several paragraphs to explain them comprehensively (*nazar* is in this compressed category as well). As Freddy Junglewalla, who lives by its creed in *The Crow Eaters*, explains *matlab*, which he considers the driving force of all action, the words “need” and “want” edge past their common boundaries:

Need (he says) “makes a flatterer of a bully and persuades a cruel man to kindness. Call it circumstances – call it self-interest – call it what you will, it still remains your need. All the good in this world comes from serving our own ends”. He elaborates its meaning further, and also makes use of Parsee-ized words in the process: “There was that bumptious son-of-a-bitch in Peshawar called Colonel Williams. I cooed to him – salaamed so low I got a crick in my balls – buttered and marmaladed him until he was eating out of my hand. Within a year I was handling all the traffic of goods between Peshawar and Afghanistan” (Sidhwa 1992: 12, Chapter 1).

Freddy is soon in a position to donate hand-pumps and hospitals. Adding another dimension to the meaning of *matlab*, and *matlabi*, Freddy says: “I’ve made friends – love them – for what could be called ‘ulterior motives’, and yet the friendships so made are amongst my sweetest, longest and most sincere” (Sidhwa 1992: 13, Chapter 1).

In short, Freddy believes, that when he serves himself, is being *mutlabi*, he is living morally. Whatever his philosophy, in this novel he ends up doing more good in the world than many acknowledged do-gooders.

Then there are examples in my novels of pure, undistilled Baboo English, like

the message telegraphed by Harilal the clerk on his employer's marriage: "May God grant you son at His earliest convenience" and another: "I am bounding in delight that my boss is returning in couple" (Sidhwa 1992: 210, Chapter 37).

As if these linguistic compilations are not enough, I'm discovering the exciting possibilities inherent in the different ways English is spoken in the Subcontinent and in the USA. The following exchange takes place between Feroza, a young student from Pakistan, her roommate Jo, and the middle-aged saleswoman behind the cosmetics counter in a small town in the USA:

"Can I have a look at some of those hair-sprays, please?"

The glass bangles on her arms jingling, Feroza pointed at an array of hair-sprays in a window behind the saleswoman. The name-tag pinned to the saleswoman's pink and gray striped uniform read "Sally".

"Sure you can, honey. Look all you want", said Sally, busy with the cash-register.

Feroza colored and said: "I mean, can I see some of them from close?"

Sally looked her up and down suspiciously, as if measuring the degree of her 'foreignness', (and) plonked three brands of hair-spray on the glass counter.

Feroza read the labels on each and holding the can she had selected timidly forth, nervously adjusting the doppatta-scarf that had slid off her shoulder, ventured "May I have this please?"

"You may not. You'll have to pay for it. This isn't the Salvation Army y'know; it's a drugstore".

Jo registered the look the saleswoman gave Feroza, her rude behavior, and followed the exchange between them with mounting indignation. More accustomed by now to Feroza's manner of speaking she felt Sally had been unpardonably ill-mannered and bullying. She intervened protectively:

"Stop pickin' on her just cause she's a foreigner! Here, lemme handle this",

Jo said pushing Feroza aside. "How much d'ya want?" she asked, and

belligerently unzipped her little wallet.

After she had collected the receipt and the parcel Jo said to the saleswoman: "You gotta problem with your attitude" (Sidhwa 1993: 150, Chapter 14).

So, more fun and games for the writer and the reader: a different culture, represented by a variation in the language that offers new possibilities.

I will illustrate the problem I faced in handling languages when I first began to write, with an example. I had written an article for *Femina*, describing a Parsee family's reaction to the birth of a son. In trying to establish the familiar tussle between two sets of grandparents, each claiming the infant resembled their side of the family, I made one of the poor grandmothers say, "The baby has fallen upon his father".

I had translated straight from Gujarati (for those readers who know Gujarati: *Ay to potana baap par parioch!*). A friend to whom I showed the article laughed. She said, "What you want to write is 'The baby has taken after his father', or 'the baby resembles his father'". Luckily the mistake was corrected and the article was published in Bombay.

I'm afraid I still tend to translate literally, and the only consolation I draw from this unfortunate tendency is I will be less likely to be accused of having a "wooden ear".

This leads me to my final point. I believe there is a difference between the writing of novelists like myself, who use English as a local vernacular, and that of the new crop of British writers of South Asian origin who have spent most of their lives in England and its educational institutions, and who have absorbed the traditions of the language together with the thought patterns of the British.

English as spoken and written by them is indistinguishable from that of the native population of England. Their contribution to English is, and will continue to be, extensive and valuable. They can manipulate English as only Englishmen can,

with confidence and aplomb, and being of alien origins in England can avail themselves of a license not available to native English authors.

But, no matter how much I may admire their verbal and structural innovations and flamboyance, I, as a *desi* writer, object to being lumped together with them. It is unfair to us both. They are a new breed of British writer, and their vision of the sub-continent and its cultures is essentially that of an outsider. They pick from the culture what is, from a Western point of view, exotic, amusing, bizarre, salable, while writers like Anita Desai, Mulk Raj Anand, Nayantara Sahgal, Amitav Ghosh and myself, who have to stretch the language to adapt it to alien thoughts and values which have no precedent of expression in English, subject the language to a pressure that distorts, or if you like, enlarges its scope and changes its shape without recourse to self-conscious stylistic gymnastics. Perhaps this is why while some among this new breed of English authors do well in Britain, they do so poorly in translation – the innovative or striking effect is often lost.

I will give a small example. While explaining the recipe for making *paneer* – a home-made cheese – I said to a linguist friend, Robert Baumgardner, “Heat two quarts of milk, and as soon as it comes to a boil, add one quart of yogurt. The milk will at once tear”. Poor Dr. Baumgardner looked so confused that I quickly realized I had committed another “the-baby-has fallen-upon-his-father” literal translation from Gujarati. I groped for the correct English word and said first, “The milk will separate”, and next, perhaps using a more apt word, “The milk will curdle”.

Now the British writer with Asian origins will never befoul the Queen's English this way, but will be on the lookout for exactly the kind of expression I tried to avoid. He would think it quaint, or exotic or whatever, and use it almost exactly as it is to flavor his otherwise immaculate use of English with striking dashes of quaintness to add color – or authenticity – to his stories about us South Asians. This view or slant on writing I feel is important. It is the same as the difference between perhaps English and American writing and is perhaps due to similar reasons.

I leave you, the writers, teachers and linguists among you in particular, to ponder these thoughts.

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Bapsi Sidhwa, born in Karachi and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, has been widely celebrated as the finest novelist produced by her country. She is the author of several novels, including *The Crow Eaters*, *An American Brat*, *Cracking India*, *The Pakistani Bride*, and *Water*, which have been translated and published in several languages. Her anthology *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore* was published in 2006. Among her many honours, she received the Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe/Harvard, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award, the Sitara-i-

Imtiaz, Pakistan's highest national honour in the arts, and the LiBeraturepreis in Germany and the 2007 Premio Mondello Award in Italy. She was also on the advisory committee to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women's Development and has taught at Columbia University, University of Houston, Mount Holyoke College, Southampton University and Brandeis. Her novels *Cracking India* and *Water* were made into the film *Earth and Water* by Canadian director Deepa Mehta. Her play *Sock 'em with Honey* was staged in London (2003) and *An American Brat* was produced by Stages Repertory Theater in Houston (2007). She now lives in Houston, Texas.