

Re-reading Indira Parthasarathy's *Kuruthi Punal* from a Bilingual Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Indira Parthasarathy has included the English language in the award-winning Tamil novel Kuruthi Punal (1975) to capture the thought process and complexities of the characters. This article demonstrates how Indira Parthasarathy has used English in a Tamil novel without amalgamating the two languages and retained the identities of both languages separately. He has gilded English words, expressions, and dialogues into the novel to fit the context and made it appear quite natural and realistic. The writer's inclusion of bilingualism in the novel is meticulously calibrated to serve the purpose to understand the motifs of the characters and the theme of the novel. Kuruthi Punal is one of the earliest examples of how a postcolonial writer can unify two significant influences on their lives revealing to the readers the connections Indians make between their native language and the acquired one—to exhibit a harmonious blend of culture. The scope of the article is restricted only to the language facets and does not delve into the thematic aspects.

Key Words: Bilingualism, Elite and folk bilinguals, language nuances, communicating tool, language identity.

English has attained the status of global Lingua Franca. According to BBC News, India claims to be the second-largest English-speaking country after the USA in 2012 (Zareer Masani). English in India has evolved through the ages with the creative writings of the bilingual authors who used their linguistic skills as a means to communicate with their readers. English steadily co-exists and hobnobs with the regional languages in the Indian socio-cultural context.

V. Ramnarayan, renowned Tamil Writer and critic, in the book "Talking Theater", values Indira Parthasarathy as "A Tamil author who seems to think in English" (15). Padma Shri Indira Parthasarathy (b 1930) is the doyen of

Tamil literature and is well versed in both Tamil and English and practiced bilingualism to experiment with a new style of writing that combined two languages. He is one of the pioneers to depict the colors and complexities of the Tamil people's lives in his works by incorporating English words, expressions, and dialogues which was a novel attempt in his time. He is not only a writer but also a translator. Following the tradition of writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Girish Karnad, Indira Parthasarathy has written his novel *Krishna Krishna* (2003) and then translated it into English later. It would be an absolute delight for a translator to translate Indira Parthasarathy's works, as he is a writer capable of thinking in

English which is revealed from reading his original texts. We all know that “Bilingualism can be defined as having some ability to use two (or even more) languages. There can, therefore, be degrees of bilingualism -at one extreme there are those people who have native-like control over two languages, and at the other extreme are those people who have just begun to acquire a second language” (Liddicoat 1-2). The writer’s bilingualism in most of his works navigates the possibilities of producing a new kind of literature that has started to embrace English as the second language among the native Tamil-speaking people.

The main characters in most of Indira Parthasarathy’s works belong to the upper-middle-class strata of society. They are well-educated and high intellectuals who have native-like control over English. Shiva and Gopal in *Kuruthi Punal* (1975), Vimmi, Arun, Radhika and Dammodharan in *Vendhu Tanindha Kadugal* (1981), Mukundan, Mishra and Sarala in *Sudhandira Boomi* (1973), Vasanthi and Moorthy in *Porvai Porthia Udalgai* (1978) and Nirmala, Chandrasekar, and James in *Mazhai* (1968) are educated and well versed in both English and Tamil. Gopal and Shiva have their Doctorate in Philosophy, Chandrasekar is a professor, and all the others have their undergraduate degrees except Nirmala. Although Nirmala does not have a proper education, she reads many psychological books about her father. These bilinguals have an extraordinary linguistic ability that most of their intellectual debates and discussions are in English. The writer’s use of English in Tamil literary works is justified as the characters are elite bilinguals who have an educated background and it is quite natural for them to converse in English. The most significant fact

about Indira Parthasarathy’s works is his expertise in bilingualism which makes his works be rendered in English with relative ease. While recollecting his memories about writing the play *Mazhai*, Indira Parthasarathy tweets that one of his good friends has commented that *Mazhai* is a good play and it has to be translated into Tamil, referring to the predominance of English in the dialogues. The playwright replies that as it was a psychological play, a part of the discourse was in English to give the play a naturalistic touch and flavour (Parthasarathy).

Kuruthi Punal is one of the most gripping novels based on the real-life massacre of the 42 Dalits farm labourers who were burnt alive by the landlords in the Keezhavenmani village near the Tanjore district (Katamble 86). The novel is a significant breakthrough in the conventional way of writing and is one of the earliest Tamil works known for linguistic innovations. The language which is used as a means of communication indicates the pattern of the thought and idea in the work of fiction. Re-reading the novel from the linguistic perspective reveals how English is understood and put forward as a language of communication among the learned elite and commoners in the post-colonial India’s multilingual background. Indira Parthasarathy’s use of English in a Tamil novel is a crucial stylistic innovation of his times. Gopal one of the two protagonists of the novel communicates in Tamil with the villagers throughout, but once he sees his friend Shiva, he starts conversing with him in English naturally. Indira Parthasarathy has used common English words like ‘hotel’, ‘bus’, ‘jeep’, ‘paper’, ‘night’, ‘problem’, ‘please’, ‘address’, ‘college’, ‘junior’, ‘main road’, ‘break-down’, ‘repair’, ‘correct’, and ‘torch’ throughout the novel. These are the words that Indians started using in their everyday conversation by the

1970s. While referring to professions he uses 'Police', 'sub-inspector', 'M.P', 'M.L.A', and 'doctor' but for all the other professions like a lawyer, farmer he uses the Tamil words. In regards to religion, he uses the English term 'Muslim' but Christians and Hindus are denoted using the Tamil equivalent.

Technical terms like 'FIR', 'police report', 'arrest', 'mufti', and 'complaint' are used frequently in the novel. To mention 'hospital' the writer has used the word 'aaspathri' (KP 144) which is neither English nor Tamil but it is a new word derived from English. By 1970 Tamil people started using these English words in their conversations but today they have become an integral part of everyday language. Today, most Tamil people may not even know the Tamil equivalent of these words. The writer has also introduced some uncommon words like 'impersonal' (KP 118), premonition (KP 175), 'autosuggestion' (KP 135), 'status quo' (KP 151), gunfire (KP 118), parliamentary (KP 166) to the Tamil readers through his novel. While referring to ideologies Indira Parthasarathy has written completely in English for example Socialism, Communism, communists, and comrade. These words run throughout the text thus making the Tamil reader work for some of the relevant information in the novel.

Indira Parthasarathy has used bilingualism not merely as a tool for communication but as an aspect of each character's personality like Shiva, Gopal, Ramiya, Kanakasabai, and Doctor. These characters are 'elite bilinguals' (Liddicoat 7) who acquired English through formal education and had the opportunity to use English naturally. They have become bilingual through a free choice to learn English as a mark of intelligence and cultural enrichment. The writer

uses English while describing the culture, profound ideas, ideologies, and feelings like frustration, fear, and disappointment. The precarious nature of life is the central theme of the novel and Indira Parthasarathy has lucidly explained it with very few words in English.

The characters converse in English while sharing the lighter moments like Shiva addressing Gopal as his 'great friend' (KP 71), "my dear man you have become crazy" (KP 81). Likewise, even while expressing feelings like frustration "My God this is a wretched country" (KP 72), happiness, gratitude, and surprise the author has used English. Indira Parthasarathy also introduces the great writer Thomas Mann and his work *Magic Mountains (1924)* to Tamil readers. As opposed to the elite bilinguals, the writer also has created so many folk bilinguals like Palani, Vadivelu, Kattayan, Ammavasi, and Papati. These "folks acquire their second language through practical contact with the speakers of that language" (Liddicoat 7). The folk bilinguals belong to the minority that is the Dalit community and they pick up English words by listening to the elite bilinguals. English has become the dominant language of communication amongst the elite groups and to understand them it has become essential for the folk bilinguals to learn and start using English vocabulary. They were not able to produce utterances in English but can understand the language to some extent. They are in a pressured situation to learn English in order to sustain themselves in their life.

Indira Parthasarathy uses the "bilingual mode" (Grosjean 3) by constantly switching between English and Tamil languages to convey the thoughts and intentions of the characters thereby contributing to the movement of the story. His

use of English in the Tamil novel proves that bilingualism has become a new way of living in post-colonial India and is closer to the normal situation. Indira Parthasarathy uses the stylistic technique of transliteration in his novels. Transliteration is a process of adapting the graphological form of the borrowed terms or source language terms into the target languages without violating the phonological and graphological rules and conventions of the target language (Murugan 153). He has used transliteration for the simple reason that, in those days the printing presses were not sophisticated enough to alternate between Tamil and English letters. It has also made the task of reading new English words easier for Tamil readers.

T. Sriraman, the translator of Indira Parthasarathy's one of the most famous historical plays *Aurangzeb*, remarks in his introduction that "Indira Parthasarathy is a masterly writer of dialogue, especially when the discourse calls for a sharp play of the intellect on political and cultural issues and the articulation of multiple perspectives" (xvii). Indira Parthasarathy's works are full of subtlety, delicacy, and depth of thought. He has a brilliant style of writing, presenting it with a perfect blend of both English and Tamil. Indira Parthasarathy's works have a fair share of English, but it never appears as it is shoved artificially into the text but blends with the natural flow of the story and appeared realistic.

Kuruthi Punal is one of the earliest examples of how a postcolonial writer can unify two significant influences on their lives—revealing to the readers the connections Indians make between their native language and the acquired one—to exhibit a harmonious blend of culture. Re-reading the novel from the linguistic

perspective helps one to understand the linguistic behavior of the elite and folk bilinguals. The elites use the English language with fluency in contrast to the hesitancy of the folk bilinguals who were beginning to use the language. In the 1970s it was the sociological behaviour of the educated elite Tamil people to use English diction in their conversations. The uneducated people also picked up these words and started using them instead of the Tamil words. Analyzing the English words, dialogues and phrases allows the readers to understand the characters' feelings and intentions. Bilingualism is a tool for how Indira Parthasarathy chooses to tell the story of the voiceless people who are oppressed for centuries. Bilingualism helped him to create characters so skillfully that may not have been as clearly defined as if he had written them completely in Tamil.

Indira Parthasarathy has deliberately used both English and Tamil language to write a compelling story about the strained relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed people. Apart from the thematic perspective, the novel has become unique from the linguistic perspective as well. Indira Parthasarathy's use of bilingualism serves the greater purpose of understanding Tamil people's lives and culture. The nuances that he uses in changing the language are intentional and thoughtful. The use of both English and Tamil without chutnifying or chutnification illustrates how both languages continue to exist without losing their originality. Indira Parthasarathy's greatness as a bilingual writer relies upon the fact that he retained the identities of both languages separately.

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Appendix

An interview with the novelist Indira Parthasarathy via Whats App 2022

Interviewee: Indira Parthasarathy (IP)

Interviewer: Mangaiyarkarasi (MK)

MK: In a country like India where writers are bilingual and trilingual do you think it is possible to produce original English works without the interference of native or other languages?

IP: There is no such thing as 'Original' English. English has become a world language because of its flexibility and genius for adapting words from other languages as its own! Our rural folks had that genius of adapting English words as native Tamil ones. 'Hearing' in the legal court used to be known those days as 'ஹீர்டிங்'. Tamil ஹீர்டிங் became in English 'catamaran'. English 'Hospital' in Tamil became 'ஹாஸ்பித்தல்'. Why ஹாஸ்பித்தல்? How many use this word in spoken Tamil? The language is for the people and not people for language. Only if we had adopted the genius of our common folks Tamil would have gone far!

MK: As a writer, you are proficient in both English and Tamil. Most of your works have a fair share of both languages. In the creative process of writing can you be able to reason

out at which point Tamil stops and English begins or vice versa.

IP: I don't think about it. If a certain idea could be better expressed in English because of its western origin in the process of thinking about a specific issue, it automatically writes itself in English.

MK: Salman Rushdie coined the term 'Chunifying' of 'Chutunification' of English, which refers to Hinglish (Hindi+English). Do you think it should be accepted as a positive result of the long-term cohabitation of two-parent languages to give birth to a new language?

IP: In my case, it should be Tamglish. But as far as possible I avoided it. This won't make sense to either a Tamil reader or an English reader.

MK: Most of the characters in your works are well educated and they converse in English. Although you have written dialogues in English you have never merged both languages. Does it mean that you tried to maintain their identities intact?

IP: I want to make it as realistic as possible. Do we talk pure Tamil or pure English while discussing an issue with another Tamil person in regard to, say, a psychological issue? It would

be a mixed bag but at the same time keeping the identities of both languages separate.

MK: In *Kuruthi Punal* and all other works you have used English words, expressions, and dialogues in English. Can you please explain why you have carried on transliteration instead of writing in English?

IP: For the simple reason in those days, I wrote those novels the printing presses were not so advanced as to alternate between Tamil letters and Roman letters alternatively. And also mixing Roman letters with Tamil script is not an attractive proposition. Even in English books when they quote Greek classics they write only in Roman script. And for the sake of realism, I use those English expressions because such expressions like 'damn it' how can one translate?

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