**U**NTIL now, Indian English novel has been evaluated as an isolated and perhaps more privileged and sophisticated stream of creativity within the rubric of Indian novel as a whole. Its relationship — complementary or contrasting — with novel in *bhasha* literatures has been overlooked for overtly political reasons. A dialogic encounter with *bhasha* literature threatens to undermine its international claims as also its projection in the media as the only authentic discourse of post-colonial India. It is usually alleged that *bhasha* writers are parochial and therefore are qualified enough to express narrow regional interests only.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, a well-known critic of Indian English fiction, in her latest critical endeavour locates the cultural dynamics of Indian English fiction in the broader context of Indian novel as a whole. This is definitely a step forward in the direction of Indian English criticism as it wriggles out of the colonial hangover in its attempt to explore the poetics of Indian English literature vis-a-vis *bhasha* literature.

In her earlier enterprise, "Realism and Reality", Mukherjee had speculated on the possible lineage of Indian English novel from ancient Indian narratives lake the Panchatantra, Kaadambari, Daskumarcharita, etc. In "The Perishable Empire", she shifts her focus once again to the post-colonial fiction scenario but within a comparative frame to underline its tensions and heterogeneity.

In her insightful opening chapter "Nation, novel, language", Mukherjee argues that in the wake of colonial encounter, it was novel in Indian languages more than English writings which received a major impetus. While Indian English novel lacked direction, in many of the Macaulay-maligned dialects, it soon matured and forged its respective traditions in a definite manner. She observes, "While novels in Bangla, Marathi, Malayalam and other languages soon consolidated their strengths and initiated literary traditions that continue to this day, scores of English novels written in the late 19th and early 20th century are virtually forgotten now." She quite significantly adds: "By the turn of the century novel in the ‘vernaculars’ had become a major vehicle of political dissent, positing in fictional terms what was not yet feasible in the arena of action, novel after novel in English paid direct or veiled tribute to imperial rule."

More than a theoretician, Mukherjee is known for her meticulous archival research. She analyses more than 60 rather obscure novels in English written by Indian between 1830 and 1930 — a period seldom taken into account to theorise the history of Indian English novel. She discovers certain distinct tendencies in early Indian English fiction. One, early "Indian English novelists displayed their acquaintance with the classics of western literature more readily than did Indian-language novelists". Two,"Novels in English hardly ever provide us with examples of self-reflexivity about the language they use." Three, this fiction catered only to male readership for the knowledge of English was a male-specific skill in the 19th century; novels in Indian languages on the other hand, had a sizeable readership among women.

Indian English novel has its unique worries and anxieties. One overriding concern of Indian English novelist has been to vindicate his Indianness, the choice of English as medium of expression notwithstanding. One comes across a spate of articles, doctoral dissertations on Indianness of Indian English writers writings, but it is unthinkable to even imagine a thesis on Indianness of Marathi or Punjabi novel as such. This anxiety of Indianness weighs so heavy on the imagination of Indian English novelist that more often than not he ends up in presenting a rather homogenised or essentialised perspective of India as a nation.

Mukherjee compares the enterprise of Indian English writings to "one-string instrument", which even in the hands of a master like R.K.Narayan "cannot become a sitar or a veena". According to her, the much-hyped Malgudi of Narayan lacks local colour, and therefore it very easily lapses into "a metonymic relationship with India as whole". Also, she adds, since English in India functions on relatively fewer registers, it does not allow Indian writer in English the creative freedom to bring out the polyphony of Indian character. Translation studies, institutionalised as they are, have divided us more than ever before. Translation is no longer a "part of natural ambience", it is a self-conscious act, a field of study. Instead of acting as a conduit of cultural transmission within country, it is generating cultural divide among us. Mukherjee recalls that how earlier Hindi-speaking women readers used to take Sharat Chandra as original Hindi writer; and how students from Kerala in the 1970s and 1980s used to know about Premchand’s "Godan".

The commodification or professionalisation of translation has resulted in the decline of its quality. The fact that contemporary translation industry encourages translation from native languages into English has destroyed the unofficial indigenous translation culture which we as a multilingual society has always had. "Mutual translation" continues to be a neglected area.

The very title of Mukherjee’s book, "The perishable Empire", however appears rather wishful, and therefore unreal too. She intends to counter Macaulay’s claim of British Empire as an "imperishable", one by way of asserting the unprecedented changes post-colonial history has undergone in terms of its deconstructive methodologies and discursive practices. The slogan of writing back to Empire is more hype than truth. Empire continues to dictate to us in ways that are too subtle to be underplayed.

Second, the writer is carried away by her Bangla heritage. Novelists or poets belonging to Bengal or Bihar receive preferential treatment. By underplaying Sanskrit as an alternative to English imperialism, Mukherjee is hinting towards the regionalisation of Indian novel. Such regionalisation is welcome provided it is not done at the cost of the nation. Moreover by asserting different trajectories of novel in different Indian languages, she seems to suggest a total absence of Indianness per se in these novels.