



INTEREST AREA: PREFERABLY ON INDIAN NOVELIST

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ABSTRACT

The Indian novel has been a vibrant and energetic expressive space in the 21st century. While the grand postcolonial gestures characteristic of the late-20th-century Indian novel have been in evidence in new novels by established authors such as Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, and Salman Rushdie, a slate of new authors has emerged in this period as well, charting a range of new novelistic modes. Some of these authors are Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Githa Hariharan, Samina Ali, Karan Mahajan, and Amitava Kumar. In general, there has been a move away from ambitious literary fiction in the form of the “huge, baggy monster” that led to the publication of several monumental post colonial novels in the 1980s and 1990s; increasingly the most dynamic and influential Indian writing uses new novelistic forms and literary styles tied to the changing landscape of India’s current contemporary social and political problems. The newer generation of authors has also eschewed the aspiration to represent the entirety of life in modern India, and instead aimed to explore much more limited regional and cultural narrative frameworks. If a novel like Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981) took its protagonist all over the Indian subcontinent and indexed a large number of important historical controversies in the interest of broad representation, Padma Viswanathan’s *The Toss of a Lemon* (2008) limits itself to a focus on a single Tamil Brahmin family’s orientation to issues of caste and gender, and remains effectively local to Tamil Nadu. There is no central agenda or defining idiom of this emerging literary culture, but three major groupings can be identified that encapsulate the major themes and preoccupations of 21st-century Indian fiction: “New Urban Realism,” “Gender and Secular History,” and “Globalizing India, Reinscribing the Past.”

KEYWORDS-interest, novelist, Indian, controversies, groupings, literary

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of a social realist ‘novel’, or at least what I perceive to be its purpose, is at odds with such a neat delineation. It is a narrative that is, or should be, uncomfortable in a novel’s skin, the clothes ill-fitting and protruding limbs. Its starting point is fact and it cannot dismiss that origin without becoming hollow. The narrative arc demands tension and twists, it wants foils and façades. To some, the social realist novel must meet these demands but when the objective shifts from ‘conveying the socio-economic condition of the working class’ to just ‘telling a good story’, there is something decidedly off. I do not claim that both these categories must remain separate, or indeed are separate; there are great novels which manage to do both. The concern arises when the latter overtakes the former in this genre.

Here, one must keep in mind that the rise of the Indian novel in English is inextricably linked to social realism in the context of India’s status as a British colony. Writers used the form to explore the contentions between colonial modernity and native traditions, clearly an instance of the Hegelian dialectic (thesis-antithesis-synthesis). From Mulk Raj Anand to Raja Rao, the unanimously-felt desire at that time was to articulate an authentic Indian experience, which can only be the subaltern Indian experience. Vernacular literatures, such as the Progressive Writers’ Movement, were particularly invested in portraying daily lives of the proletariat. In both instances, the writers themselves did not belong to the group they were writing about and were in fact far removed from them in terms of socio-cultural capital and material privilege. As a result, a general air of condescension was not uncommon. [1,2]

This essay, however, is not really concerned with the history of this genre, its iterations, deficiencies, or its past practitioners. It is not just a consideration for space or a reluctance to venture into the realm of the scholarly but also a desire to limit the following discussion to two recent contemporary novels in order to explore how the genre manifests itself in current Indian writing in English. This of course automatically excludes all the books in translation which revolve around the same themes, such as *The Sickle* by Anita Agnihotri, translated from the Bengali by Arunava Sinha.



The concerned novels are *Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line* by Deepa Anappara (2020) and *Homebound* by Puja Changoiwala (2021). Apart from being social realist novels, the books are similar because their authors are journalists; this is largely their area of professional interest and the books are their fiction debuts.

An epistolary structure is also worth questioning for reasons of plausibility. The novel revolves around the migrant crisis in India post-COVID, where sudden announcement of pandemic measures and containment restrictions led to the vast migrant labour population setting off en masse on foot from their cities of employment to their towns and villages across the country. Meher's family is one such case. Her father moved to Mumbai for better opportunities years ago and once he was settled, he called for his wife and kids. Now he has decided they must return to their village in Rajasthan to wait it out. So, would someone in Meher's position have the wherewithal to write eleven letters over the course of just one week while embarking on a tortuous journey underlined by hardships? Could there have been enough time? Could she, as a fifteen-year-old girl born to working class parents, even have written these letters?

Djinn Patrol on the Purple Line by Deepa Anappara is a more traditional novel, albeit one that ingeniously plays with magical realism, flashbacks, and dramatic irony. Divided into three parts, the narrative follows a clear three-act structure. The protagonist is a precocious nine-year-old boy called Jai who lives in a basti in an unnamed city—most likely New Delhi—where a recent spate of kidnappings have recently taken place. Children as young as five and as old as 16 are being abducted, one after the other. Jai, a huge fan of detective and true crime shows, is on a mission to solve the case and find the missing children with the help of his friends, Faiz and Pari. Unlike *Homebound*, which is based on a singular event and uses a series of incidents which can be traced to real headlines, the background inspiration for *Djinn Patrol* is more diffuse and it is difficult to make clear connections like before.

Each part begins with a recounting of an urban legend, the stories of ghosts and djinns who act as the vengeful guardian deities of the dispossessed and the downtrodden. Whether it is Mental or Junction-ki-Rani who themselves receive the short end of the stick, or the good djinns who fulfil the prayers of their supplicants, these stories act as a bulwark against despair and shore up hope among the subaltern that there is something supernatural on their side in a world that seems out to get them. After each kidnapping, the narrator also presents flashback chapters from the children's point of view which go over their last known actions to the point of their abduction, throwing up new questions rather than answering them by heightening the gruesome suspense. Both of them work as creative narrative devices that serve to elevate an otherwise "straightforward" story and speak to the craft aspects of the novel. [3,5]

II. DISCUSSION

Indian novels in English have generated a considerable amount of interest both in India and in English-speaking countries, particularly during India's postliberalization period since 1991. For India, this period has seen unparalleled consumption of global goods and exposure to international media, and has resulted in Indian writers writing in English (including writers of Indian origin) catching the attention of the Western world like never before.

"Postliberalization Indian Novels in English: Politics of Global Reception and Awards" focuses on Indian writers writing in the English language, whose concerns are related to India in her immediacy, and who have come into literary prominence in the postliberalization period. Such writers have broached issues including nationalism, diaspora, identity, communalism, subaltern representation, modernism and the impact of globalization. Although the idea of this study is not to undermine the value of their novels, its aim is to consider the correlation of their novels' themes with the workings of the organized, global market processes now present in postliberalized India.

As such, some large questions arise: What are the cultural and critical frameworks that define literary reception? Has there been a marked shift in the reception of Indian novelists writing in English postliberalization? To what extent are the works of these writers driven by the dictates of the market, and does a commercially/economically driven media influence critical/commercial perceptions? And are there certain thematic concerns and representations which are deemed "prize and attention worthy," and do these factors influence the critical/commercial reception of the novels?

In investigating these questions, this critical handbook reveals the forces shaping the modern Indian novel in the postliberalization period, and provides a systematic approach to the study of Indian novelists in terms of their global reception.

When Malik Muhammad Jayasi wrote *Padmavat*, he perhaps had no idea that one day his powerful fiction would replace historical facts. Even though at the end of *Padmavat*, he had himself admitted that it was an allegorical tale, the story of Chittor queen Padmini and her luckless suitor, Sultan Alauddin Khilji, began to be treated as fact, so much so that it became part of Rajput oral traditions and even Persian chronicles in the 17th-18th centuries. Today, it's sacrilege to some if you say Padmini was fiction. [7,8] Historical fiction had that sort of a hold even in our time not until too long ago. But India's leading publishing houses say that it is no longer the case.



“Bloomsbury publishes both fiction and non-fiction but mostly non-fiction. Historical fiction used to be in vogue, but is not much in demand anymore,” says Praveen Tiwari, Publisher, Bloomsbury India. Prasun Chatterjee, editorial director of Pan Macmillan India, agrees with Tiwari that historical fiction sales have been lukewarm. “Still we publish in that area if we think it is important and will attract the attention of readers. But it is historical non-fiction that has done well for all publishers recently.”

Anushree Kaushal of Penguin Random House says that historical fiction hasn't yet established itself as a major genre. “It's not a problem of numbers, because there has never been a shortage of it in the traditional sense, but in India it is yet to reach a Philippa Gregory/Hilary Mantel level of fame. It also depends on the kind of historical fiction one attempts,” says Kaushal, who is an editor. But she adds that history in its non-fiction form has always been, and will continue to be, incredibly big. “With more and more archives opening up their doors to young scholars and amateur historians, and more documents getting declassified (and discovered!) on a regular basis, I think we will continue to have a dependable, narrative-led list of history books for a long time to come.”

Chatterjee says that beyond the classic best-sellers by A L Basham, SAA Rizvi and Ramachandra Guha, there are other works too that tend to get discussed and debated a lot. “In our times, controversies regarding historical events and figures command more attention than fiction, or, even fiction gets drawn into the domain of reality.” Parth Mehrotra, commissioning editor (non-fiction) of Juggernaut Books doesn't want to confine success to just historical non-fiction but all kinds of non-fiction. “Apart from celebrity writers like Saurav Ganguly and Twinkle Khanna, non-fiction sells the most. There is a huge appetite for well written narrative nonfiction. Stories around India sell really well — but people don't want to read long, boring lectures, they want to read stories. Books have to compete with Netflix and Facebook for leisure time — people want books that entertain them and also help them learn something along the way.”[9,10]

How about mythology? One of the biggest publishers in India of mythological fiction, Westland Books, refused to comment on this. But Penguin Random House thinks it's a diverse, booming genre that has been popularised by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Amish Tripathi. “They hold their own in a tough space and are some of the most well received, locally produced fiction titles. We published the fantastic *Sitayana* by Amit Majmudar earlier this year, which looks at the Ramayana from the points of view of Sita and other characters, and we will publish *The Dharma Forest* by Keerthik Sasidharan early next year, a retelling of the Mahabharata war from the points of view of three key characters. I think these previously unexplored points of view—decidedly more feminist and inclusive than we are used to reading—are what set these apart,” Kaushal says. Tiwari says it is a successful if somewhat crowded and saturated genre. “There are authors like Amish and Devdutt Pattanaik. Amish really started this genre with his *Shiva* trilogy. Now, there are many titles and authors, but not every title is well-researched. So, even though popular, it is getting increasingly saturated. We publish fewer mythological fiction, but we are not averse to it. One such title we have published, *The Curse of Gandhari* by Aditi Banerjee, is doing very well.”

Bestselling author Anand Neelakantan thinks there will always be a market for mythology in India “because for the last 5,000 years, we have been writing and rewriting our puranas stories”. “But yes, I feel the market is a bit saturated now because after a lot of mythology books became best-sellers, a lot of youngsters have started writing mythology. Some are good, some are average, some are terrible, but the market is flooded with mythology books. So, there may be some dip in sales. But if you generally write well, then it should sell irrespective of the genre,” says the author of *The Rise of Sivagami*, a *Baahubali* prequel that's being turned into a Netflix series. But literary agent Kanishka Gupta feels sad that “fiction is stagnant in India”. “New writers are struggling to find readers while big writers are struggling to hold on to their readers. It's really hard to make people read books nowadays because Netflix and Amazon are constantly vying for your free time.” He adds that many of the big authors of fiction are now diversifying into cinema and TV by writing screenplays, plots, etc. So, which are the best-selling genres? “In adult, it is largely non-fiction, and in children, it is both fiction and non-fiction, including picture activity books. Adult non-fiction includes topical and political non-fiction, biographies and autobiographies, self-help, mind body spirit and business books,” Tiwari says. Chatterjee largely agrees but says that they also publish “carefully selected” literary fiction apart from commercial fiction such as crime thrillers or social dramas. “In non-fiction we publish on a range of topics which are relevant today and likely to find a resonance with the readers.”[11,12]

For HarperCollins India, too, socio-political and historical fiction and self-help books are the best-sellers. Self-help books are popular “because in India, people expect to become better by reading”, says Akriti Tyagi, head of marketing at HarperCollins India.

Gupta agrees. “Business books, books by gurus, book on diet, etc, do very well. Celebrity writing is also very successful. We could say that in India, it's a non-fiction-led market.” For Penguin Random House, Kaushal says, literary fiction and romance are big. Their bestsellers are by Arundhati Roy, Khushwant Singh and Amitav Ghosh in literary fiction while in romance, Durjoy Datta, Ravinder Singh and Sudeep



Nagarkar are big. For Juggernaut, “narrative nonfiction, extremely high quality literary fiction; celebrity writing-- these are our top three genres. What about romance and chick lit? “The success of young romance and chick lit largely depends on the name of the author and how well it has been written,” Tiwari says. Chatterjee adds that it only works sometimes. “Many a times the books get lost without a trace.” For Juggernaut, erotica is their most popular category of digital reads. “Long-form romance stories and non-fiction also do well online. But in the physical book market non-fiction tops the list,” Mehrotra says. An independent publishing professional formerly attached to several leading publishing houses says on condition of anonymity that there are highs and lows of sales of works by even authors as big as Amitav Ghosh and Jeffrey Archer. “Let's take celebrity writing, for instance. Star power can sell some copies. But Twinkle Khanna’s first book, MrsFunnybones, which is non-fiction, has sold more copies than her two recent books that are fiction. A new author of fiction, like romance or anything else, finds it increasingly difficult to even get a publisher,” she says. The publishers also have different standards when it comes to calling a title ‘bestseller’. “For fiction, content, writing style, distribution, and name of the author play a crucial role in making a book a bestseller. In case of a non-fiction, subject plays the most crucial role along with timing, publicity, distribution, author’s affiliation and content. To qualify for a bestseller, minimum sales in a year should not be less than 10,000 copies,” Tiwari explains. Chatterjee thinks a bit differently on this. “A bestseller is difficult to decode. It can be any of a spectrum of factors or a combination of them: the relevance of the content, the popularity of the author, the 'word-of-mouth' effect due to some specific aspects of a book, the promotional campaign and selling strategies apart from the price and positioning of the book. It is an awareness of all these and more that help a book to become a bestseller. The bestseller in every category of books is different.” Mehrotra says a bestseller is a “great story, told simply and directly.”

III. RESULTS

India has a unique literary history and tradition that extends back over 3,000 years. Indian English literature may have a relatively shorter history, but is nonetheless rich with award-winning and critically acclaimed masterpieces no book lover should miss out on. To get your reading journey started, we’ve rounded up a list of books by authors from India that have greatly influenced the course of the country’s literature.[13]

White Tiger

Arvind Adiga’s Man-Booker-Prize-winning debut novel was widely acclaimed for its refreshing take on social class disparities and contradictions in contemporary India. The book is a thrilling first-person narrative told from the perspective of Balram Halwai, a young man from a poverty-stricken small village who moves to Delhi to work as a chauffeur for the elite.

Nectar in a Sieve

Acclaimed Indian author Kamala Markandaya’s debut novel, Nectar in a Sieve, is the story of rapidly changing mid-20th-century India, told from the perspective of Rukhmani, a woman from rural and impoverished India. From her arranged marriage to Nathan, a farmer, to the changes brought about by the advent of a large tannery in their village, the novel covers a rich range of subjects with uniquely gripping prose.

The Great Indian Novel

This satirical novel by Shashi Tharoor recreates the Hindu epic Mahabharata within the context of the Indian Independence Movement and its following decades to become one of the most exciting reads in contemporary Indian literature. Recasting figures from India’s freedom struggle and politics as mythological characters from a 2,000-year-old epic, Tharoor’s work is a powerful read regardless of how familiar you are with the country.

Train to Pakistan

This historical Indian book by Khushwant Singh was widely revered during its release in 1956 for bringing a human perspective to the partition of British India into India and Pakistan. While most accounts of the partition at the time primarily focused on political aspects, Singh recounted the event in terms of human loss and horror. Train to Pakistan is an essential read for anyone looking to explore Indian literature or history.



Palace of Illusions

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's award-winning novel retells the Hindu mythological epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, its lead female character. Draupadi is famous for having married all five of the Pandava brothers – the protagonists of the Mahabharata – and is an ever present, central character through their journey into exile and war. However, little is told from her perspective or about her motives and thoughts in the original epic, which Divakaruni tactfully reclaims in Palace of Illusions.

The Guide

R.K. Narayan is among the most read and celebrated authors in Indian books and literature. Based in the famous fictional town of Malgudi in South India, The Guide follows the story of a Railway Raju, a corrupt tour guide, and the odd sequence of events which go on to make him a spiritual guide and eventually a revered holy man in the country.

In Custody

Anita Desai's novel, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, revolves around Deven Sharma, an Urdu scholar in small town India who is caught in an ordinary, mundane life teaching the language to indifferent college students. When he is given a chance to interview Nur, one of the country's finest Urdu poets, he sees it as a way to channel his love for the language in a more meaningful way.

The God of Small Things

The Booker-Prize-winning debut novel by Arundhati Roy tells the story of a family in 1960s Kerala. Delving deep into a range of issues from the caste system to the state's encounters with communism, the story follows two fraternal twins, their parents and their extended family as they navigate life in this highly acclaimed work by the famous activist and writer.

A Fine Balance

Set in 1975 against the backdrop of the central government declaring a State of Emergency throughout India, Rohinton Mistry's literary masterpiece tells the story of four strangers from different walks of life. Shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1996, this book is a gripping account of political, social and economic forces that drove India through the late 20th-century and into its current form.[13,15,17]

A Suitable Boy

Vikram Seth's acclaimed work follows the story of four families in newly independent and post-partition India. Primarily revolving around the journey of Mrs. Rupa Mehra to find 'a suitable boy' to marry her daughter, the book meditates on a range of issues from post-partition politics, Hindu-Muslim strife, caste and class tensions, and changing family relationships. At 1,349 pages, Seth's work is among the longest English language Indian books published in a single volume.

The Last Song of Dusk

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi's debut novel tells the story of Anuradha, who moves to 1920s Bombay from Udaipur to marry Vardhmaan. The novel follows their blossoming marriage through its highs and lows with powerful, addictive prose.[18,19]

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Since you are here, we would like to share our vision for the future of travel - and the direction Culture Trip is moving in.

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We know that many of you worry about the environmental impact of travel and are looking for ways of expanding horizons in ways that do minimal harm - and may even bring benefits. We are committed to go as far as possible in curating our trips with care for the planet. That is why all of our trips are flightless in destination, fully carbon offset - and we have ambitious plans to be net zero in the very near future[21]

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