



Introduction

Alexis Tadié

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Introduction ¹

There is nothing new about the fascination for India in literatures written in English. Travel writings of the early modern period were popular with publishers and readers, who would relish the *Thousand and One Nights* atmosphere of such accounts. The English novel of the nineteenth century, from Thackeray or Collins to Kipling and Flora Annie Steel or E. M. Forster, turned India into a country of mystery and adventure, of romance and heroism. In the twentieth century, this emphasis on India could be found in the works of best-selling authors such as John Masters, M. M. Kaye, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Paul Scott or J. G. Farrell. Indian writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao were published in England in the first half of last century, while R. K. Narayan soon gained a strong following in India as well as in England, where, notably, Graham Greene championed him. Anita Desai started publishing in the early 1960's and was first shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1980 with *Clear Light of Day*.

But it is Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* which is considered as a landmark in the renewed appeal of India in English letters. Furthermore, the publication of Rushdie's second novel opened up a space for Indian novelists who wrote in English. They felt able both to experiment with less realistic forms of writing and to publish their books, thanks to the development of new series by major publishing houses such as Penguin India. Recently, though, Indian writers who publish in English have stopped referring to Rushdie as the source of their inspiration, and a new generation of novelists has emerged and asserted itself. The Booker Prize provides an indicator of the fame of Indian literature in the English speaking world. Indian writers have won the Booker four times since 1981: Arundhati Roy in 1997 with *The God of Small Things*, Kiran Desai in 2006 with *The Inheritance of Loss*, and Aravind Adiga in 2008 with *The White Tiger*, all followed in Salman Rushdie's footsteps. Thirteen novels by writers that have a connection with the subcontinent were also shortlisted over the same period.² *Midnight's Children* won The Booker of Bookers in

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1. I would like to thank Marielle Morin for her help and invaluable suggestions.
 2. 1983: *Shame* by Salman Rushdie; 1984: *In Custody* by Anita Desai; 1988: *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie; 1991: *That Long Journey* by Rohinton Mistry; 1994: *Reef* by Romesh Guneseckera (from Sri Lanka); 1995: *The Moor's Last Sigh* by

1993 and The Best of the Booker in 2008. India was the guest of honour at the 2006 Frankfurt book fair, the « pays invité » at the Salon du Livre de Paris in 2007, and Indian writing was the theme of the 2009 London Book Fair. But it would be wrong to read Indian fiction in English only in terms of the European book market. Some authors now enjoy a huge readership in India, while their books may not be available abroad. The most striking example of such a phenomenon is Chetan Bhagat, whose *Five Points Someone* has sold more than 500,000 copies in India. With this novel, and the novels that follow, *One Night @ the Call Centre* and *The 3 Mistakes of my Life*, Bhagat has established a remarkable readership that owes nothing to markets outside India. Other writers such as Anuja Chauhan, Advaita Kala or Kunal Basu have all been selling more than 25,000 copies of their works. Whereas novelists who write in English were sometimes accused of writing for an international audience, the domestic success enjoyed by recent novelists shows an increasing autonomy of the Indian market (it is estimated that books in English represent a little more than 20% of the market).

This editorial, journalistic and marketing interest has of course generated a certain amount of dissent among commentators. V. S. Naipaul dismisses the whole of Indian writing in English as devoid of imagination and obsessed with family life and the place of work: “These novels are by and large autobiographical. Every Indian who looks within himself finds the matter for a family story, with great characters, *daddyji* and *mamaji* and *nanee* and *chacha*, against a background of the extended Indian family. Since no writer can have two extended families, these novels appear to be rationed, one per writer. One writer, one book: it may not build a literature, but it is a system that allows new writers and new families to come up all the time” (Naipaul 192). Writers in English tend to ignore novelists who write in other Indian languages, of which the arch-example is to be found in Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West’s introduction to the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing*: “The prose writing—both fiction and non-fiction—created in this period by Indian writers *working in English*, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 ‘official’ languages of India, the so-called ‘vernacular languages,’ during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, ‘Indo-Anglian’ literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books” (Rushdie and West). On the other hand, novelists in “vernacular” languages do not hesitate to express symmetrical discontent vis-à-vis writings in English.

Salman Rushdie; 1996: *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry; 1999: *Fasting, Feasting* by Anita Desai; 2002: *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry; 2003: *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali (from Bangladesh); 2007: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid (from Pakistan) and *Animal’s People* by Indra Sinha; 2008: *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh.

There is a sense in which the debate is made more fierce because of the creation of the category of “Indian writing in English” (conveniently referred to as IWE...), sometimes called “Indo-English” or “Indo-Anglian.” But such labels have a marketing and a polemical function, rather than a critical one; they help to identify a set of writings, and either to attack or defend them. The publication of *Midnight’s Children* probably marked the rebirth of a critical discourse which identified India with fictional representations of the country. In doing so, it generated the universal but fictional category of “India,” which could then migrate and take root in Canada, in England, or in the United States. There thus emerged a further tension, between the diasporic novel and home-grown fiction. In addition, the geographical universe of these novels stretches beyond the borders of the post-1947 Indian state, to Pakistan as in recent writings by Mohsin Hamid or Mohammed Hanif; to Sri Lanka as in the novels of Romesh Gunesekeera; to Bangladesh (Ghosh); to the diasporas of America (Lahiri; Desai 1999) or England (Rushdie 1988, 1999; Aslam; Ali; Sahgal). Generic diversity must also be noted, since “the novel” can refer equally to the short form favoured by Narayan or Amit Chaudhuri, as well as to the proliferating universe of Rushdie or Seth. Novels may entertain a dialogue with the short story in the works of writers such as Desai, Mistry, Gunesekeera, Narayan or Lahiri; with travel literature in the works of Ghosh, Seth and others; with autobiography in the works of Seth, or in Dalit literature analysed in this issue by Udaya Kumar. That is why it seemed important to try and restore a sense of perspective with respect to a body of texts that have gained a significant amount of critical attention in recent years. Indeed, that is why this issue goes beyond the strict historical, geographical, generic and linguistic frontiers suggested by the label “Indian writing in English.”

In her study of the Indian novel, Meenakshi Mukherjee retraces the developments of the novel in India, thus dispelling a number of myths about the genre. Although the influence of the English novel may have been of importance, it would be wrong, according to her, to consider that the Indian novel is a Western import (the same case could also be made about the Arabic novel); furthermore, it is more useful to understand it as the crucible of many traditions. Mukherjee explains for instance about Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s *Durgeshnandini* that “its linguistic registers range from the sonorousness of Sanskrit *kavya* in the description of nature, to the earthiness of the Bangla spoken by common people of his time in the description of ordinary life, to a racy idiom peppered with Urdu and Persian words in the conversation of the Muslim soldiers” (Mukherjee 600-601). The influence of the great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as well as of popular cycles of stories, must also be taken into account in an understanding of the evolution of the Indian novel.

This connection with the nation helped shape the genre. The idea along with its critique was articulated as much in literature as in history and in politics: “The construction of a usable past has always been an

agenda of nationalism, and the discursive process through which this is achieved enlists the services of history as well as literature” (Mukherjee 608). The growing interest in history in nineteenth-century India explains as much, if not more, the emergence of the historical novel, as does the model of the Western nineteenth-century novel; so that, if Walter Scott was important for the fashioning of a form, as is often claimed, he acted rather as a catalyst than as the sole model (Mukherjee 609). The idea of history and of the nation has survived in the contemporary novel, in particular in the questioning of the inheritance of Independence which surfaces in a number of literary works. The novel’s concern for history, and in particular for national history, takes on a new appearance after Independence, when the traumatic event of Partition is questioned by novelists in tentative, fragmented, ambiguous ways, both in English (Ghosh) as well as in other languages (see Kaul; Butalia).

The Indian novel in English must therefore be viewed against the backdrop of a large body of fictional works, some written in English, which came to constitute it. Whereas, in the early years of the twentieth century, novels in English were mainly deferential towards the Empire and towards English classical literature, forms of questioning of the power of the Raj were taking place in novels written in “vernacular” languages (Mukherjee 629), or even in other forms of writing (Chatterjee). The present success of the Indian novel in English may be largely due to the fact that the readership of novels in the other languages remains confined, through lack of (reliable) translations, to the linguistic regions from which they originate. But this situation has generated some critical distortion, which may indeed become part of literary history, whereby Indian writings in English and in “vernaculars” are considered in different contexts: “For nearly two decades, Indian novels written in English and novels written in the other languages are being increasingly seen in dissimilar contexts. Whether their disparity of audience (global and local) affects their respective concerns, thematic focus, attitude toward their material styles of representation, and fictional strategies still remains a largely unresolved area of critical debate” (Mukherjee 631).

Thus the Indian novel in English has both left the frontiers of India and sought refuge in localised surroundings. The geography has been extended with the emergence of a distinct Pakistani novel in English, alongside the Sri Lankan or indeed the Nepalese, thus favouring the emergence, if ever new categories were needed, of a subcontinental genre. The political disruptions have led to the blossoming of increasingly distinct national traditions. But the very idea of frontier also appears elusive, with Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* questioning for instance the materiality of the borders between Bangladesh and India inherited from Partition. The “Indian” novel is also of course diasporic in its migrations. The novels of Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* and *The Ground Beneath her Feet* in particular, address the movements of individuals and the complexities and hybridities of exile, as does a work like Romesh Gunesekeera’s *The Match*, which explores the migrant condition from the Philippines to England, and

offers a departure from some of his earlier fiction that was rooted in the landscape and the territories of Sri Lanka.

While some Indian novels take the world as their province, however, other works seek to root themselves in the local. In some cases it may of course be argued that what is sought is nothing more than another exotic excursion through India, and there are many examples of regional novels in English that simply offer a portrayal of a particular part of the country. But the more interesting novels investigate the concept of the local through an archeology of the landscape and a questioning of the relationship between the local and the global (Appadurai). Writers like Ghosh, Narayan, Gunesekera, perhaps even Roy, echo Nirad Chaudhuri's concern for the historical materiality of the land in his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, and explore the constructions of the local through its histories and geographies. But these geographies may of course be imagined, and the novel has sought to reinvent them in "diasporic" as well as in "local" writings.

The question of language is at the heart of these writings. The status of English, and therefore of the writer who chooses to write in the former colonial language, invites complex considerations of readership, but also of literary positioning. The use of English has come under attack, as mentioned earlier, from writers in the other languages, with accusations of producing literature for tourists, of writing for the West, of being rootless, of being cut-off from the history and traditions of the country, and so on. It is of course possible to argue that not only is English sometimes the only language in which these novelists can write, but also that the English, or Englishes, of India do have a connection with the history and geography of the sub-continent. Salman Rushdie argued some years ago that Indians who wrote in English were recolonising the English language, reshaping it to suit their own needs, and so taking possession of it (Rushdie 1991). U. R. Ananthamurthy concedes that Rushdie writes in a language intimately connected with Hindi, while Arundhati Roy's English has been exposed to Malayalam. And it may be said of Mohammed Hanif for instance, that his writing retains the connection with Urdu. The English language is inhabited by all the voices that appropriate it, by all the accents and the lilt and the words that find a refuge in it, by the histories that are told in its rhythms, "tongue curving and cutting/ a cadence with a word announcing Dominica, St Lucia, Côte d'Ivoire" (Collins qtd in McLeod 193). While the English language of the Indian novel is, at its worst, another incarnation of a global language that has lost relevance, it can also be seen as an attentive, careful attempt at moulding a shared medium of expression and infusing it with the poetic diversity of the world.

Similar debates take place around poetry. As Jeet Thayil has pointed out, it is mainly poets who find themselves exposed to criticism about authenticity and tradition. The publication of Nissim Ezekiel's collection of poems, *A Time to Change*, marked a new departure for Indian poetry in English, and after Ezekiel many poets have developed a voice in English. Thayil suggests further that "before novelists discovered Indian English, Derozio

had already been there and so had Arun Kolatkar and Nissim Ezekiel. But the new ground they were instrumental in mapping ended up being claimed for fiction” (Thayil 23). The issue of the shaping of the English language by Indian writers is therefore one that unites the literary field.

The connections between geography and history are at the centre of those literary productions that come from countries divided by frontiers, by civil wars and lines of dissent, and whose integrities are disputed and disrupted. Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* regrets the disappearance of the diversity of Indian culture with Partition, and the waning of Urdu (Desai 1980). The work of Amitav Ghosh investigates the complexities of the geographical and historical fragmentation, as well as the necessity for the narrative to restore some form of order and coherence on the past (Ghosh 1988). The novels of Salman Rushdie pursue the ever-receding dream of a country that once offered the creative magic of its children of midnight (Rushdie 1981, 1999). The Indian novel in English has thus offered more than case studies in postcolonialism; it has contributed to the shaping of its concepts. Homi Bhabha’s investigation of hybridity, for instance, is clearly indebted to Rushdie (as well as to Toni Morrison). The questioning of the link between geography and history, in particular through a reexamination of the inheritance of Independence, their mutual fragmentation, the complexities of the migrant condition, the disappearance of the diversities of culture, the linking of the local to the global, and the reinvention of a language through the appropriation of English—these are all instances of the postcolonial condition that is largely explored by such novels.

If, then, the concept of “the Indian novel in English” does not exist beyond a convenient and sometimes polemical way of dealing with a large body of literary productions, it is still possible to suggest that around India and its migrant communities, around Pakistan or Sri Lanka and their political and geographical specificities, a number of literary concerns have emerged. But these concerns should not be separated from similar investigations in the other Indian languages; they should not be severed from other aspects of the literary world, in particular poetry; and, above all, they should not be restricted to India.

This collection of essays, through echoes and parallels, through an investigation of what lies, precisely, beyond the strict limits of the category of “the Indian novel in English,” hopes to offer a wider perspective on a vibrant component of the literary world. It opens with the idea of geography. Supriya Chaudhuri connects the geographical and linguistic displacements in Rushdie’s and Ghosh’s works, and insists on the materialities of places and languages. She shows how Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, through its complex treatment of place, suggests the difficulties of converting physical place into language, and contrasts Ghosh’s endeavour with Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown*, which is set in an imaginary homeland that has ceased to exist. The link between language and place is also at the heart of Ankhi Mukherjee’s essay, which concentrates in particular on recent Pakistani and Indian novels in order to address the deterritorialisation of the twenty-

first century Indian and Pakistani novel in English, in particular through a reading of *The White Tiger* as well as *A Case of Exploding Mangoes* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. The question of minority lives described in a majority language provides the main focus for her essay. Cécile Girardin also focuses on recent novels published in India, which deal with the representation of insurgencies in some Indian states. It is in particular the dislocation of the national ideal which is at the centre of her study, and the linguistic disintegration that it carries with it, as a result of which she shows how the relationship to history has evolved.

Vanessa Guignery moves from politics to poetics in an essay which investigates the question of nation and communalism in a global context. She shows that firm boundaries between individual, society and nation are both asserted and challenged by recent fiction, and that it is the notion of line or border which is at stake in such writings. Laetitia Zecchini's contribution introduces elements of comparison, which are essential to an understanding of language and genre. She turns to Indian poetry in English, and to the Bombay poets, Adil Jussawalla and Arun Kolatkar, arguing that the weight of history, and the dislocations that it has brought about, have generated what she calls a poetics of strangeness. For Annie Montaut, the whole issue of the language in which writers express themselves is one that needs careful assessment. She explains that the language in which writers produce their texts is not simply linked to choice, but to history, to their relationship to a tradition, and to an investigation of a literary and cultural heritage.

Udaya Kumar analyses recent autobiographical texts, written in particular by Dalits. He investigates the ways in which these texts address the question of shame, and wonders whether an ethical reconsideration of the concept is possible, beyond the dichotomy of perpetrators and victims. Finally, Marta Dvorák reminds us that the condition of postcolonialism is one that must be analysed within the context of a global world. She argues that postcolonial fiction must be read in a globalised context, in order to bring about a new understanding of the negotiation of meaning in the postmodern globalized world. The conversation with Anita Desai brings to light some of the issues connected both with her own work and with writing in English.

This variety of approaches and questionings of Indian literature in English testifies to the difficulties of addressing such a body of literature as one entity or category. It is hoped that these contributions will bring to light the complexity of issues and the range of critiques that the literature of the sub-continent elicits. Comparisons with poetry, with the politics and poetics of language in other Indian languages, and with contemporary novels in English from other parts of the globe, including England, bring to light the many different issues that such novels address. And they might even lead us to think, for the time being at least, that "Indian literature in English" does not exist.

Alexis TADIÉ
Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne

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