

# Crossing National Borders

The Indian English Novel since the 1990s

AS AN AVID READER OF INDIAN NOVELS written in English I have been impressed again and again by the vitality, vivacity and broad range of themes and styles of a literary genre that for Uma Parameswaran once seemed “destined to die young [... with] A.D. 2000 as the dirge date for Indo-English literature”.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, her hope that “time proves this prediction



wrong”<sup>2</sup> has been fulfilled, so much so that even an optimistic reader at the time would not have expected this to happen during the following three decades. A spate of younger writers, keen to narrate their stories in ‘that’ language, have continued to shape, bend and transform it into ever so many varieties of ‘Indian English’ which the founding fathers of the novel would have applauded. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao or Bhabani Bhattacharya experimented with it from the 1930s onwards.

It is not my intention to add to a critical discourse that to my mind has long ago run its course, become repetitive and stale. Nor do I want to respond to Makarand Paranjape’s (2000) and Tabish Khair’s (2001) discourse on the poetics of Indian English fiction, which I have briefly commented upon elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> but I’d like to look at what strikes me as comparatively recent modifications or even additions to the thematic concerns of a literary genre that had begun to step across national boundaries as long ago as with several novels of the forerunners of today’s so-called diasporan writing. Among them I would count Anand’s *Across the Black Waters* (1940), G.V. Desani’s

1 Uma Parameswaran, *A Study of Representative Indo-English Novelists*, New Delhi: Vikas 1976, 2

2 Ibid., 6

3 Dieter Riemenschneider, *The Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934-2004*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications 2005, 38–41

*All About H. Hatterr* (1948), Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) and Kamala Markandaya's *The Nowhere Man* (1973). While these writers returned to India, if not always in person then in their writing, others of the following generation like Dilip Hiro, Santha Rama Rau or Sasthi Brata stayed away. Their 'example' in turn was followed by authors born a few years before or after independence: Farrukh Dhondy, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, Shashi Tharoor, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Sunetra Gupta or Ravinder Randhawa. Among this group of 'diasporan' authors other novelists can be counted as well though they would return to India or move between countries and continents: Anita Desai, Gita Hariharan, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Amit Chaudhuri or Boman Desai. It is an impressive array of names which a close observer of the Indian literary scene would certainly enlarge by also including poets like A.K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Sudeep Sen or Sujata Bhatt and one or the other writer-cum-critic like Tabish Khair.

Recalling not merely the titles of their work but their thematic preoccupations, we can draw some provisional conclusions. With a few exceptions stories revolve around Indian characters living in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century though not necessarily in India. As is almost to be expected, the topic of living away from their home country triggers off problematizing cultural clash, identity and alienation and the search for place and home. Further, these narratives are usually told in a realistic manner that allows little room to the modes of allegory, fantasy and satire or to the kind of 'Hatterrese' mix that empowered Desani's novel with such an exceptional grasp of the reality of the diasporic Indian. Finally, employment of the realistic mode in the bulk of Indian English story telling has also held back diasporan writers from experimenting with linguistic registers even though Desani or Rushdie have shown that English is a rich medium of communication because of its close contact with Indian languages and their colloquial or dialect varieties on the one hand and their own inventiveness and courage to exploit it.

No doubt, all this is not news to the connoisseur of Indian English writing and is mentioned here only by way of raising the question whether we come across recent novels that leave what I would term the beaten tracks of the 'national' and the 'diasporan' experience. In other words, texts that take a more holistic look at today's world by crossing the line that encircles the 'Indian' experience as perceived along national and diasporic trajectories, be they of a thematic or an idealized nature as discussed in Khair and Paranjape's studies. I'd like to answer this question in the affirmative and

am thinking of Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* (1999) and *Two Lives* (2005), Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) or Kirin Nagarkar's *God's Little Soldier* (2006). Though their subject matters differ, it is not just India the reader encounters here, let alone Indianness we are lured into. No doubt, the location in *The Hungry Tide* is the Sundarbans and substantial events of Rushdie and Nagarkar's stories occur in Kashmir and Bombay respectively, while one of the 'two lives' in Seth's novel is that of the Indian dentist Shanti Behari Seth. Still, I would argue that both, events and characters in these works are to be placed within a larger than an Indian referential frame. Let me illustrate what I mean.

Seth's *An Equal Music* is exceptional in that it is so far removed from the Indian context that it stands quite apart while its composition gives reason to speculate on the emergence of a discrete subgenre of the Indian English novel. If the reader had no idea about its author the text would not offer the least clue because neither action nor character, neither theme nor language and style fit into perceived patterns of writing we readily identify with the tradition of Indian English fiction. It is a very private story told through the highly subjective voice of the English musician Michael whose main interest lies in talking about himself as the member of a famous string quartet and as a man who loves Julia, also a musician who, as he finds out, is gradually turning deaf. Both had met as students in Vienna a decade before and fallen in love but had lost contact of each other after he had abandoned her quite unexpectedly and rather ruthlessly. Running into each other coincidentally in London after so many years, both resume their relationship though Julia is married and has a son, only to once and for all part again because of yet another failure on Michael's part to honour their relationship.

However, far more exciting than this love story of sorts is the musical story with its exquisite presentation of details pertaining to examples of classical European compositions, in particular by Schubert and Bach, and its disclosure of the group dynamics of the four members of the Maggiore Quartet, including the portrayal of their differing personalities. Here we must acknowledge Seth's profound immersion into and sensitive understanding of a European art as a narrative stance we have not come across in Indian English writing. It suggests his deep love for a musical tradition totally different from his own which he celebrates in a novel where the love story narrated by a high-strung, egomaniac and ever so indifferent male recedes into the background. The total exclusion of Seth's own culture in *An Equal Music* does not even allow us to speak of it as a transcultural

text but to see it as a contribution to the European music story tradition. It is, indeed, an exceptional 'Indian' novel where the epithet 'equal' might suggest that European classical music matches its Indian counterpart.

By contrast, Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is unambiguously located in India, or more precisely and like several of his previous works, in his home state of Bengal. Yet in spite of the impressive local colour the Sundarbans are painted in with their intricate waterways and its tides, its myriad islands and sandbanks that are forever shifting, its vegetation and animal world, its storms and, last but not least, its dense population of fishermen and peasants, the author's principal motif, I believe, lies elsewhere. The story of a few days in the lives of the young Indian cetologist Piyali Roy having arrived to observe a subspecies of dolphin, of the Delhi-based translator Kanai and his aunt Mashima, and finally, of the fisherman Fokir and his family, revolves around an issue of global dimension. What should have precedence in the modern world, the subtext asks: the care for survival of an ecologically balanced biotope like the Sundarbans or settling impoverished and homeless refugees in their fertile surroundings to ensure their survival? It is a question the novel does not answer, or rather, the answer given is twofold. Years ago the Bengal government had stepped in and forcibly removed the settlers from the land they had illegally taken possession of. Now, the task lies with people like Piyali, Kanai and Mashima who devote their lives to create bearable living conditions for the original people of the Sundarbans.

The plot structure reveals itself as multiple-layered depicting the various characters' relationships as they develop. Most impressive is the Piyali-Fokir relationship embedded in the natural world of water and islands that is counterpoised by local myths and legends. Both motifs are bundled together in a text that forms part of, as much as it contributes to issues of eco-literature, a new kind of writing that has evolved in recent years and has been met with increased attention by writers and readers. *The Hungry Tide* thus points towards a new direction in Indian English fiction which in the past has paid but scant attention to nature and instead has privileged topics relevant to the urbanized middle-class of the big cities.

This preoccupation with city life serves as a usable starting point from which to approach Seth's latest novel, *Two Lives*, which like *An Equal Music*, at least for its greater part, is located in London. Shanti Behari Seth settled here in the 1930s and in 1951 married the German Jewish refugee Henny Gerda Caro who had escaped the Nazis just before the outbreak of the war. The novel thus portrays an unusual pair of 'exiles' whose lives draw our attention to an aspect of diasporic writing we have hardly ever come

across, and certainly not in Indian fiction in English. At the same time, the book's unusual amalgam of biography, memory, documentation and essay-like excursions into European history and national psychogrammes highlights how unstable the borderlines of traditional literary genres have become. What is particularly noteworthy in this respect is Seth's approach as an erstwhile uninformed outsider who is anxious to explore the truth of Germany's historical role in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and here especially the fate Germans meted out to its Jewish community under Nazi rule. The initial motif of reconstructing his granduncle's life thus becomes incorporated into the story of the fractured lives of two people that leads us to understand European history as part of modernity, scrutinized here for the first time from an Indian angle. *Two Lives* brings home the message of looking back at experiences of people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to understand the present with its allegedly global cultural wars, the increasing chasm between 'us' and 'them', the 'pure' and the 'impure', true and false Christians, and last but not least, the West and the Muslim worlds. This 'twist' of the narrative and its final appeal to "eschew group hatred" and to trust in "humane logic and perhaps, in due course, love"<sup>4</sup> (499) takes me straight to my next example, to Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*.

The multi-layered story winds its way geographically from America to Europe, to Kashmir and back to America while in time it moves from the present to the past and back to the present. The seemingly irresolvable tangle of love and hatred motivating the actions of individuals as well as of groups of people sworn to enforce their own version of racial and religious truth on others give rise to a truly global scenario of violence and terrorism that has characterized Nazism in the past as much as it does the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. Rushdie's sombre story of the Muslim Shalimar and his Hindu wife Boonyi, French-born American Max Ophuls and his English wife Margaret and Max and Boonyi's American-Indian daughter Kashmiri or India reminds us of *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) with its pessimistic outlook into the future, yet a future that in this novel encompasses much more than the fate of an Indian family. A parallel though can be drawn between the inextricable convolutions of personal passions and political and ideological convictions that drive people on in both novels. This holds true in particular of Shalimar's actions that are motivated not so much by his own and his Muslim conspirators' ambition to free Kashmir from Indian rule and set up a Muslim state but from his desire to revenge Boonyi's betrayal of leaving him, of becoming Max's lover and the mother of their child.

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4 Vikram Seth, *Two Lives*, London: Little, Brown 2005, 499

I believe that it is precisely Rushdie's intention to unmask man's lust for power that motivates the main agents on three continents and in different historical periods to perpetrate inhuman atrocities: the Nazis in occupied France who succeed in eradicating the Jewish community including Max's family; the Indian military in Kashmir who suspect anyone to side with their adversaries, that is, several Muslim guerrilla parties, who in turn do not only fight the unbelievers from outside but also each other and even kill civilians they suspect to support 'the others'; and finally, those hardcore, totally non-political criminals in California whom the authorities can hardly keep in check. Violence though is legitimate in the case of Nazi terrorism, as Max's involvement in La Résistance in France proves; not however any longer in the self-opinionated and factional power game in Kashmir, and certainly not at all in Shalimar's personal revenge. He murders Boonyi, sent back to Kashmir where she is ousted by her family and lives in isolation, traces and kills Max in Los Angeles and finally confronts Kashmira/India in her father's house. Being all set to defend herself the outcome of their encounter remains as open-ended as the Kashmir conflict.

Like its tightrope dancing protagonist, *Shalimar the Clown* presents us with a world dancing on the rope and threatening to plunge to its death. It is a world in which terrorist acts in India form but part of a conflict that has assumed global dimension. As national boundaries do not any longer count, the writers' responsibility and courage are asked for to respond to the frightening international scenario of terrorism that has begun to affect the lives of more and more people at the beginning of the 21st century. It is a response very much at the heart of Kiran Nagarkar's *God's Little Soldier*.

Having portrayed the dense and convoluted network of power politics, religion and art in 17<sup>th</sup> century Rajasthan in his impressive novel *Cuckold* (1997), he now draws a similarly lively picture of the complex interplay of present day global politics, religion and morality, the sciences and the arts, economics, finance and ecological concerns. The exuberant story whose main plot, subplots and innumerable details, intertextual references and shifting points of view cannot even be summarized here, narrates the fate of Zia and Amanat, two brothers of the Bombay Muslim family of Khan. Raising the perennial question of man relating to the world, Zia represents active man, Amanat contemplative man. Profoundly concerned with the creation of a better world, Zia pursues this goal restlessly by assuming different names and identities, living for a time with Trappist monks in France and assisting them in renovating their monastery. Discovering his

gift as a stockbroker he subsequently supports fundamentalist Americans like them as ‘God’s little soldier’ to create healthy surroundings for the young by pushing for legislation against premarital sex, abortion and homosexuality. Yet doubting their evangelical goals he reverts from his adopted Christian faith to Islam, joins the Taliban in Afghanistan and after their defeat becomes an international arms trader. Betrayed and fearing for his life; he opts to hide underground — and makes his exit from the novel. Driven by his quest for the one and only truth worthwhile to be accomplished, the moral aspect of using such doubtful means as terrorism, brain wash, nuclear and biochemical warfare is subordinated to the aim of creating a better world for future generations. Zia though, and this may explain his chameleon-like transformations, is never really sure about what is the truth and whether his actions may not be motivated by selflessness and altruism but rather by his wish for personal salvation. Nor is Amanat of much help with his admonishing letters, his stories and plays that convey a moral stance vis-à-vis the world ‘out there’. Neither one nor the other religious belief nor the active involvement in the world of economics and finance, politics or warfare, neither moral contemplation nor the artist’s representation, Nagarkar’s novel suggests as “a fable for our times”, offers a final answer to the true nature of God. In this sense each of us must beware of playing the role of God’s little soldier.

I hope to have shown how the modern Indian novel in English has yet again been set on a new course that may have had Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) as its starting point at the end of the 1980s. A concern with questions of a global dimension and importance marks a departure from predominantly local themes and authorial preoccupations on the one hand and life in the diaspora on the other. No doubt, such writing will continue to engage Indian authors at home and abroad as an abundance of publications easily testifies. Here, the vicissitudes of the Indian middle-class family continue to command much attention as in Akil Sharma’s *An Obedient Father* (2000), Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002) and Shashi Deshpande’s *Moving On* (2004); or the tribulations of a working life as in Githa Hariharan’s *In Times of Siege* (2003) or Anurag Mathur’s *Scenes from an Executive Life* (2001). The same writer’s *The Inscrutable Americans* (1991) and Boman Desai’s *Asylum, USA* (2000) enlarge the canvas of diasporan writing while Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot* (2001) and Allan Sealey’s *The Brainfever Bird* (2003) centre on the meeting if not confrontation of Indian and foreign characters. No doubt, all these novels make interesting reading, yet what I am asking is, who else will join Ghosh, Nagarkar, Rushdie and Seth to take their readers to new destinations?

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