

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal

ISSN 0975-2935

www.rupkatha.com

Volume VI, Number 3, 2014

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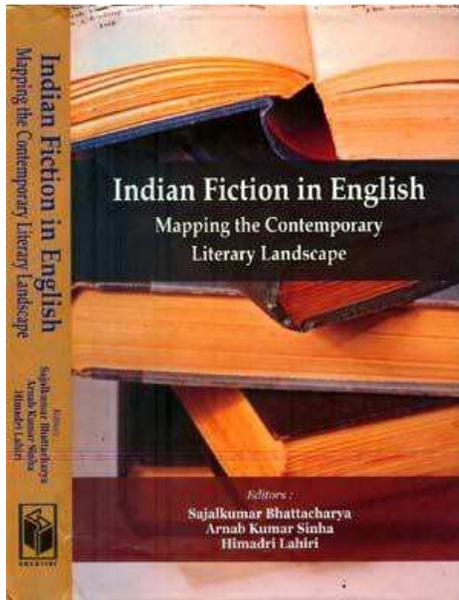
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Indian English Fiction – The Fruit Inevitable: A Review

Indian Fiction in English: Mapping the Contemporary Literary Landscape



Edited by
Sajalkumar Bhattacharya, Arnab Kumar Sinha &
Himadri Lahiri

New Delhi: Creative, 2014
Page nos. 432
ISBN 978-81-8043-108-1.

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Fiction is the rotund fruit which blossoms spontaneously and inevitably in the fast spreading, all encompassing, encroaching and evergreen tree of life, observed Tagore in the introductory paragraph of his essay *Shesh Kotha* (Final Words) in the fourth volume of *Golpoguchho*. Life spreads its ever expanding branches about its trunk, and the monotony of its accessions envelops existence, till one fine day, on one of its branches, a fruit blossoms. It is rotund, bright, being sweet, sour or intensely bitter in its pulp, and has an inevitability about itself. Fiction is the fruit of the tree of life and experience. Tagore made the above observations on the nature of the short story in particular. But the remarks are equally applicable to the art of fiction in general. If the content of fiction is life, like the huge expansive evergreen tree, the form is the fruit. The rotundity of the fruit suggests the shape and significance offered by the artist of fiction to the immense panorama of the chaotic variety of life and its experiences. Tagore's observations fit snugly into the territory of English fiction in India. Amit Chaudhuri observes, "Indian life is plural, garrulous, rambling, lacking a fixed centre, and the Indian novel must be the same" (115). A relatively new genre in the matrix of Indian literature, the novel in India is a colonial child. The English novel in the Indian soil is more so, as the enterprise of writing fiction in the colonizer's language ought to be fraught with and wrought in anxieties of influence. But it is the same influence that underscores the first colonial experience, and hence life, in those times of anxiety. Hence the cross-pollination of language, race and art gave birth to the fruit called Indian English novel.

The recently published anthology of essays titled *Indian Fiction in English: Mapping the Contemporary Literary Landscape* (New Delhi: Creative, 2014) edited by Sajalkumar Bhattacharya, Arnab Kumar Sinha and Himadri Lahiri makes fresh forays into the taken-for-granted literary landscape of Indian Fiction in English. The “Introduction” to the volume explains to the reader the inevitability of the genre in colonial and postcolonial India, rooting it back to 1835, the year of the publication of Macaulay’s *Minutes on Education*. Since then, the bogey of Indian English fiction chugs on, traversing the landscapes of colonial India, forging new narrative forms to articulate the Indian experience in the language of the colonizer. Amit Chaudhuri rightly points out that “since India is a huge baggy monster, the novels that accommodate it have to be baggy monsters as well” (Chaudhuri 114); “the largeness of the book allegorizes the largeness of the country it represents” (114-115). The bulky Booker of Bookers – *Midnight’s Children* – automatically comes to mind in this context. Chaudhuri draws a contrast between them and the novels written in the regional languages such as Bengali, “where the short story and novella have predominated at least as much as the novel, often in the hands of the major novelists of the first half of the century, such as Bibhutibhusan and Tarashankar Banerjee” (114). Moreover, Chaudhuri also refers to the writer and critic Buddhadev Bose who reminds the scholar that Tagore brought the modern short story into Bengal in the late nineteenth century, “some time before it was introduced to England” (114). Any attempt to map Indian English Fiction may refer to these valuable insights provided by none other than Amit Chaudhuri, to situate the contemporary Indian English novel in context. And there lies the value of the volume under review edited by Bhattacharya, Sinha and Lahiri. Although the book attempts to “map” “the contemporary literary landscape” of Indian English Fiction, the chapters in the first section initiate a discussion on the history of the evolution of the Indian novel in English.

The essays in this volume have been distributed across seven sections on the basis of their thrusts of argument, followed by an “Interview” with Tabish Khair presented by Sajalkumar Bhattacharya. However, the common linking paradigm of critical evaluation seems to be the question of the identity of the Indian English novel, inextricably connected with questions of nation, postcoloniality, history, ethnicity and representations of the diaspora. Almost all of these contentious issues have been addressed by Tabish Khair in his interview given to Sajalkumar Bhattacharya in the final section of the volume. Hence, instead of beginning from the beginning, one may begin from the end. Khair responds to a set of penetrating questions that naturally arises in any critical engagement with the genre in question – Indian English Fiction – covering almost all the above-mentioned areas of enquiry. With a critical detachment, he separates himself from the privileged metropolitan positioning of the Indian English novelist, despite having migrated to Denmark himself, and celebrates his root-status as the Indian in Gaya, which to him is different from the Indian in Goa. However, his celebration of his small-town roots must not be deemed as one that claims a false subaltern status, as he frankly cautions. As a critic, he vehemently resists West-centric stereotypes of assessing the Indian English novelist. One such stereotype that is commonly used in discourses of scholarship is the idea of mimicry. Khair vociferously declares that the contemporary

novelist in India writing in English has nothing to mimic. Mimicry might have been a reality to the top-thin layer of highly anglicized ‘natives’ in the past. But today, it is important to realize that the Indian English novelist took from the English or the West what came naturally to them, “without realizing their source”, or acting under duress. The sensibility that comes to be portrayed in Indian English Fiction thus has been inevitable. Khair’s observations once again legitimize Tagore’s definition of fiction – the inevitable fruit of life. Khair maintains that writing is not a cultural activity for him, a mark of sophistication or education. “I do not write because it is the thing to do or because I have time to kill...I write because I need to, because I feel an urge to tell that story or those stories in that way.”

The first section “Parameters and Politics of Indian Fiction in English: Some Reflections” presents three valuable essays that historicize and problematize the much used category “Indian English Fiction”, critiqued, debated upon, and sometimes passionately vilified by both purists and globalists. The opening essay by Somdatta Mandal, true to its title “Past, Present and Future of the Indian English Language and Literature: Some Observations,” provides a bird’s-eye view of the history of Indian English Fiction with its antecedents in less known non-fictional narrative pieces such as *Travels of Dean Mahomet* in 1794 and the first drama scripted by an Indian in the English language, *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* by Baboo Krishna Mohan Banerjea in 1831. Adopting a socio-historical approach to the rise of English writing in India, Mandal highlights less heard names such as Cavelly Venkata Boriah, Kylas Chunder Dutt and Reverend Lalbehari Day, Dhan Gopal Mukherjee and Sudhin N. Ghose, to name a few, among the well known stalwarts such as Khushwant Singh and Nirad C. Choudhuri, to show the narrative continuum of Indian Fiction in English. Besides, she also observes how writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan and G. V. Desani, in order to cater to the tastes of “dual readership” either chose to get their novels published from abroad or got veterans such as E. M. Forster, Graham Greene or Anthony Burgess, to pen prefaces or recommendations for themselves. Providing a plethora of interesting information for the scholar of Indian English Fiction, Mandal’s essay traverses the evolutionary path of both the Indian English novel and the Indian English idiom which happens to occupy a contentious position in the linguistic matrix of the country since the publications of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* in 1864 (printer’s devil dating it to 1964 in the volume) and *Govinda Samanta* by Reverend Lalbehari Day in 1874. The complexities involved in the state of affairs of the genre today are sensitively documented in the essay which exposes the unaddressed and unrepresented facets of contemporary Indian culture such as the overarching presence of the pan-Indian urban middle class, which today forms a major demographic component. Instead, English educated writers based abroad, represent heroes who hop, skip and jump continents as if the globe were their backyard, very frequently valorising exile.

Himadri Lahiri’s essay in the first section “Nation, Nation-based Category and Indian English Literature: A Belated View”, defying all narratives of post-theory scepticism, argues in support of the need for categories in critical scholarship, without the

support of which Indian Fiction in English cannot be critiqued. Lahiri argues in support of the role of geopolitical spatiality in the act of forging fictions in postcolonial India that cries out naturally for a nation-based category. He calls the creation of such a category “an absolute practical necessity” However, he too provides a stark critique of the most commonly used category to brand fictional narratives composed by writers writing in English in India – “Indian English Fiction” or “Indian Fiction in English”, which incidentally happens to be the title of the volume reviewed at present. Lahiri’s critique poses uncomfortable questions for the academia of the Indian subcontinent that seemed to be complacently ensconced in the cushion of such categories as the Indian novel in English and the Pakistani novel in English, after the freedom at midnight when two nations were left bleeding with gaping and running sores that would never easily heal. Lahiri’s questions to the literary historiographer may be summed up in one line: can one partition history in the act of historicizing literature? Otherwise, what rigid posturing denies great storytellers of the Indian nationalist movement of the pre-partition period such as Ahmed Ali, Feroze Khan Noon, Mumtaz Shah Nawaz and Khwaja Ahmad Abbas a well-deserved space in the canon of Indian English Fiction? Lahiri rightly points out: “This is an area which has not been addressed in a critical way so far.” Confused and hopelessly communalised by the great divide, Islam has been equated with Pakistani identity when it came to labelling the above writers who could never imagine that they were heading for a partition of consciousness and even literary scholarship, a dilemma quite evident in Tariq Rahman’s book *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* (1991), from which Lahiri quotes in order to substantiate his argument.

Amidst the flood of articles sifted through critical anthologies and volumes on Indian English Fiction in the market of academic scholarship, rarely do we stumble upon one which opens up several potential areas for further research for the inspired scholar working on the subject. One may identify at least two potentially rich areas for further study in Lahiri’s essay – the one that may involve that group of marginalised Muslim writers from the Indian English canon, who, for no fault of theirs, do not find a place, as mentioned earlier. Among them, there is another sub-group represented by writers such as K. A. Abbas who never left India after partition, yet has been denied a place in the canon, both in India as well as Pakistan. Abbas, sadly has not found a secure place in the canon of Pakistani fiction in English too as he had never migrated. Tariq Rahman, as if in a magnanimous gesture of comradeship, allows a space to him in *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* on account of an audaciously parochial rationale, as referred to in Lahiri’s essay: “However, I have dealt with Abbas because he represents a neglected aspect of Muslim consciousness which found literary expression in English before the Partition”. The other potential area of inquiry for further research may be detected in the first and only work in English on the Indian Chinese community by an Indian Chinese author Kwai-yun Li who later migrated to Canada. Lahiri’s essay identifies similar narrative spaces on the peripheries of the contemporary fictional landscape in India, such as writings from India’s North-East and Kashmir, both insurgent infested locales which cry out for representation both in literature and literary historiography. Angshuman Kar’s essay “No War in Inter-War Indian English Fiction” addresses a few questions on the

studied silence maintained by Indian authors writing in English as well as in the regional languages on the impact of the two great wars that left Europe bleeding. Despite their British and European counterparts actively engaged in representing war and world politics in their fiction, Indian novelists such as Anand and Narayan consciously avoid the war backdrop or war as subject in their fiction. Kar attempts to read into the silences and expose the politics beneath the blank spaces of fiction writing in Indian English literature.

Pradip Ranjan Sengupta's essay "Word, Language and the Indian Idiom: A Study of Ghosh's Use of Dialect" in the second section "Representation of the Postcolonial India" is a commendable study of Amitav Ghosh's sincere attempt at providing a mature rendition of the modern English idiom in contemporary Indian English fictional space, particularly in his later novels such as *The Hungry Tide* in which he adopts the method of partial translation to effectively capture the spirit and essence of his milieu and tell his story in English. Rajarshi Mitra's essay on Jim Corbett's *My India* titled "Dear Native Sahib: India in Jim Corbett's Autobiographical Writings" is a surprise entry in this anthology of critical essays on Indian Fiction in English. One might wonder how an autobiographical writing may fit into the schema of fiction. However, a closer reading would reveal an insightful critique of the autobiographical elements in Jim Corbett's *My India*. An autobiographical account may naturally raise the expectation of credibility. But Mitra detects several fissures in Corbett's representation of India, particularly during those moments when he bids farewell to the country in which he lived, breathed and wrote. A fondness of spirit coloured by nostalgia for the land makes Corbett's *My India* too sweet and too nice, where "even the rogue Sultana is portrayed as a benevolent dacoit helping out the poor in need." "The marked sense of sexual and political innocence that might at times seem too contrived" makes Jim Corbett's *My India* fictional. Corbett's convenient and quiet espousal of the colonizer's anxiety leaves several political questions answered, which Mitra attempts to address in this essay. While Corbett chooses Kenya as his future home, we see the East-West encounter from the other side of the colonizer's gaze.

The first essay of the third section "History and Ethnicity" titled "Making Little History Happen: An Evaluation of History in I. Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama: A Chronicle*" offers another fresh perspective of the East-West encounter from the gaze of the Anglo-Indian. The generic use of the "nama" as in *Akbar Nama* or *Babar Nama*, popular to traditional Indian chronicles and biographies, has been carefully chosen as a narrative device which allows the narrator Justin Trotoirre an informal entry into the official discourse of history in the annals of which the Anglo-Indians do not find adequate representation. Sudipta Chakraborty's essay "Interpolating Renaissance: History and Allegory in Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*" busts the Eurocentric myth of the Renaissance, asserting Rushdie's re-reading of the cultural phenomenon of the Renaissance not as a Western monopoly, but as a movement that had its roots in Emperor Akbar's world-view. Samrat Laskar's essay on Kunal Basu's *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* underscores a new engagement, on the part of the Indian English novelist, with China, the rising neighbour in the East, with whom India has shared a complex relationship over the past few decades. Basu's representation of China's inhibitions in

engaging in active cultural communications may go a long way in addressing future questions on some of the burning issues which have determined Indian ties with China.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) has garnered considerable critical attention in the fourth section of the volume "Women and Representation." Two essays have been devoted to the novel in this anthology. Trayee Sinha's essay addresses the identity question and its representational potential, and the one jointly written by Soumyajyoti Banerjee and Amrita Basu addresses questions on the body as text. Draupadi, addressed as Krishnaa, with a double 'a' by none other than Sri Krishna in the *Mahabharata*, has always intrigued novelists and critics alike. But what has evaded both these essays is Divakaruni's engagement with this highly complex power centre of the *Mahabharata* – Draupadi – from a global/international/metropolitan perspective of the contemporary globalised Indian English writer, as Tabish Khair may have read it. The Sahitya-Akademi-Award-winning Marathi narrative *Yuganta* (1998) by Iravati Karvey and Prof Nrishinghaprasad Bhaduri's *Krishnaa, Kunti Ebong Kaunteya* (1998) in Bangla are two highly reputed works on Draupadi, both of which are well researched interpretations of the myth of the lady in the centre of the *Mahabharata* in the respective regional languages. Moreover, both are non-fictional narratives. It would be an interesting exercise to examine Divakaruni's global perspective as an Indian English novelist, on the silences in the epic when it came to act of narrating her in fiction. Divakaruni's novel may be read as Draupadi's narration of herself, which may become the focus of critical engagement for critics in future. In the same section of the volume, Pradipta Shyam Chowdhuri's essay "Looking into the Arabian Nights: Reading Gita Hariharan's *When Dreams Travel*" offers a fresh perspective to the woman as story-teller in Hariharan's hypertext-novel on the *Arabian Nights*. The four essays in the fifth section *Representation from the Diaspora* effectively highlight the fluidity of identities and problems of fictional representations of the diasporas in Indian English Fiction. The complexities involved in categorization of these texts within the matrix of Indian English Literature have been appropriately approached by Tabish Khair in his interview to Sajalkumar Bhattacharya.

What is fresh about this anthology under review is its sensitive focus on fictional writings in English from the North-East and the newly emerging trend of churning up bazaar fictions in the market of the popular literature industry. In the former section dealing with the North-East, Rumpa Das's essay "The Strength of the Weak: Power of Women Against Terror" appropriately contextualizes the hangover of logo-centric tendencies of colonial scholarship in the act of categorizing the North-East as a broad all-encompassing *topos*, a uniform whole for matters of political convenience. Such tendencies are hegemonic, running the risk of gross oversimplification, as Das rightly observes. Her readings of Mamang Dai, Temsula Ao and Mitra Phukan open up new vistas of critical scholarship by engaging with female points of view of North-East concerns – namely terror and violence – in the respective states popularly clubbed together as the Seven Sisters. Manas Pratim Borah's essay, "Narratives of Violence and Northeastern Terror Lore: A Reading of Select Fictional Writings from Northeast India" engages with the fondness for *lores* in this part of the country, which have provided

narratives of this region with energy and vigour to address the hardships of life and the adverse socio-political experiences which have become realities of the region over time. Borah is chiefly concerned with what he calls the “terror lore” typical to the diverse narratives of the region. However, despite Borah’s interest in *lores*, he has not engaged with the rich treasure troves of oral folklores of the region, particular to each of the innumerable ethnic communities across the Seven Sisters. Although they do not belong to the category of ‘Indian Fiction in English’, it goes without saying that their presence feeds the creative imagination of the North East with life blood and vitality.

The final section on popular Indian English Fiction titled “Pop-Lit” attempts to jolt multicultural/global award-winning Indian English fiction writers out of their complacency of publishing one novel at intervals of three to five years. Hoards of young writers of fiction from both cities and small-towns are making a beeline to offices of publishing companies everyday to get their stories published. The book-market of popular fiction respectfully bows down to the overarching presence of both prolific Indian writers of international repute such as Chetan Bhagat and Aravinda Adiga in academic forums and bookstores across India, and bestselling authors credited with one or two novels such as Parul Mittal. It seems, there is space for every writer of pop-lit in bookshelves across India. However, when it comes to critical engagement with such fictional narratives, a few suggestions may be necessary. It is important for the critic of such texts to investigate into the engineering of stories that thrill and charm readers cutting across age and class. Strategies adopted by the popular culture/literature industry to install thrill in narratives, through a certain amount of amnesia, may be explored through a detailed reading of such narratives in the light of Western theorists of popular literature such as Umberto Eco. Mahitosh Mandal attempts to engage with Chetan Bhagat’s reception and literariness, but falls short of providing a theoretical assessment of Bhagat’s literariness. Abhilash Dey’s essay on the “Desi Chick-lit novel” raises expectations on a more penetrating theoretical engagement. However, the sociology of the stories seems to dominate the focus of critical attention. Matters of execution in the domain of popular fiction have largely remained unaddressed.

To conclude, one must not forget to mention the importance given to the exhaustive notes at the end of some of the essays of this volume, particularly in the first section. They would go a great extent in providing vital cues for further research on areas unexplored so far within the domain of Indian English Fiction. Besides, the “List of Publications of Prose-Fiction in English Since 1980” at the end of the volume may be used as a valuable database for students, scholars and teachers.

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