

Krishna Sen and Rituparna Roy, *Writing India Anew: Indian English Fiction 2000-2010*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013. 280 pp. ISBN 978-90-8964-533-3.

An invigorated Indian economic, political and social landscape demands a renewed examination of the nation's contemporary Indian English fiction corpus. *Writing India Anew* reiterates that the now unfashionable and dated tropes of "writing back to the center" no longer hold good, and that the plethora of themes explored in contemporary Indian English fiction call for a reassessment of Indian literary works as specific responses to the country's ongoing transformation following its liberalisation policies since the 1990s.

This volume brings together fifteen essays by established and emerging critics and scholars whose research focuses upon fiction produced in the first decade of the new millennium. As Sen and Roy contend, twenty-first century Indian English fiction "constitutes a metanarrative of reworlding" (14), and initiates a re-mapping of the cartographies of change. Divided into four sections, "Re-Imagining the Nation," "Revisiting the Past," "Reviewing the Present" and "Reinscribing Home," the volume fittingly reserves its largest section on current fiction by writers like Aravind Adiga, Chetan Bhagat and Rana Dasgupta. In the spirit of examining India anew, the collection's most significant contribution comes in the form of insightful essays on new literary forms like science fiction and graphic narratives created and produced in India.

The editors assert that contemporary Indian English fiction forges so many distinct paths with a new kind of assurance that it is no longer possible to view this literature as "derivative or dispossessed" (9), and can boldly stake its claim as a major contributor to contemporary Anglophone literature. Admitting that the protean nature of this diverse work poses theoretical challenges, they acknowledge that no extant category can satisfactorily encompass the multiplicity of contemporary writing. This is offered partly in defense of their decision to then fall back on the arguably unimaginative categories listed above that merely reiterate the continued centrality of nation, home, past and present time, even while decrying their outmoded perspectives. Here it is useful to contrast the categories adopted by another contemporary critical work, E. Dawson Varughese's monograph *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English* (2013), which eschews these standard paradigms and adopts fresh ones like "Urban Scapes," "Chick lit to crick Lit" and "Young India" that perhaps better reflect the changing socio-economic and cultural milieus within which these literatures are flourishing.

Having said that however, the essays by Bill Ashcroft and Nandini Bhattacharya, while still inscribed within postcolonial and nationalistic perspectives, do forge new paths through their arguments that writers like

Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Amitav Ghosh “regenerate a hidden tradition of anti-nationalistic utopianism in Indian literature most prominent in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi” (18). Also Himanshu S. Mohapatra’s critical analysis of Aravind Adiga’s celebrated realist narrative style in his essay “Babu Fiction in Disguise: Reading *The White Tiger*” poses thought-provoking questions of the chasms between the realist narratives of Balzac, Dickens and Flaubert (whom Adiga claims to derive inspiration from), with that of his literary predecessor Mulk Raj Anand. Mohapatra convincingly argues that Adiga deviates from the progressive mode of the socially committed writing of the former group to celebrate instead Indian exotica that ultimately caters to the Western market for Eastern “murk, mayhem and melodrama” (21), precluding any possibilities of the eradication of the social evils of inequality and poverty even as some attempts to eradicate these problems exist in movements that are currently taking place across India.

The strength of the book lies in its analysis of new literary genres that are emerging in India, namely, science fiction, comics and graphic novels, and literature that examines the growing power of technology and its often dark influence in the everyday lives of the common person. Sreemati Mukherjee’s essay “Story-telling in the Age of Cybernetics: Rana Dasgupta’s *Tokyo Cancelled*” offers a welcome analysis of a lesser-known Indian writer whose work combines magic realism and irrealism to paint a bleak picture of modern life, stripped of its emotional and ecological vitality in the age of cyber culture. In “Childhood’s End: Science Fiction in India,” Abhijit Gupta provides an excellent overview of the nascent history of scifi in India, offering insights that explain its slow popularity there when compared to the West, and critically analyses the often-overlooked and neglected novels by Rimi Chatterjee, Manjula Padmanabhan and Samit Basu. Completing this section is Rimi Chatterjee’s sweeping overview of the genesis of Indian comics and graphic novels in her essay “Frame/Works: How India Tells Stories in Comics and Graphic Novels.” The essay offers a detailed study of the various factors that contribute to the popularity and difficulties of comics and graphic books from a publishing and marketing perspective, as well as a critical look at the major themes that they address. These themes range from the sanitised presentation of Hindu religious myths offered by the enduring Amar Chitra Katha Publications, to the more contemporary graphic novels like Sarnath Banerjee’s *Corridor* (2005) that shows the influence of Japanese *anime* and deals with issues of sexuality and religious fundamentalism, clearly venturing into new areas for comics and graphic novels in India. Manta Ray’s *Husb* similarly addresses issues of child abuse, although Chatterjee finds it somewhat unsatisfying due to its complete lack of words that detract from a clearer understanding of the perspectives of its characters. Fittingly, this essay is accompanied by some illustrations from the comics and

graphic novels cited, which adds to the reader's understanding of the nuances of Chatterjee's critique.

Writing India Anew accomplishes many of its goals, showcasing the growing multiplicity and diversity of contemporary writing in English in India. Some missed opportunities remain however. In the Introduction, Sen and Roy acknowledge that several new voices are now heard from India's seven northeastern states, and mention writers like Temsula Ao, Mamng Dai, Anjum Hasan, and Siddhartha Deb as "articulat[ing] their compelling tropes of identity and violence while recuperating their distinctive culture and myths" (16). But apart from this brief reference to these new writers from India's under-represented and marginalised states, there is no more critical commentary on their work; the standard staples of Aravind Adiga, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh and of course Salman Rushdie continue to elicit and dominate critical attention to the exclusion of other writers. In addition, Nandana Dutta's "Indian English Women's Fiction and the Fascination of the Everyday" provides the solitary essay dedicated to women's writing, even as the essay on Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* by Peter Liebrechts remains bound within the diaspora genre. One would also have liked to see some attention to works that deal with the alarming environmental deterioration in India, evident in Anuradha Roy's *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* (2008) and Usha K.R.'s *Monkey-man* (2010), for example.

Targeted at the interested reader, students of literature and specialist researchers and academics, *Writing India Anew* does provide a timely overview of exciting new developments in Indian English fiction. Some chapters, more than others, are especially useful in drawing the contours of new disciplines like scifi and comic and graphic novels, and go a long way in contributing a new awareness and appreciation of nascent art forms in Indian English fiction. It makes a valuable contribution in these areas, while still remaining moored to traditional categories that could usefully be replaced by more productive and creative ones.

Works Cited

- Roy, Anuradha. *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*. London: MacLehose Press, 2008.
Usha K.R. *Monkey-man*. India: Penguin, 2010.
Varughese, Dawson E. *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

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