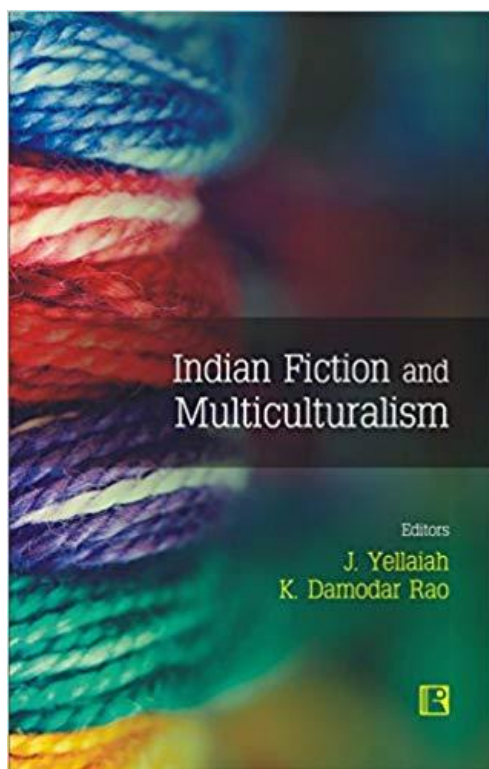


J. Yellaiah and K. Damodar Rao, eds. *Indian Fiction and Multiculturalism*. New Delhi: Rawat, 2018. 244 pp. ISBN 978-81-316-0957-6.



While discussing various conceptual issues linked with the term “multiculturalism,” Conrad William Watson argues that there are certain specific political, cultural, religious, economic, demographic and historical factors which influence nations to adopt different policies for achieving a multicultural set-up (16). Watson refers to nations like the UK, USA, Japan, France, China and India to exemplify the problems involved in implementing policies that apparently express the intent of achieving the goal of multiculturalism, but, in reality, they seek to oppose the philosophical foundation of multiculturalism. Thus, according to Watson, multiculturalism is a complex phenomenon, predicated on the idea of “liberalism” and “the principle of cultural relativism” (11-12). The Indian scenario in the context of multiculturalism presents a typical case where caste, religion and class intersect to complicate the perspective of multiculturalism. Centred on the history of multiculturalism in India, J. Yellaiah and K. Damodar

Rao's edited book, *Indian Fiction and Multiculturalism* (2018), makes an attempt to address issues that are intricately connected with questions of identity, equality, rights, along with political and religious dissent in a nation like India, which claims to be multicultural in its outlook. In fact, the book maps the various facets of multiculturalism in India by examining the trend of writing fiction. Yellaiah and Rao intend to situate the genre of Indian fiction within the context of multiculturalism, and in doing so, they analyse the responses of the renowned fiction writers to the policy of multiculturalism adopted by different governments in India. This perspective, indeed, is quite unique, as it seeks to establish a new discourse in the area of Indian English fiction.

The Introduction of the book provides a clear view of the notion of multiculturalism in India by tracing the trajectory of this notion since the ancient ages. The editors argue that the idea of multiculturalism "may be recent... but an ancient society like India has lived the experience for many centuries" (xi). Ancient Indian scriptures, including "the rationalistic *Charvaka* school besides *Tarka* (logic) and *Mimamsa* (deliberation and debate)" uphold the "spirit of enquiry," "tolerance" and debate (xii). These aspects, the editors observe, are embedded in the cultural fabric of India. In fact, the idea of "Indianness" has been explored by many Indian critics, and one particular characteristic of this idea is plurality (xiii). Due to the presence of "pluralistic tradition," the Indian culture is a "multicultural mosaic," which "celebrates differences" and is not "monotonous because it is heterogeneous" (xiii). Against this background of Indianness, the Indian fiction writers, according to the editors, have fashioned their narratives to accommodate the ideas that are reflective of the multicultural spirit of the country. Though this introduction is highly informative and scholarly, it does not take into consideration the aspect of globalisation, which had a big impact on the multicultural outlook of the nation. Indeed, the notion of Indianness has also undergone a significant change in the post-globalisation scenario. However, the impressive quality of this editors' essay is the range of critical references, which will probably enrich the young scholars working in the field of Indian fiction. Apart from this introductory essay, the book contains twenty-six essays: one essay discusses the question of nationalism in the context of multiculturalism, six essays are, in a sense, general critical pieces on the different aspects of Indian fiction, and the nineteen other essays are based on particular textual studies.

The only essay in the whole book that extensively deals with the aspect of nationalism and its connection with multiculturalism is P. Mallikarjuna Rao's "The Question of Nationalism: An Indian Response." This essay seeks to discuss nationalism from the perspective of resistance to colonisation. "Nationalism," as Mallikarjuna Rao states, "is one of the significant aspects of decolonization" and it operates "at two levels, one is political and the other is cultural" (2). By primarily centring the discussion on nationalism in the Indian context, Rao cites the

viewpoints of popular Indian critics to examine their ideas about anticolonial nationalism. In this essay, emphasis has also been placed on the concept of nativism. Rao refers to the criticism of G.N. Devy and Satchidanandan to argue that nativism must promote secularism, equality and “cultural plurality” (6). Among the six essays that are general articles on the issue of multiculturalism and its representation in Indian fiction, three articles are quite interesting. The authors of these three articles are: Syed Mujeebuddin, P. Shiv Kumar and M. Rajagopalachary. Syed Mujeebuddin’s essay, “Indian English Fiction and the Question of Indianness: A General Assessment” uses the title of Homi Bhabha’s book, *Nation and Narration* to divide the whole article into two sections. The first section deals with the idea of nation as a construct, and how this idea generates a sense of nationness. This section seeks to examine the notion of Indianness, citing meaningful references to the works of Partha Chatterjee, Benedict Anderson, Edward Said and Romila Thapar. The second section highlights the contribution of those Indian authors who have represented the essence of Indianness in their works. The topic of P. Shiv Kumar’s essay is stimulating, as it seeks to interrogate the popularity of the “NRI writers” (Shiv Kumar uses this term to refer to the Indian diasporic writers) vis-à-vis the Indian writers whose works do not belong to the category of diaspora literature. Shiv Kumar believes that the “NRI writers” have not represented the true Indian cultural scenario in their works, because their strategy has always been to produce an image of India that is appealing to the West (26-27). Citing numerous critical references, which are strong opinions of some renowned Indian critics, Shiv Kumar establishes his argument that the popularity of the “NRI writers” is not acceptable if the whole issue is seen from the perspective of representational politics. Though this essay contains a persuasive argument, the reviewer believes that making any generalised comment on the issue of popularity of “NRI writers” is problematic. Some Indian diasporic writers are obviously interested in pleasing the West, but there are many who have done enormous research on Indian culture in order to produce works that are commendable. In M. Rajagopalachary’s essay, the main focus is on the contemporary Indian English novels. This essay reviews the major Indian English novels that were published after Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, to emphasise the flexibility of the genre, which has fashioned itself according to the changing socio-cultural and economic scenario. Although the article presents a thorough review of the evolution of the genre of Indian English fiction, it does not consider the Indian English novels from the north-east India. Whether Indian English novels from the north-east India should be a part of the canon of Indian English novel or it should form a separate canon, is a matter of debate that could have been addressed by M. Rajagopalachary.

In the group of nineteen essays that deal with specific Indian novels, the reviewer finds eight articles quite appealing since they make sincere endeavour to establish new ways of reading the texts. The other articles, no doubt, are

interesting, as they critically engage with the representation of certain aspects of multiculturalism in popular Indian novels. For the sake of review, I shall focus on select eight essays that belong to this group. The authors of these eight essays are: G. Thirupathi Kumar, Mittapalli Rajeshwar, J. Yellaiah, G. Sujatha, Alessandro Monti, Christopher Rollason, P. Mallikarjuna Rao and Radhika Purohit (co-authors) and Palakurthy Dinakar. Two articles by G. Thirupathi Kumar are included in this book, but for the purpose of review, I am selecting one which has interested me the most, "Interrogating Tradition: A Study of Mulk Raj Anand's *Gauri*." It analyses Anand's novels in the light of his individual talent, seeking to question the tradition of Indian English novels. When read from the perspective of this questioning, Anand's novel, *Gauri*, according to Thirupathi Kumar, presents a glaring example of his departure from the tradition of representing Indian woman in fictional works. The critical piece by Mittapalli Rajeshwar argues for the need of discussing Indian English novels from the perspective of masculinity. To provide an idea about how masculinity functions in the Indian context, Rajeshwar discusses six Indian English novels to elucidate the "shaping and public performance" of masculinity inherent in the "psyche of the protagonists" of these novels (65). J. Yellaiah, who is one of the co-editors of this book, has written an essay on Arun Joshi's magnum opus, *The Last Labyrinth*. This novel, Yellaiah observes, is Kafkaesque in essence, as it predominantly engages the readers in a search, an aspect that is symbolically represented in the image of labyrinth (73). This search, which probably never ends, can be read from the point of view of anxiety and spiritual crisis experienced by modern Indian men (73-74). The subject of G. Sujatha's essay is unique in the sense that it deals with a novel meant for critiquing the Bollywood culture. By primarily focusing on I. Allan Sealy's novel, *Hero: A Fable*, Sujatha explores the narrative method employed by Sealy's to foreground the element of satire on Bollywood (85-86). Alessandro Monti's essay intends to study two novels: *Looking through the Glass* by Mukul Kesavan and *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, to consider the aspect of "travelling backwards in time" (115). These two novels, Monti observes, map the history of India's colonial past by critiquing the notion of "national or communal solidarity" (115). The focus of Christopher Rollason's critical piece is on Vikram Chandra's fictions. As a representative figure in the domain of Anglo-Indian writers, Rollason states that Chandra's fictions, particularly, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and *Love and Longing in Bombay* use different narrative strategies to allegorise the history and politics of India. This article also interrogates the issue of authentic representation of India, an aspect which assumes significance when the nationality of an Anglo-Indian writer is a matter of debate. Rollason urges the readers to seriously study the novels of Chandra as they contain his powerful "vision" (187). "Shattered Lives and Scarred Souls: Women in Partition Stories" is the title of P. Mallikarjuna Rao and Radhika Purohit's article. The main objective of this essay is to explain the plight of women during the partition of

India, situating the entire study in the context of partition stories written by authors like, Alok Bhalla, Jamila Hashmi and others. Palakurthy Dinakar's essay presents a brief survey of some Telugu Short fiction in English translation, examining them from the viewpoints of gender and patriarchy.

On the whole, J. Yellaiah and K. Damodar Rao's edited book seriously engages with different facets of multiculturalism and its representation in Indian fiction. As the domain of Indian fiction happens to be very big, it is practically impossible to explore all the possible traces of multicultural spirit in the genre. The editors must be given the credit for making a good selection of essays that are well-informed and stimulating studies on the subject. However, any process of selection also includes exclusion, which often is the outcome of policy decisions. The book could have included essays on Indian fiction from the north-east, Kashmiri fiction, Call Centre novels, Corporate novels, Urban fiction and many other varieties of Indian fiction that have prominently figured in the canon during the post-globalisation period. These new varieties of fictions offer an interesting perspective on the interface of multiculturalism and globalisation. With regard to the structure and planning of the book, I would like to mention that the essays (twenty-six in number) could have been placed under different sections bearing appropriate references to the themes and contexts of the essays. This kind of structuring works as a kind of guide for the readers who are often eager to study essays on specific themes. In spite of these omissions, J. Yellaiah and K. Damodar Rao's edited book will appeal to the critical sensibility of Indian academia. Most of the essays in this edited volume provide ample scope for rethinking the concept of multiculturalism from new perspectives. The author and subject index placed at the end of the book are really helpful, and it reflects the hard work involved in the process of editing a book. This book will genuinely inspire students, young scholars and teachers to engage with the notion of multiculturalism and its impact on the Indian fiction.

Works Cited

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