

Lisa Lau and Om Prakash Dwivedi, *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English*. Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 131 pp. ISBN 978-1-137-40155-7.

In her excellent introduction to *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English*, Lau writes that “Re-Orientalism theory takes as its starting point the salient fact that by the 21st century, the East has increasingly seized the power of representation” (2). Indeed, representation and the position of “the East” (following Lau and Dwivedi) is a core narrative of this co-authored volume. What Lau goes on to highlight however, is that “this representation is not exempt from being partial and skewed, and, moreover, it is still Western-centric and postcolonial” (2). The analyses of the novels in this book that follow Lau’s introductory chapter talk to this particular manifestation of representation and in doing so move through a series of interests: the “unreliable narrator” (Lau), “reverse Orientalism” (Lau), “urban India” (Dwivedi) and “commodification” (Dwivedi). These particular interests are offered as cultural products of authors “who pioneer new paradigms, and who create new methods of re-Orientalising” (5).

Lau explores the “unreliable narrator” through Thayil’s *Narcopolis*, Sharma’s *An Obedient Father*, Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and Hamid’s *How To Get Filthy Rich In Rising Asia*. In each case, the manifestation of the narrator is analysed, resulting in a lucid and compelling argument for the rise of the “unreliable narrator” in South Asian literary fiction in English. In her suggestion that the “Dark India” of *Narcopolis*, the criminal world of Ram Karan in *An Obedient Father*, Balram’s dubious state of mind in *The White Tiger* and the satire of Hamid’s third novel, each constitute, in turn a narrator that disrupts the “over-cozy relationship” (Lau and Dwivedi 29) with his/her reader. In the “reverse Orientalism” chapter, Lau looks at two novels: Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Roy’s *The Folded Earth*. Here are two novels with two very different approaches to the creation of their protagonists which however, do share a common goal; “to circumvent some of the problematic issues of representation” (56). In her discussion of *The Folded Earth*, Lau explores how Roy has forgone the tradition of exoticising India (despite the novel’s setting in the Himalayan foothills) and how Roy has taken the unusual step of casting the female protagonist, Maya – described by Lau as “un-Indian” – as a free-willed woman, unshackled in her discovery of new territories and freedoms. The control that Roy’s protagonist has over the reader is a pleasant one, given that Maya usurps tradition in radical yet, emancipatory ways, while Hamid’s protagonist of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is otherwise. As Lau writes: “Hamid pushes this [the controlling first-person narrator] to the limits, completely

overwhelming the reader – and the other characters – with the extent of the control exerted, and overtly so by his narrator” (64).

Dwivedi’s chapter on “urban India” traces how cities such as Mumbai, New Delhi and others have been projected in contemporary post-millennial Indian fiction in English and uses Suri’s *The City of Devi* and Batabyal’s *The Price You Pay* to explore this particular aspect of Indian writing in English. Dwivedi suggests that the urban centres explored in this body of writing set up sites of struggle, mimicry and poverty and therefore, interrogate India’s postcoloniality anew, in turn, treading fertile ground of the re-Orientalist paradigm. Dwivedi’s second chapter is something of a departure from his first chapter in this co-authored volume. Where Lau’s chapters follow through both in terms of theory and textual examination, Dwivedi’s chapters are not so connected. He does undeniably trace the re-Orientalist paradigm through both of his chapters even given that his second chapter turns away from textual analysis to consider “the material conditions of production and consumption of postcolonial Indian writing in English (IWE)” (100). Offering a historical overview of literature’s “marketplace,” Dwivedi surveys the production of Indian writing in English and its receptions both domestically and abroad. He returns to some of the preoccupations of Lau’s chapters by considering how these new forms – manifest in style, genre or voice – play to global readerships. He writes:

Representations of dysfunctional law and order, interplays of caste and class, sexual overdoses, depictions of communal tensions, and the failures of India’s acclaimed modernity and its nationalism are some of the recurring themes in contemporary IWE, and this kind of epistemological discourse seems to suit the taste of global readers. (103)

Dwivedi goes on to discuss how contemporary Indian writing in English interfaces regularly with media, promotional events, the securing of the “right” literary agent and significantly, with money. These aspects of the commodification of contemporary Indian writing in English as well as the impact of literary festivals are covered in Dwivedi’s contribution to this volume. He concludes that “the production and consumption of IWE take place within a distinctly postcolonial framework, and clearly re-Orientalism and Orientalism permeate this industry at all levels, and in no insignificant degrees” (118).

Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English is a timely piece of work. Not only does it survey key fiction texts which speak to and of post-millennial India, it raises theoretical issues of representation amidst the shifting landscape of writing and publishing in India, and the reception of such published material in the West. This theoretical positioning is the book’s most valuable component and it works at its best when the analyses of the texts and the publishing/literary scene connect back to this paradigm. This connection happens for the most part, although chapter 4 does not articulate this

connection as clearly as it could do. It is refreshing to read a volume which discusses very recently published texts but without the imposing postcolonial paradigm as the vehicle to access and analyse the fiction. It is equally refreshing to read a volume which chooses to group texts together in the way it is done here – both thematically and stylistically. Lau’s “unreliable narrator” chapter is particularly noteworthy in its discussion of diametrically-opposed texts through a common textual strategy and is written in an innovative and creative manner. As Indian writing in English continues to evolve in response to a plethora of stimuli, challenges and motivating factors, it will be interesting to see how the role of re-Orientalism evolves alongside, moreover, to see how India represents itself in its fiction in English as well as how it negotiates with others on how they choose to represent the same.

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