

M. Rajagopalachary and K. Damodar Rao, eds. *Postcolonial Indian English Fiction: Decentering the Nation*. Jaipur: Rawat Publishers, 2016. 232 pp. ISBN 978-81-316-0758-9.

Re-visiting or re-contextualisation of India by Indian Writers in English has offered exciting possibilities in fiction since the 1980s. India is a huge construct in which each segment of the society feels it owns the totality in much the same way as the whole structure assimilates and celebrates plurality authenticating different marginalised sections and their narratives, the postcolonial way. Of late, these voices from margins and their narratives have become integral to the Indian English Fiction scene. Indian English writing of the two decades spanning the turn of the millennium, i.e. 1990-2010, has deservedly received much critical attention in the recent past. However, more than five years have passed after the time frame, and from this vantage point, it is now possible to make an effort to understand fully the paradigmatic shift that distinguishes the corpus of fiction from the literature written in the earlier decades. *Postcolonial Indian English Fiction: Decentering the Nation*, a volume of twenty-six essays edited by M. Rajagopalachary and K. Damodar Rao, is a remarkable effort in that direction.

The volume germinates from a 2008 conference on “Re-presentation of History in Recent Indian English Fiction,” an issue scholars have been extensively discussing for quite some time. The title of the conference is significant: in the Indian academia, scholars working in the department of English in various universities were the first to recognise, at the turn of the millennium, the historicity of the text and the textuality of history. The Introduction raises many questions and leaves trails open for researchers. The new episteme of Indian English writing after Rushdie and Globalisation, the editors argue, is characterised by a re-interrogation of established narratives of history and constructions of the nation. This epistemic shift separates the corpus of post-Rushdie Indian English fiction from their predecessors. The shift is best exemplified, as A.S. Dasan argues in his essay, by Anita Desai’s shift from *In Custody* (1986) to *Baumgartner’s Bombay* (1988): a move away from narratives of inwardness to the representation of culture and identity. The book is almost successful in understanding this general course.

Since the 1990s, an increased insistence on the importance of the comparative study of the colonial past and the trajectory of nationalism marks the fields of humanities and the social sciences. There are urgent historical reasons for such a turn to Partition Studies: after the violence of the nineteen eighties and the nineties, scholars began to revisit India’s past in a bid to understand the present. K. Damodar Rao’s informative essay on Ghosh’s *Shadow Lines* uses the pre-eighties critical apparatus when he mentions “violence

of the religious or communal variety” that has plagued Indian history for a long time. Nationalist historiography viewed the birth of the nation as the culmination of the political developments in colonial India, where the nationalist and “communal” forces fight between them the battle of good and evil. I put “communal” in quotes as Gyanendra Pandey has interrogated and deconstructed the commonsense term in his book *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (OUP, 2010). At the turn of the millennium, we have witnessed a very large output in historical and social scientific literature, the birth of the Subaltern Studies School, the Women’s Movement and the feminist presses such as Kali for Women, Stree and Zuban books. One needs to remember that if the cumbrous nationalist ideology of the Hindu right looks so outdated today, it is for the most part due to the unremitting struggle of women scholar-activists. *Women’s Studies in India: A Journey of 25 Years* (also from Rawat, 2014) and many other books document this long struggle. In the “Introduction,” the editors of this volume draw the reader’s attention to the fictional reinterpretation of (a nationalist) history different from the pre-nineties literature and rightly point out that this project is similar to the work of the Subaltern Studies school. Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* is the paradigmatic text, as it blurs the border between creative writing and research, fiction, history and anthropology. It is significant that Partha Chatterjee translated Ghosh’s germinal non-fiction “The Imam and the Indian” (*Granta* Travel issue 1991) in Bengali for the *Baromash* magazine in the same year. The editors might find it suitable to explore the mechanisms of this shared design in the next edition, and connect it to the Women’s Movement too.

The turn of the millennium literature, the editors acknowledge, is distinct in its recognition of history as a series of constructions and representations. As the postmodernist historian Alan Munslow (1997) argues, the past is available never in its pristine, truthful form but only in interpretations. Once we accept history-writing as narration, we do not aim at scrutinising the positivist-empirical “faithfulness” of these narratives. Salman Rushdie is given the pride of place for spearheading the trend: five articles in this book focus on his works such as *Midnight’s Children*, *Shame* and *Shalimar the Clown* while some more essays deal with his contribution to the new wave of Indian English Writing. *Midnight’s Children*, the introduction argues, is the mother text that problematises nationalist historiography and the self-fashioning of the postcolonial nation during the governments of Nehru and Indira Gandhi. Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Shashi Tharoor, Anita Desai, Mukul Kesavan, Geetha Hariharan and others have attempted to understand and interpret many turns and bends in the course of India’s history – they range from Partition to the Bangladesh liberation war, and Operation Blue Star to post-Babri Masjid riots. Partition is one such watershed which still baffles the researchers, and every year some memoirs, survivor interviews, scholarly works, accompanied by excellent fiction

in English and translation from vernaculars are routinely published. Even awful film directors want to get some recognition by making cheapjack movies on Partition. The volume has some very informative essays on the authors who have challenged established narratives and offered their reconstructions of these momentous events in our history. P. Shailaja and M. Sridhar's essay on the fictional representation of the Indo-Fijian community shows how the diasporic self is shaped and re-shaped as the cross-section of history and memory from the nineteenth-century immigrant "girmityas" to the new-generation Indo-Fijians who are presently compelled to transmigrate.

However, the volume, for the most part, stays inside an already charted territory. The article by H. Kalpana carries assumptions but tantalisingly touches a few issues that should have fulfilled the volume's promises: an interrogation of the timeless "Indian" identity propagated in the writing of authors such as Raja Rao and R.K. Narayan, shifts in the authorial perspective at the turn of the millennium; the need to focus on language, and an increasingly interdisciplinary approach to understand issues such as colonial modernity, subject-formation, community politics and the national imaginary. It is not clear how a collection on "decentering the nation" can aim to address the topic without any reference to the indigenous line of historical and sociological research since the 1980s. The corpus of this tradition is quite respectable and enormous: a few names that come readily to mind are Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Spivak, Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, Gyanendra Pandey, G.D. Gaonkar, Arjun Appadurai, Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Veena Das, Saurabh Dube, Ishita Banerjee, Leela Gandhi, Akhil Gupta, Mushirul Hasan, Sudipta Kaviraj, Shahid Amin, Bhikhu Parekh, Lata Mani and many more. The volume would have benefitted from the insight generated by this tradition.

What is strange about the book's approach is that it raises some very promising questions, but the anticipation is thwarted by the essays that are either a history of Indian English Fiction 1990-2010 (useful for undergraduates) and thematic analysis of individual texts in the usual paraphrase mode. B. Krishnaiyah and M. Rajagopalachary's article explores the "re-charting of history" in Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. Their assumption of the turn of the millennium epistemic shift seems to be shared by most of the contributors:

However, the treatment of history is not new in the history of Indian English Fiction. But, what sets them apart from the earlier writers is their ripeness in selection and treatment of theme, manipulation of point of view, use of innovative methods of narration, magic realism and linguistic improvisation such as hybridity, chutnification of language, intertextuality.
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The point of departure for a study on the millennial epistemic shift in Indian fiction in English should be the position that fictional narratives are re/constructions of the past, attempted in succeeding decades, *from different power/knowledge configurations*. The textuality and politics of these narratives demand our attention. As Spivak says, “we are, as we privilege practice, produced within an institution” (*The Post-Colonial Critic* 2). Discourse analysis and not the usual paraphrase mode can help the critic understand why the earlier fiction, like one’s mother’s wedding sarees and jewellery, unmistakably belongs not only to a different time but also to a different discursive matrix. Even contending narratives as diverse as the colonialist text and the nationalist response can base their assumptions on the same deep-seated cultural frames of reference. Chaman Nahal’s fiction is different from Rushdie’s not only because of “ripeness” or magic realism but due to their representational politics which ensue from different discursive matrices. It is worthwhile to explore these frames that have come to be dismantled in our time, and the newer ones that have been set up.

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