Introduction: Literary Pasts, Presents, and Futures

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Literary histories can seem self-evident, tracing a linear development from "the beginning" straight through to the present day. It is thus that one might imagine a history of the Indian novel in English, which by most accounts – indeed, comparatively within the larger span of Indian literature – is a brief one. This history would begin with the nineteenth-century indigenous elite's first dabblings in the writing of English, influenced by colonial education and the allure of modernity and driven by reformist impulses. It might then take us to the movement known as "progressive writing" in the early twentieth century, when the novel was put to the service of a range of nationalist visions, and then to the early postcolonial decades, a period when English novels and their *bhasha* (vernacular-language[1]) counterparts went in a number of directions. It would then linger a bit at 1981, when, it is said, the Indian English novel finally found form with the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Such a history would trace Rushdie's impact on the genre during the 1980s and 1990s and contrast the more commercial forms of contemporary Indian English writing since 2000 to the literary heavyweights of the preceding generation.

The current volume seeks to complicate, enrich, and at times challenge this conventional account. The straightforward historical trajectory, based in three formative periods that cover around a century, mark the Indian English novel at three definitive moments: its emergence, its "realist" phase, and its "modernist" one. Each period can be understood as a response to – even critique of – the former; at the same time, because of the global status and marketability of the third phase, its significance might be taken to have vastly surpassed those of the other two. However, this narrative has significant limitations. First, *A History of the Indian Novel in English* suggests that what happens to the novel *between* and *within* these supposedly distinct eras is as important as the eras themselves. Second, it argues that a solely historical approach has the potential to reduce authors to their

explicit political positions or to the ethos of their age, thus precluding attention to literary form – to questions of genre, narrative, and literary aesthetics – and to the multiple ways in which literature *means*. A straightforward historical narrative also potentially occludes the question of the contemporary novel, which, the following chapters variously suggest, is not necessarily a continuation of or development on the Rushdie generation; modernism is not always surpassed by postmodernism; literary histories might not always unfold linearly. And, lastly and perhaps most importantly, this book demonstrates that the story of the Anglophone novel cannot be isolated and told as if it were a self-contained history. Rather, the English novel developed in relation to the rich history of the Indian novel – and indeed Indian literature more generally – in other languages. This runs counter to some conventional critical wisdom, which uses the current global importance of English to make a case for the inherent distinction of the English novel in India.

These are distinct arguments but, I believe, not unrelated. They all serve to call into question the historical narrative, along with our conventional tools for generating literary histories in the first place. They draw attention to how traditions not only *develop* but intersect and interact and gain richness and meaning from contemporaneous trends and transhistorical forms, rather than only as revisions of their own pasts. They compel us to focus on genre, form, and aesthetics rather than reduce literary works to expressions of their age. And by focusing on the contemporary *qua* contemporary – rather than as a continuation of an already-existing narrative – they allow us to challenge the teleology of literary history, to refuse to be contained by the logic of progressive time.

But linear histories are compelling things. This is especially true in the Indian context, in which the various literary traditions require specialist knowledge (or, at the very least, reading ability), lending the practice of literary history a certain practicality that comparative studies lack. The particular paradigms of postcolonial theory have also done much to determine what Indian literature – and the Indian novel in particular – *is* as an object. The post-1980s Indian novel's own investment in the hold of the (colonial, national) past on India's present has affected our readings of the entire genre to such a degree that the field of Indian novel studies is almost entirely dependent on a critique of historicity. While this approach has been useful in theorizing the relationship between literature and history in a broad sense, it has also resulted in some significant blind spots and erasures in terms of the texts it foregrounds and the themes it makes legible.[2] This historical framework has also meant that form and aesthetics

have been undervalued, and the field has at times neared a straightforward historical determinism or literary sociology.

The following introduction thus proceeds in five sections. The first sketches out a chronology of the Indian novel in English based on the progression of the subgenre from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century and presents the volume's chapters in relation to this chronology. The second, third, and fourth sections suggest ways of enriching this history through attention to the interactions between the Indian English novel and the bhashas; a renewed focus on literary form; and a consideration of the particular ontology of the contemporary. These sections attempt to foreground some themes that appear throughout the chapters – to draw them together and to suggest alternative groupings than those based solely on historical progress. Lastly, the final section collects some notes on terminology and explains the structure of the book.

A History of the Indian Novel in English

The first three chapters of this volume trace some of the first instances of the Indian novel in English, from Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), discussed by Supriya Chaudhuri in Chapter 1; Lal Behari Day's *Bengal Peasant Life* (1878), analyzed by Satya P. Mohanty in Chapter 2; and Krupabai Satthianadhan's *Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life* (1887–88) and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" (1905), which are only two of the range of women's texts Barnita Bagchi reads in Chapter 3. All of these works – as discussed further in this introduction – were highly experimental and emerged in dialogue with their vernacular contemporaries. Hossain's text – more a novella than a novel – takes us into the twentieth century, but the notable shift in the thematics of the Indian novel, to which both Snehal Shingavi and Rumina Sethi alert us in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively, takes place with nationalism and the rise of the "progressive" and "Gandhian" novels about fifteen years later as subgenres of the nationalist novel more generally. Anglophone authors Ahmed Ali, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao were central to these movements, and it was in this realist turn, which consolidated some of the disparate trends of the nineteenth century, that, many say, the Indian English novel was truly born. This is also when the gaze of Anglophone writers (as of nationalist leaders: Mohandas K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mohammad Ali Jinnah all studied law in England) turned westward, with both Ahmed Ali and Mulk Raj Anand gaining patronage from E. M. Forster and spending several years in London

(D. Anderson, 81–2; M. Anand, *Conversations*); Raja Rao wrote his "Gandhian" novel *Kanthapura* in France (R. Rao, "Entering" 537).

Yet these writers were also contemporaneous with the flourishing of high modernism in the west, and as Vinay Dharwadker suggests in Chapter 6, the experimental realism of Anand and other progressive writers might also be seen as a version of modernism defined by a particular kind of cultural critique founded in anti-colonial nationalism. Indeed, we can follow this line of thinking beyond independence as well, as the Indian English novel goes in a number of experimental directions. The event of Partition, for instance, as Ananya Jahanara Kabir argues in Chapter 7, marks the novel in profound ways both in terms of new themes but also formally, resulting in new aesthetic modes that last until the end of the twentieth century. The legacy of Partition remains immanent in the domestic novels that Suvir Kaul discusses in Chapter 8, in which Muslim writers struggle to reconcile the harsh realities of postcolonial Muslim life with the urgent need for religious reform, especially around women's rights. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande also wrote their early works during this period, focusing on gender and women's subordination within the household. But overall, these individual authors never cohered into a movement or notable trend. While they were and continue to be well-known, in Indian literary studies they remain largely in the shadow of contemporary bhasha novelists, such as Phaniswarnath Renu, author of *Maila Anchal* (Hindi, 1954), Srilal Shukla, of *Raag Darbari* (Hindi, 1968), U. R. Anantha Murthy, author of *Samskara* (Kannada, 1965), Sunil Gangopadhyay, Mahasweta Devi, and others. In Chapter 9, Rashmi Sadana discusses the politics and aesthetics of translation, which, she argues, was an essential mediating lens through which these bhasha writers gained national exposure.

If Partition marks the incipient moment of postcolonial disillusion – the beginning of the end of nationalist idealism – then Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency in 1975 represents its death knell. It was Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) that gave form to this sense of disillusion, changing the course of the Indian English novel from that point forward. *Midnight's Children* was marked by a profound critique of the dominant nationalist narrative, emphasizing the constructedness and precarity not only of India's nationalist history but of history itself. All of Rushdie's novels are characterized by a resistance to metanarratives, a playful textuality, and a critique of the realist fallacy. Thus started a new phase in the Indian novel, which has alternatively been called "modernist" (Walkowitz), "postmodernist" (Afzal-Khan; Bhabha, "How Newness";

Hutcheon 92; M. Mukherjee, "Anxiety" 2609), and properly "postcolonial" (Bahri; McLeod; During 46; Tiffin). As Arundhati Roy quoted in her epigraph to *The God of Small Things* in 1997, summarizing the literary ethos of the 1980s and 1990s: "Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one."[3]

Chapters 10, 11, and 12 consider the Emergency from refreshingly original perspectives; rather than focusing solely on Salman Rushdie's representation of the event in *Midnight's Children* – as the brilliantly termed "sperectomy: the draining-out of hope" (503) – Ayelet Ben-Yishai and Eitan Bar-Yosef consider Emergency through the fictional and nonfictional writings of Nayantara Sahgal; and Eli Park Sorensen situates Rohinton Mistry's Emergency writings within Mistry's larger interest in form and totality. Vijay Mishra takes a unique perspective on Rushdie's works themselves through a formal reading of their aural quality, which resists the allure of national allegory that underlies so much Rushdie criticism. It is a similar resistance to allegory that animates the next three chapters as well: in Chapter 13 Saikat Majumdar illuminates an interest in privacy and an aesthetic of the ordinary in the writings of Shashi Deshpande and Sunetra Gupta; Kavita Daiya reorients critical attention from the big "P" of Politics to small acts of intimacy in Chapter 14; and in Chapter 15, Alex Tickell explicitly engages the gap between nationalist historiography and the lived histories of India's present in his analysis of the meta-historical novels of Amitav Ghosh, Githa Hariharan, and M. G. Vassanji.

The remaining chapters bring these various questions to the present, approaching the contentious question of contemporaneity in the new Indian novel from a range of perspectives. In Chapters 16 and 17, respectively, Rukmini Bhaya Nair is interested in linguistic experiment and Mrinalini Chakravorty in aesthetic innovation. In Chapter 18, Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee sees the contemporary novel as struggling to represent the increasing violence neoliberalism wages on the poor; and Shameem Black suggests, in Chapter 19, that the novel might be engaged in imagining a "post-humanitarian" ethical space that exposes the complicity between the discourse of human rights and the very violence it was built to condemn. The next five chapters consider different forms of novel-writing that have emerged over the last decade: Priya Joshi on pulp fiction (Chapter 20), E. Dawson Varughese on "chick lit" (Chapter 21), Tabish Khair and Sébastien Doubinsky on fantasy fiction (Chapter 22), Corey K. Creekmur on the graphic novel (Chapter 23), and Sangita Gopal on "filmi lit" – or novels written with a film adaptation and screenplay

already in mind (Chapter 24). The final chapter by Toral Gajarawala considers the question of caste in relation to the contemporary, offering a hypothesis on the new forms that political critique will take once the older aesthetics of literary radicalism give way to the more ambivalent politics of ressentiment.

These twenty-five chapters tell a convincing story of the development of the Indian novel in English from the late nineteenth century until the present. But they do a good deal more. The discussion that follows offers some language to begin to flesh out the theoretical questions that the timeline of literary history might unintentionally preclude.

Bhasha Modernities and the Question of English

Across the board, the Indian novel had its more spectacular start in the bhashas – Malayalam, Odia, Marathi, Bengali – than in English. English was of course a colonial language, brought to India by colonial education and instituted by means of a deliberate policy, as articulated most famously by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835, "to form a class who may be interpreters between [the British] and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" (237). With literacy rates in any language at 3.5 percent in 1881 (P. Joshi, *In Another* 42 and 268–9, n. 13), and even lower in English, one can see how tracing the rise of the English novel might simply offer a highly selective genealogy of India's native elite.

Yet in fact, although Governor-General Lord Bentnick did largely adopt Macaulay's policy as outlined in his Minute on Indian Education, the actual process of "forming" this class was not as seamless as he might have imagined it. For one, the question of whether or not to structure education in English or the vernacular languages was not one that all colonial officials agreed on. Although English was seen as a means to wrench native elites out of what were seen as their inherent cultural limitations, some officials saw vernacular education as better equipped to transmit the moral learning that was part of the civilizing mission. Indeed, India's modern written bhashas emerged in the very crucible of colonial modernity, and thus any false opposition between India's "authentic" or untouched bhashas and the colonial language of English is in fact inaccurate. In this way, *both* English and the vernaculars were the site of the consolidation of colonial power – and the site of potential resistance as well. An 1887 Minute from the governor-general warned that "the general extension in India of secular education has, in some measure, resulted

in the growth of tendencies unfavourable to discipline and favourable to irreverence in the rising generation"; the Christian Vernacular Education Society for India used this as evidence that English education was potentially dangerous to British interests.[4] However, the bhashas were the site of significant projects of reform and dissent as well. In fact, what we see across nineteenth-century bhasha writings is a profound sense of literary experiment, evident in the writings of Bengali author Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, whom Sudipta Kaviraj reads as reflective of the "unhappy consciousness" characteristic of colonial modernity (*Unhappy*), and in the epistemic experiments of Fakir Mohan Senapati in his Odia novel *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, to name only two. Bilingual writers characterize these ambivalences more literally in their movements between languages, as seen with bilingual poets Michael Madhusadan Dutt (R. Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen* 86–126) and Henry Derozio (R. Chaudhuri, "Politics"; and "Cutlets") and in the embattled writings of Toru Dutt, Krupabai Satthianadan, and Rabindranath Tagore. As the range of these early authors shows, neither writing in English nor in the vernaculars expressed straightforward political or ideological alliance with colonialism but rather evinced a complex interrogation of the contradictions of colonial modernity itself (A. Chaudhuri, "Modernity" xix).

Thus early English fiction did not emerge in a distinct sphere of its own but rather in relation to and in dialogue with innovations in the bhashas that were taking place at the same time (M. Mukherjee, *Perishable* 9). Often, individual authors wrote in both English and one of the bhashas. Thus, less than a decade after publishing his one and only novel in English, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay founded a Bengali magazine, *Bangadarshan*, in which he hoped to invigorate the Bengali language in public life, where English had largely found sway.[5] Likewise, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote both in Bengali and English – and Toru Dutt in French as well. These examples show how the modernity that emerged in India was always already polyglossic. Thus we not only dispel associations of foreignness attached to the nineteenth-century Anglophone novel in India but also see how an analysis of the English novel cannot be separated from accounts of colonial modernity across languages.

Interchange among the various linguistic traditions continued beyond the nineteenth century. While early twentieth-century Anglophone writers Mulk Raj Anand, Ahmed Ali, and Raja Rao are often lumped together as nationalist/socialist writers who wrote in English, this grouping provides only a partial understanding of the richness of literary cultures in this

period. Anand and Ali were both affiliated with the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA), which brought together authors writing in a range of languages, including Sajjad Zaheer in Urdu and Premchand in Hindi.[6] As Snehal Shingavi discusses in Chapter 4, Ahmed Ali wrote in both Urdu and English and was involved equally in literary debates with his fellow Urdu writers as he was with other English writers.[7] Raja Rao, too, wrote in Kannada and French along with English (Amur; Jamkhandi 133). Seeing these authors as essentially linked just because they wrote in English overlooks the richness of engagement of both figures in their respective languages. In the postcolonial decades as well, the "existentialist" (P. Gupta 53) Hindi writer Nirmal Verma spent most of his life abroad, often set his works in Europe, and has admitted significant influence from western literature (P. Gupta 53) rather than from the Hindi novel. Kiran Nagarkar's first novel, *Saat Sakkam Trechalis* (*Seven Sixes are Forty-Three*, 1974) was written in Marathi, and only later did he switch to English (Lukmani xii). Partition literature, as discussed in Chapter 7 by Ananya Jahanara Kabir, also crossed linguistic boundaries; a novelist such as Qurratulain Hyder crafted her own English translation of her Urdu *Aag ka darya*, demonstrating engagement in both languages' literary and public spheres. And, as Rashmi Sadana's chapter shows, some of the most significant works of this period were written in the bhashas and disseminated in translation.

These myriad, interlingual histories tend to get obscured in contemporary literary criticism, which often privileges English as a distinct and more cosmopolitan language than any of the bhashas. This is in part because of the slippage between English and cosmopolitanism advanced by many English-language novels themselves: for instance, in the "altered vision" (5) with which Aadam Aziz returns to Kashmir in the first pages of *Midnight's Children*, a perspective that makes him "[resolve] never again to kiss earth for any god or man" (4). From this moment onward in the Indian novel, travel (and English) is cast as broadening and perspective-changing, constructing, in turn, staying home (and, consequently, writing in the bhashas) as myopic and provincial. Rushdie stated this view more directly in his Foreword to *Mirrorwork*, an anthology of writing from India from 1947–1997 that he edited, in which he included only one piece – out of thirty-two – in translation; the others were all originally written in English:

> The prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – created in this period by Indian writers *working in English*, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in

> the 16 "official languages" of India, the so-called "vernacular languages," during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, "Indo-Anglian" literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. (Rushdie, Introduction viii, emphasis in original)

While celebrating English over the bhashas, Rushdie simultaneously asserts its marginality, as by putting the phrase "official languages" in quotes, he suggests at least to the book's non-Indian readership that English is only recognized "unofficially" by the Indian state and thus that writing in English carries an inherently non-nationalist or cosmopolitan imaginary.[8] From this perspective, English is not only global but inherently progressive; this is not the progressivism of social realism but a righteous refusal of the narrowness of nationalist belonging.

The backlash to comments like Rushdie's from academics in India "defending" the vernaculars led to a further entrenchment of the national-cosmopolitan agon. Path-breaking literary critic Meenakshi Mukherjee – who worked at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi and then at the University of Hyderabad until her death in 2009 – coolly suggested that "in the English texts of India there may be a greater pull towards a homogenisation of reality, an essentialising of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours, the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community" ("Anxiety" 2608). Yet those are precisely the authors that are more widely read, "interviewed . . . [and] invited for readings" (M. Mukherjee, "Local" 51).[9] In response, several English authors took increasingly entrenched positions in defense of English. Vikram Chandra, for instance, argued that Indian critics such as Mukherjee, whom he dubbed "commissars" and "self-proclaimed guardians of purity and Indianness," have constructed a "cult of authenticity" around a nationalist fantasy of Indianness ("Cult").[10] Through this type of polarizing debate, the stakes of the question rose dramatically, crescendoing into rigid – and ultimately useless – binaries: authentic versus traitorous; *desi* versus *pardesi*. Backed by the very material realities of market inequality and access to international celebrity-status, the English writers who "won" the debates framed their position in such a way that increasingly, any call for attention to vernacular writing was cast as backward, provincial, and an expression of a knee-jerk nationalism.

This valuation of Indian English writers over bhasha writing was only strengthened by an increasing interest in the west – the place where, until

very recently, literary fortunes were made – in a certain type of writing coming from India, often marked by an easily digestible blend of exotic difference and legibility (in short, different but not *too* different): "otherness [that] is validated only if it fits into certain pre-established paradigms of expectation: a magic realist ambience, mystical spice women, small town eccentrics, the saga of women's suffering, folk tale elements blended into contemporary narrative, so on and so forth" (M. Mukherjee, "Local" 52). This contradictory desire was encapsulated in a June 1997 issue of *The New Yorker* that featured eleven of "India's leading novelists" (Buford 6) – all writing in English – who, the article's author reported, represented, "in a hopeful, even exhilarating way: the shape of a future Indian literature" (8). In the photograph of the eleven writers, they are all dressed in shades of black, suggesting a kind of staged hipness; yet despite this well-meaning attempt to convey the modernity and futurity of the Indian novel, the cover of the issue still relied on tired, Orientalist imagery for representing India, showing the surprise on the intrepid, white explorers' faces when they find a statue of Ganesh not staring ahead with his usual composure but reading – and reading fiction, to boot (see Figure 1). English – in particular the "Indian English" celebrated so enthusiastically by the article – provides precisely that mix of difference and legibility that makes Indian writing marketable to an audience unfamiliar with India. This is not the "small-town tedium, frustrated youth, couples incapable of communicating with each other, the impossible gulfs between aspiration and reality" of the Hindi novel *Raag Darbari* – the "India that the West does not like to think about for too long" – but "the florid, sensuous, inclusive, multicultural world of the post-Rushdie, postcolonial novel," through which "the West can settle down to contemplate, not India, but its latest reinterpretation of itself" (Orsini, "India" 88).[11] One might say that Chinua Achebe's determination that the African writer "should aim at fashioning an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience" (63) was commodified and neatly assimilated in this period into a particularly American multiculturalism that values the exotic only when it appears in faintly familiar garb.

And yet, although the ripple-effect of these debates continues to affect not only what gets published but what authors write in the first place, it appears that the relationship of English to the vernaculars in contemporary writing has begun to shift in the last decade or so. For one, today's authors seem to be more attentive to the political – if not expressly historical – relationship between English and the vernaculars, now that the euphoria surrounding cosmopolitanism's children has somewhat died