

Introduction

As the evening rolled on, [Faiz] and Neruda recited to one another. The translators did their bit and translated from Spanish into English and Urdu into English but as the night wore on both poets dispensed with the translators. [Faiz] was reciting to Neruda in Urdu and he was reciting to [Faiz] in Spanish and I think both of them understood one another perfectly.

(Hashmi, Hashmi, and Razvi 2011)

One night in 1962, the renowned Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz found himself in an impromptu transnational *mushā'irah*, or poetry recitation, with the Chilean poet and future Nobel Prize laureate Pablo Neruda. According to a recollection of the event by Faiz's daughters, the exchange produced an almost mystical form of "perfect understanding."¹

Forty years later, the renowned Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid would have his own encounter with Neruda, this time through a visit to the dead poet's home in Valparaíso, Chile. It is this imagined confrontation that frames the personal crisis and political awakening of his protagonist, Changez, at the climax of Hamid's novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2006). Like Faiz's dream of perfect understanding, Hamid uses Neruda's ghostly presence to offer a glimpse of an alternative vision of world literature that could have connected places like Pakistan and Chile outside the mediation of English or the economic interests of its empires. It is a vision that is fulfilled by Hamid's intertextual gesture, even as it is seemingly betrayed by the language of its composition.

This book traces an unexpected journey to Latin America, a journey through which we can understand the multilingual world that both haunts and continues to shape South Asian literature in English. The cohort of authors that moved between these regions includes Latin American Nobel laureates Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz. They are joined by Booker Prize notables Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Mohammed Hanif, and Mohsin

Hamid. These globally familiar names accompany a host of literary and cultural figures who range from foundational writers of the 1960s like Geeta Kapur and Zulfikar Ghosh to up-and-coming authors like Tanuj Solanki. In their explorations of this historically unprecedented geographic connection, these authors formed the vanguard of what they dreamed might be a new world-literary order. And they remain haunted by that multilingual dream even when writing in a language, English, whose global spread threatens to eradicate it.

The study of “global” literature written in English is haunted in turn, rooted in a long-standing relationship to Latin America that it does not acknowledge, one that binds it indelibly to literary traditions outside itself and its carefully cultivated coterie of linguistic others. Personal relationships and later intertextual exchanges fueled by the Latin American “boom” of the 1960s–70s did more than enable a series of essential – and understudied – stylistic developments in South Asian fiction. They also set the template for the emergence of South Asian fiction as a market phenomenon from the 1980s onward, enabling it to enjoy pride of place as a premier literature of the new global order (Kantor 2018).

This was the era when South Asian Anglophone fiction gained institutional power as the primary regional exemplar for variously constructed literary spaces: the Commonwealth, then the postcolonial world, and now, possibly, the Anglophone globe. These are the major geographic-cum-conceptual categories through which literature from the Global South is legitimated in institutions of the Global North. Ironically, it was at this very moment of ascendance that such academic frameworks progressively excluded Latin America and Hispanophone literature from concepts of a shared literary world, consolidating their boundaries as *de facto* English-exclusive categories.

And yet, even as this institutional understanding of South Asian literature was growing in force, South Asian authors themselves were constructing a “countershelf” of Latin American literature. This reference “shelf” of model authors, ideal texts, and shared styles functioned as a strategy to break away from the inherited, overdetermined significance of writing in English and to build a world-literary fantasy of solidarity to stand in its place. Spanning novel, essay, and memoir, poetry and prose, these fantasies sometimes took the form of ersatz personal genealogies, ones that frequently imagined reincarnation as a technology of connection across space and time. More often, they invoked a kind of psychic connection created at the moment of Columbus’ original mistake: the transposition of the “East Indies” onto the West. They also adapted a long-standing interest

in al-Andalus to link the conquests of Latin America and South Asia conceptually through medieval Spain. And they came together around the unique capacity of narrative form – whether modernist or magically real – to represent shared legacies of colonial oppression. Rushdie puts it just this way, describing the space that brings together South Asian and Latin American writing “bounded by frontiers which are neither political nor linguistic but imaginative” (Rushdie 1992, 69).

In different ways, all of these fantasies encode wonder at the world’s unexpectedness, along with a form of equality that does not erase multiplicity. They rely on the world’s vastness – both spatially and temporally – to retain a capacity for newness, making associations that did not exist, that could not have been imagined, until they appeared. Here, specifically literary aesthetics of wonder – expressed in terms like *a’jūbe*, *extrañeza*, and *asombro* – act as a category of practice that can counter the dull cultural flattening of the “globe” that the rise of the Anglophone seems to presage. The related idea of “unexpectedness” offers a category of analysis that scholarship can take up from these authors, allowing us to grasp patterns of association these authors created and argued for, ones poorly anticipated by existing frameworks for the study of planet-wide circulatory theories.

The countershelf fantasy is fundamentally one of reading – often, as we shall see, literally situated on a bookshelf. Yet it also operates like a mirror with two distinct but related facets. For Faiz, Latin America is a looking glass, a location of immediate, unexpected self-recognition. For Hamid, it is a rearview mirror, one that enables a backward gaze onto the past as both a site of nostalgic identification and a possible model for the future. These relational fantasies endure across decades of literary production, even as more overtly political categories of association – Third World, postcolonial, Global South – have waxed and waned. And it was by embracing the fantasy of the countershelf, imagining themselves not as a minor subset of a British or South Asian canon but as equal contributors to this worldly tradition, that South Asian authors made the unexpected journey to the very heart of “Global English.”

“The World as India”: Locating the Stalemate between World Literature and Global English

Shortly before her death in 2005, Susan Sontag delivered a lecture affirming the value of world literature in translation, an essay she titled “The World as India” (Sontag 2007). It now appears as the herald for the posthumous translation fellowship funded by her estate. For her, the

Indian subcontinent is, at once, home to a spectacular proliferation of literary languages and the vanguard of English-speaking as a global phenomenon. Lament over the effects of the latter is expressed here, as in so much cultural criticism of that era, through the concept-metaphor of the call center worker (Srinivasan 2018a). India thus locates the essay's conflict between a multilingual, egalitarian sphere facilitated by translation and the looming threat of a hierarchized, technologized Anglophone globe.

Opening with Sontag – who was by no means an expert in South Asian or postcolonial literature – captures the two major critical anxieties this monograph seeks to address. The first is that multilingual world literature and what we now call Global Anglophone literature are and always have been enemies, foils, and fierce combatants in a winner-take-all contest for the planet. Second, but related, South Asia is the key battleground for this contest, being the location of both an exemplary multilingualism and a particular historical, geopolitical, and economic vulnerability to English.² To understand the appeal of the countershelf, it is first necessary to account for this long-standing stalemate, which South Asian authors are using Latin American literature to “counter.”

South Asia has played this tense dual role of multilingual hotbed and Anglophone vanguard since the colonial era. Perhaps predictably, no document of the era more clearly articulates that tension than T. B. Macaulay's “Minute on Indian Education” in 1835. Almost any writing about South Asian literature in English begins with a ritual invocation of the Macaulay Minute (Bhabha 1984; Mukherjee 2000; Bahri 2003). Macaulay's memorandum to the British Council of India on the subject of Indian education is the document that undergirded the decision to fund English-medium instruction, and defund education in other languages, in colonial India. Though the decision itself was much more complex, the Macaulay Minute has come to stand metonymically for the whole ideological apparatus of English education and, through it, for the logic of British colonization as such (Bhabha 1984; Vishwanathan 1989; Spivak 1999). As Venkat Mani argues, Macaulay's statement essentially inaugurates the Anglophone–World polemic that Sontag and so many others will continually reanimate thereafter (Mani 2017, 58–62).

Beyond its standing as a legal document, references to the Minute endure because of the specific rhetorical flourishes through which Macaulay justifies his position, rhetorics our fields are still working to counter. In the document's second-most infamous phrase, he justifies the defunding of Sanskrit and Arabic scholarship in favor of English by stating

baldly that “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia” (Macaulay 1835).

This spectre of the “single, good shelf” is one that arguably haunts traditional understandings of world literature as much as the postcolonial context in which it is more often invoked. Indeed, so much scholarship in these fields hinges on a particular imagined location in which readers encounter texts. Emily Apter imagines world literature as a sort of museum shaped by decontextualizing and appropriative acts of curation (Apter 2013). Both Gayatri Spivak and Gauri Vishwanathan understand it as the university classroom, implicating education in the process of indoctrination (Viswanathan 1989; Spivak 2005). Aamir Mufti, Priya Joshi, and Venkat Mani construe it as a library defined by uneven forms of circulation and state sponsorship (Joshi 2002; Mufti 2016; Mani 2017). Several scholars invoke an airport kiosk as a metaphor for world literature’s rootless cosmopolitan elitism paired with its middlebrow aesthetics (Watroba 2018). More recent South Asian criticism invokes instead the pavement bookseller as an object lesson in the inequalities of linguistic and educational access that underlie literary production in the Global South (Narayanan 2012; Sadana 2012).

It should call our attention that all of these bookshelves of world-literary contestation are institutional, shaped by either the market or the state. As Pheng Cheah astutely notes, “recent theories of world literature . . . define the world in terms of the circulation of commodities, that is, as the expression, field, and product of transnational market exchange” (Cheah 2016, 6). This observation about “recent theories” holds just as true for studies of globally circulating literature originally written in English. Economic and political concepts predominate both fields: world systems theory, or evolutionary theory, combined and uneven development, or even Orientalism (Moretti 2000; Casanova 2004; WReC 2015; Mufti 2016). In addition to the market, scholars have also preferred circulatory systems that track neatly onto histories of domination (postcolonial studies) or geographic contiguity (area studies and the “oceanic turn”). Even the turn toward digitally mediated “distant reading,” as Lauren Klein argues, likewise runs into the problem of “scale,” in which the preference for large volumes of texts is inadequately attentive to “the subject positions that are too easily (if at times unwittingly) occluded when taking a distant view” (Klein 2018).

These models leave little space to explore how world literature can operate in the way Sontag describes, as a location of positive affiliation and growing worldly consciousness for her own development as a writer.

Instead, the focus on institutional circulation produces a bifurcated agential model in which authors, especially those from the Global South, are cast as cynically omnipotent market masterminds, while at the same time, and with no apparent irony, utterly helpless victims of various systems that deliver a certain kind of literature to their doorstep and force them to recapitulate it (Jameson 1986; Brennan 1989; Lazarus 2011). Increasingly, these authors are charged with eagerly hastening an era of predictable, eminently digestible, and stylistically moribund “global lowbrow” (n+1 2013; Fisk 2018; Watroba 2018).³

Resistance to these systems can only be imagined as, on the one hand, a strategic essentialism and exoticism, a kind of ironic knowingness about one’s capitulation to global forces, or, on the other, an intransigent refusal of circulation through incommensurability and untranslatability (Huggan 2001; Brouillette 2007; Melas 2007; Spivak 2009; Apter 2013; Chakravorty 2014). Any kind of relationality encoded in such gestures is profoundly hierarchical and negative – to do with the refusal of relations between North and South. Responsive to the historical violence of comparison, they emphasize difference without leaving space for the way authors themselves thought and wrote in comparative terms.

The turn toward incommensurability preserves a particular type of “innocence” of Global South writers from capital in its social, political, and economic forms. This innocence safeguards the author’s worthiness for scholars in the Global North. But it also preordains the powerlessness of these literatures on the world stage, functioning, as Miriam Ticktin explains, “only insofar as it is a space of freedom from desire, will, or agency” (Ticktin 2017, 579). As Gloria Fisk argues, such an attachment to innocence in world-literary studies might also be read through Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the literary field, in which authors’ legible desire for, will to, or agency around success operates inversely to their perceived deservingness of it (Fisk 2018). This makes it all but impossible to theorize gestures of South–South solidarity as something more than symbolic, as actually significant forces in literary history.

A quite similar set of unsatisfying binaries arise in the study of writing from the Global South originally produced in English. They, too, radiate out from the Macaulay Minute. Its most infamous and frequently cited lines have come to dominate the discussion of English as a literary language in South Asia, the ones in which the spread of English is the means to create “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay 1835). English, then, is no mere language in Macaulay’s figuration. It is a vector that deforms the

whole embodied experience, the very self of South Asian subjects, bending it to the will of colonial domination (Bhabha 1984; Mukherjee 2000; Bahri 2003). This transformation, moreover, was to be affected by an education in English literature, directly implicating both object and discipline in the program of colonization (Viswanathan 1989). This document, this phrase, is the traumatic origin of South Asian Anglophone literature – perhaps all Anglophone literature, since policies enacted first in India became standard across the empire (Gikandi 2014). How could any author hope to redeem the practice of writing in English from such an origin?

Simon Gikandi summarizes the common answer for postcolonial studies. He summarizes the common polemic in which writers “have limited options: they could master English and use it to create a literature of their own, or they could make an epistemic break with the language and turn to the mother tongue as a place of reconciliation” (Gikandi 2014, 11). The binary opposition of this answer elides the many colonial and postcolonial writers who wrote in multiple languages without experiencing it as particularly fraught or traumatic. To put it more pointedly, this framing reinforces a narrative convenient to the Anglophone center of postcolonial studies, one in which sticking with the “mother tongue” guarantees the innocent intransigence that means that literature will circulate only locally, leaving English as the single, naturalized pathway into the globe.

Pervasive in scholarship of the Anglophone globe is the idea that, if one chooses English, either one may unproblematically adopt British literary influence or one may use English to “write back” to Empire (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002). Scholars of English literature often cue this choice through the Shakespearean metaphor of Ariel and Caliban, where the latter’s English becomes a resistant tool against its erstwhile master: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse” (*The Tempest*, 1.2.437–438). This dyad of colonial selfhood is so self-evidently “English-y” that we might forget it doesn’t come from English at all: it was actually first pioneered at the turn of the twentieth century by an Uruguayan writer named José Enrique Rodó (Rodó [1900] 1988).⁴

It is now commonplace to observe how the “obsolete postcolonial and ironically acutely Eurocentric cliché of ‘writing back’ to the West” maintains English (especially British literature) at the center of an ostensibly decolonized literary project (Zecchini 2014, 17; Yoon 2015, 245). But there are problems, too, in upholding “local,” “mother tongue,” or “vernacular” languages – often referred to as *bhashas* in South Asianist scholarship – as the sole safeguard of postcolonial authenticity. First, this position reifies a Eurocentric language ideology of the “mother tongue” that did not

historically exist in places like South Asia (Yildiz 2013; Orsini 2015; Mufti 2016). More troublingly, it paints postcolonial scholarship into a corner from which the only convincing avenue to rehabilitate Anglophone writing is to claim that it never really was written in English but is always already translated – perhaps “born translated” – from the author’s authentic mother tongue.⁵ This figuration, one ironically presented as resistant to Anglophone domination, can conceive of no cosmopolitan, “foreign” languages but only admits other languages as “vernaculars” already familiar to the author – a construction thoroughly critiqued by Mufti (Mufti 2016). These languages and their literatures end up fulfilling an imagined relationship of subservience, the local insiders that foil English’s pervasive and exclusive rights to the outside, the “globe.”

These patterns reappear in the common histories of South Asian literature in English. They are cast either as a set of multilingual and cosmopolitan relationships geographically limited to the subcontinent or as an English-mediated entrée onto the world. The latter is shaped by relationships of contest against, collaboration with, and ultimately capitulation to the former colonizing power.⁶ Despite their differences, both start with the Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand, and both end with Rushdie.

This first set of narratives about Anand emphasize his identity as, to playfully tweak Orsini’s term, a “multilingual local”: someone who enacts a kind of cosmopolitanism through their facility with the multiple languages, registers, and cultural contexts of a single region (Orsini 2015). Let us borrow Orsini’s apt phrasing and declare this the “local” narrative. Often in tandem with authors like Ahmed Ali and Raja Rao, such narratives recall Anand’s intimate association with the multilingual collective the All India Progressive Writers Association, his and others’ facility with other languages of India, and his relationship to the struggle for Indian Independence. These stories use Mulk Raj Anand as an exemplar for the transformation of Anglophone literature from niche to mainstream, prefiguring the much more forceful emergence of the Anglophone novel in the 1980s and the political rise of English in India in the 1990s. They also call on Anand to parallel the larger story of English in India in this period, which found its footing as a language of administration, education, and business – a “global” language, in short – unexpectedly, almost by accident, emerging as a stopgap to fill political vacuums left by fierce contests between (in the case of India) Hindi and South Indian Dravidian languages.

Ruvani Ranasinha tells a different story about Anand, one that routes through London. Let’s call this the “abroad” narrative.⁷ Beginning with Anand’s memoir *Conversations in Bloomsbury* (1981), Ranasinha traces

Anand's personal relationships with literary figures – especially E. M. Forster – as well as the way his writing was received and marketed in the United Kingdom (Ranasinha 2007). She emphasizes the difficulty that Anand had in finding a robust British readership and his compromises with the exoticizing desires of the publishing establishment that had no idea how to market his writing (Ranasinha 2007). This sets up a contrast with later chapters where, she claims, the emergence of first V. S. Naipaul and later Rushdie paved the way for an entirely new reception of writing by authors of South Asian origin (Ranasinha 2007).

Both narratives about Mulk Raj Anand do important work to push back against the assumption that Anglophone writing is only a few decades old, coinciding tidily with the massive uptick in attention that such writing has garnered since the 1980s, centered around the figure of Rushdie. For the sake of simplicity, let us say that Rushdie's publication of and Man Booker Prize for *Midnight's Children* (1981) was the transformative moment for South Asian Anglophone writing. Consider, for example, the way that title has been played upon in the apt description of Indian literary historiography divided into "before" and "after" midnight (Joshi 2002) or contests between Anglophone and *bhasha* writing, described respectively as midnight's "children" and "orphans" (Shankar 2012). Even now, scores of scholarly articles and monographs center on this author and novel, all seeming to validate Neil Lazarus' infamous quip that "there is in a strict sense only one author in the postcolonial literary canon. That author is Salman Rushdie" (Lazarus quoted in Sorensen 2010, 11).

Still, while asserting a continuity between Anand's moment and ours, these narratives actually reveal a curious rupture. Both at home and abroad, South Asian Anglophone literature was a struggling, puny thing. Until, suddenly, it wasn't. Rushdie's string of successes over the course of the 1980s presaged a larger South Asian "boom," starting with Vikram Seth's record-breaking advance for *A Suitable Boy* (1994), hitting an early peak with Arundhati Roy's record-shattering payment and Booker Prize win for *The God of Small Things* (1998), and waning after twin literary events – the Booker Prize for *The White Tiger* and the Best Picture Oscar for *Slumdog Millionaire* (based on the 2006 novel *Q&A*) – a decade later in 2008 (Kantor 2018). Foundational critic Meenakshi Mukherjee poses a question that no later scholar has sufficiently answered: "Why are we suddenly witnessing a total reversal at the end of the 20th century when an unmistakable and ebullient proliferation of fiction in English written by both resident and non-resident Indians has become a globally recognised and consequently a nationally highlighted phenomenon" (Mukherjee 2000, 13)?

Following a pattern set by Mukherjee, both local and abroad historiographies jump abruptly from the very full archive of the 1930s–50s to the dramatic rupture of 1981 and everything that came after. Each essentially brushes aside the 1960s and 1970s as if they don't matter.⁸ This critical feint on the matter of literary historiography becomes more baffling still when we consider the essential role that Indian literature in English played in the establishment of a narrative about postcolonial literature. The startling shift in reception for South Asian Anglophone writing – beginning in the 1980s, coming into full bloom in the 1990s and early 2000s, and slowly withering over the last ten to fifteen years – traces roughly the same timeline that marks the rise, dominance, and quiescence of postcolonial studies. The problem of the missing midcentury in India is now a problem for the periodicity of the entire project of narrating “global” writing in English, one that endures even as the specific power of postcolonial studies has declined.

In truth, the event that unites South Asian writing from the 1950s with South Asian writing in the 1980s happened neither locally nor in some narrowly defined Anglophone “abroad.” It originated, instead, in Latin America, in the “boom” of Hispanophone writing in the 1960s and its worldwide proliferation in English during the 1970s. While the most obvious utility of “boom” literature to South Asian authors was as a pathway out of the contest between Anglophone literature and its “vernacular” foil, Latin American writing of this period also offered a model for moving beyond the increasingly orthodox social realism of the Independence-era progressive writers, without abandoning politics altogether. The turn to Latin America extends well beyond the development of so-called postcolonial magical realism – the only part of this transnational exchange to have ever garnered critical attention. Instead, it concerns a pervasive development of stylistic and thematic approaches adapted from “boom” superstars like Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Julio Cortázar, as well as earlier canonical figures like Alejo Carpentier, Jorge Luis Borges, César Vallejo, Neruda, and Paz. At the level of style, topic, and perhaps especially persona, these writers provided a blueprint for writing about issues common to the Global South, including models for negotiating how those areas would become legible to readers in the Global North.

To understand the particular appeal of Latin American literature for these authors requires a return to the rhetoric of Macaulay's second-most-infamous phrase, in the endless polemic it forces between “the native literatures of India” and the “good shelf” of writing in the colonizer's