

23. Indian Imaginaries in World Literature and Domestic Popular Culture

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At the turn of the millennium India became widely known as a “global superpower of the future”. The image of a country rapidly transitioning from tradition and poverty to modernity and wealth was a dominant story, reported both internationally and domestically. Since then, these expectations have been both questioned and challenged, but they have also evolved as a recurrent theme in literature. Fiction writing centred on Indian society and its diaspora has been notably present in a global literary sphere since the last few decades but, importantly, also the Indian book market has more recently grown remarkably. Stories in English about urban Indian middle class realities are abundant both internationally and within India.¹

In this chapter I will focus on two novels, both of them written in English by Indian authors and published in the same year, 2008: Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and Chetan Bhagat’s *The Three Mistakes of My Life*.² These are novels that relate closely to contemporary Indian society, or rather, to certain ideas of what a new Indian society, emerging around the first decade of the second millennium, is becoming. Both books could be read as commen-

¹ E. Dawson Varughese, *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

² Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger: A Novel* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008); Chetan Bhagat, *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2008).

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tarities on what it means, in terms of desires, possibilities and constraints, to be young in today's India. Similarities and differences between them are in several ways instructive for discussing some conceptual issues within the scholarly field of world literature.³

Although they share several themes and narrative elements, one could claim that these books do not belong within a common literary field. Indian fiction, according to Francesca Orsini, is distributed across three distinct literatures. First, an *international* field of Indian literature in English, published by international publishing houses; second, a *national* field of English literature, usually limited to domestic recognition; third, several *regional* literatures in various vernacular languages that are rarely translated.⁴ Suman Gupta has spelt out the difference between the first two Indian literatures, written in English:

The Indian commercial fiction in English which circulates predominantly within the country can be regarded as reasonably distinct from the “literary fiction” which has a larger-than-India presence.⁵

Adiga's *The White Tiger* was awarded the Man Booker Prize of 2008, and obviously qualifies as belonging to the field of international literary Indian fiction, while Bhagat's *The Three Mistakes*, hugely successful domestically but hardly recognised outside India, would fall in the national category of commercial literature in English. The question, then, is to what extent these two novels narrate the contemporary Indian society differently.

³ Adiga's book have been discussed frequently by scholars (while Bhagat's have rarely been noticed). See for example Ines Detmer, “New India? New Metropolis? Reading Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as a ‘condition-of-India Novel’”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47.5 (2011): 535–545; Ana Cristina Mendes, “Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 45, no. 2 (2010): 275–93; A. J. Sebastian, “Poor-Rich Divide in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*”, *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 1, no. 2 (2009): 229–45.

⁴ Francesca Orsini, “India in the Mirror of World Fiction”, *New Left Review* 13 (2002): 75–88.

⁵ Suman Gupta, “Indian ‘commercial’ fiction in English, the Publishing Industry, and Youth Culture”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, no. 5 (2012): 46.

Two stories, in brief

The White Tiger is a story of Balram, a clever young man born into a poor low caste family in rural north India. He nurses a dream of escaping poverty and a future that is predetermined by a brutally hierarchical society. His first break comes when he manages to get a job as a driver in a landowning family. Together with his employers he moves to Gurgaon, the rapidly growing satellite city south of New Delhi, and encounters a world of new possibilities. In this middle class environment of luxury and corruption, Balram is a keen learner and soon realises how he could make his dreams come true. He kills his boss and steals a large amount of “black money” with which he escapes to Bangalore, the hub of IT business. There he starts a new life as a crafty entrepreneur in the transport business.

The Three Mistakes is about another young man, Govind. He lives in Ahmedabad, but on the old and less fortunate side of the river, which divides this modernising city into separate worlds. Govind loves mathematics but does not want to become an engineer as his mother wishes – he wants to be a businessman. Together with two best friends he opens a cricket shop in the compound of a Hindu temple. The goal is to build up a business profitable enough to be moved over to one of the posh shopping malls on the modern side of the river. The three friends almost succeed when a number of serious obstacles come in their way: first an earthquake, then a religious-political riot and finally a disastrous love affair. Govind’s dream finally ends with his suicide attempt.

Apart from the obvious theme about young men with ambitions of becoming businessmen, these two novels have several other elements and features in common – though often in contrasting shapes. I will not engage closely with the stories as such, but rather read the books from some distance (though not as distant as Franco Moretti suggests for reading world literature):⁶ first by discussing the literary technique by which these stories are told, second, by looking at how the novels converge with other forms of cultural productions and, third, by asking how the stories relate

⁶ Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54–68.

to a contemporary Indian reality. My aim is to understand how vernacular and cosmopolitan tendencies are juxtaposed in various ways, thus constructing “world-making” narratives for separate audiences.

Framing the Indian story

To begin with, Adiga and Bhagat use similar techniques to narrate their core story within a frame tale: the protagonists themselves relate the events of their lives to a particular addressee. In Adiga’s novel, this narration is conveyed in the form of letters that the self-taught entrepreneur Balram writes on his computer, addressed (but never sent) to the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao.

In Bhagat’s book, Govind tells his story to an author (a fictive Chetan Bhagat) sitting by the young man’s hospital bedside after his suicide attempt. However, in this novel the listener-author is recounting what Govind tells him, in contrast to Balram who, in Adiga’s book, is narrating in the first person.

In both novels the respective frame tales are essential to the vernacular and cosmopolitan dynamics of its story. In Adiga’s case, it is of course no incident that Balram writes his letters to a Chinese addressee. In the image of a new global world order India and China are siblings and need to share experiences with each other – “*Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*” as Balram phrase it. Now, he wants to give the Chinese prime minister a true picture of the new entrepreneurial India. One point with this frame tale is that it gives the author plenty of reasons to *explain* and reveal Indian particularities. The Chinese prime minister can’t possibly know much about caste, religion or politics in India – Balram has to clarify. One could claim that the book is, with a liberal use of Rebecca Walkowitz’s term, “born translated” for an international audience – though in a cultural, rather than linguistic, sense.⁷

The story in Chetan Bhagat’s book is, on the other hand, told to a person who is familiar with the same place, share similar

⁷ Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

ideas and tacit knowledge as the protagonist. The author (both the fictive persona and the real individual) has, like Govind, been a young student in Ahmedabad. General Indian peculiarities do not need to be explained; only the local setting, Ahmedabad, is explicitly introduced to a non-local reader.

Thus, by different uses of a common frame tale technique Adiga and Bhagat are constructing literary worlds that relate to readers in contrasting ways. *The Three Mistakes* is a novel that offers opportunities for identification. The main characters are sympathetic and their everyday life is full of activities and incidents – cricket, school exams and family troubles – recognisable to any young middle class Indian. *The White Tiger* does not have that appeal; it is a dark novel and most characters are unsympathetic or even cruel. Few readers would feel close to the cynical underdog Balram – and audiences who possibly might identify do not read novels in English. A dominant theme in this book is the relation between middle class families and their domestic servants. This portrayal is certainly not flattering, thus, Adiga is in a sense “disloyal” to Indian middle class readers.

This difference with regard to identification is also emphasised linguistically. Adiga does use typical words and concepts from Hindi, but selectively and always in italics, thus emphasising the cultural “otherness” of the story. In Bhagat’s novel, on the other hand, the characters speak English as if it is natural to them and they do not express themselves in obviously Indianised English.⁸ By contrast, Adiga is sometimes explicitly pointing out particular Indian English pronunciations and phrasing. Just as Amir Mufti has observed with reference to Salman Rushdie’s novels, Adiga attributes this form of speech to subaltern and illiterate people, rather than to the urban middle class who is more likely to speak such English.⁹ It is the low-caste villager Balram, who has a peculiar Indian accent, not his employer.

⁸ Rita Kothari and Rupert Snell, eds., *Chutnefying English: The Phenomenon of Hinglish* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

⁹ Amir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 166.

Media convergence

A particular Indian discourse, established since decades, is concerned with a cleavage within the society: a traditional, rural, vernacular and religious Indian population is contrasted with a modern, urban, secular, English-speaking elite. The problematic relation between these “two Indias” is a recurrent theme in political and intellectual debate as well as in popular cultural productions. At the time when Adiga’s and Bhagat’s novels were published, an advertisement appearing in major television channels, both English and vernacular, was topical. It consisted of a video in black and white in which the legendary film actor Amitabh Bachchan was walking completely alone on a long bridge, a huge uncompleted construction reaching out over the sea with no land in sight. With a dark and powerful voice, the actor reads a poem:

There are two Indias in this country.

One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has been showering recently upon us.

The other India is the leash.

One India says, “Give me a chance and I’ll prove myself”. The other India says, “Prove yourself first and maybe then you’ll have a chance”.

One India lives in the optimism of our hearts. The other India lurks in the skepticism of our minds [...].¹⁰

In *The White Tiger* this discourse is mirrored in Balram’s desire to step out of “the Darkness” (tradition) into “the Light” (modernity) and in *The Three Mistakes* it is the Sabermati river dividing Ahmedabad into two worlds that represent this cleavage.

Looking at these two books from a little further distance it is also striking how both are associated with particular movies. *The Three Mistakes* has been made into a Bollywood film; it was

¹⁰ The advertisement was part of a campaign, called India Poised, commissioned by the newspaper *The Times of India* and run during 2007, celebrating the 60th anniversary of independence. The poem was written by Gulzar, a well-known Urdu poet and film director.

released 2013 with the title *Kai Po Che!*.¹¹ Chetan Bhagat participated himself in writing the script, but one could indeed argue that already the novel contained most of the essential elements of a popular *Masala* movie, mixing romance, action, drama and comedy, and including archetypal characters of this film genre. The book even has a typical Bollywood film structure in which the narrative often takes a completely new direction after the compulsory half-way break in a three hour long production. Thus, the novel is written in a form in tune with Hindi cinema. In this sense it is *The Three Mistakes* which is “born translated”, but for a vernacular, not a cosmopolitan, audience. Considering that most of Chetan Bhagat’s novels have been adapted for the screen, he is a writer that blurs the boundaries of Francesca Orsini’s taxonomy: he is published within the field of national English literature but has a much larger presence in vernacular popular culture.¹²

The White Tiger has not (yet) been adapted to film and it is not at all written in the style of a Bollywood production. Its relation to a particular movie is incidental. It was not only Aravind Adiga’s book that attracted international attention to the “darkness” of a new global India in 2008. This was also the year when Danny Boyle’s film *Slumdog Millionaire* premiered on cinema theaters around the world – it won eight Academy Awards (Oscars) in 2009.¹³ The film is about a slum boy and his everyday struggle for existence in a brutal and unequal society, but whose experiences ultimately become a resource for escaping from that cruel world. Almost simultaneously *The White Tiger* and *Slumdog Millionaire* reminded the world that India is still a very unjust society, thus contributing in challenging the recently successful international “rebranding” of India as a modern democratic market economy. Not surprisingly, this attention stimulated heated debate within

¹¹ The film *Kai Po Che!* is directed by Abhichhek Kapoor (2013). The title is a Gujarati expression used in kite flying competitions.

¹² Bhagat’s novels are also translated into several vernacular languages.

¹³ *Slumdog Millionaire* is based on another novel: *QA* by Vikas Swarup (London: Doubleday, 2005).

India about a representational “backlash”; these are not the success stories that should support India in the global economy.¹⁴

In this latter case of convergence between a novel and a film it becomes obvious that there is a certain friction between reality and fiction. This brings us to the next level of reading. That is, how do these two novels concretely relate to real events and persons in contemporary India?

Fiction and obtrusive realities

In both Adiga’s and Bhagat’s novels there is a powerful politician recurring in the background of the story. In *The White Tiger* this is “The Great Socialist”, the Chief Minister whose powerful hands are everywhere, affecting Balram from the village school into the city. For a domestic reader, this character is unmistakably recognisable by appearance and deeds, because he is closely modelled on an (in)famous political former Chief Minister in the state of Bihar. This is of course a level of meaning that is lost to most international readers, but it is also not essential. *The White Tiger* is concerned with fictionalising reality in its general tendencies, not in the details. It does, however, reveal that the novel is double coded, not only aimed at an international audience.

The Three Mistakes has a more intricate relation to reality. The book narrates two horrible events that are not literary inventions.¹⁵ The first is an earthquake that occurred on 26 January 2001, killing some 20 000 people in the state of Gujarat. The second, and in the novel more defining event, took place a year later, in February 2002, when a riot broke out in which 2 000 people, mainly Muslims, were killed by a mob. The Chief Minister of

¹⁴ Assa Doron and Ursula Rao, “From the Edge of Power: The Cultural Politics of Disadvantage in South Asia”, *Asian Studies Review* 33, no. 4 (2009): 419–28; Ana Cristina Mendes, “Showcasing India Unshining: Film Tourism in Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire*”, *Third Text* 24, no. 4 (2010): 471–79; Anjana Mudambi, “Another Look at Orientalism: (An) Othering in *Slumdog Millionaire*”, *Howard Journal of Communications* 24, no. 3 (2013): 275–92.

¹⁵ This might sound strange in a commercial “feel-good”-novel, but is very consistent with the Bollywood form of the book.

Gujarat, at that time, was accused of not trying to stop – even to encourage – violence that later would be known as “the Gujarat massacre”.¹⁶ In the book, neither the name nor any descriptions of this politician is mentioned. Still, Bhagat tells a story of violence masterminded by activists in a nationalist political party, with blessings from political leaders high in command. One could have expected that this delicate theme would be toned down in the Bollywood version of the story. Not so. The film narrative is even modified so that the riot is emphasised – with a twist, however, that makes it possible to interpret some justification for those committing the killings. The domestic debate around the movie was confused: was *Kai Po Che* (and Chetan Bhagat) for or against the accused Chief Minister? Importantly, the film was screened and debated during the year preceding the Indian parliament election of 2014, in which the controversial politician would campaign as leader of the opposition. Today the same man, Narendra Modi, is the Prime Minister of India. Rarely is “commercial fiction” so intricately intertwined with vernacular realities of such ramification.

This has consequences, however. *The Three Mistakes* (or its film version) hardly stands for itself as a fictional narrative. The local reality is too obtrusive; it becomes a meta-frame for the whole story. The book is of course possible to read for an international audience without familiarity with the political controversies around “the Gujarat massacre” – but that would be a completely different reading.¹⁷ In Adiga’s novel it is, by contrast, rather the global reality that is obtrusive. That story is completely inscribed into a world scenario of rising economic power in Asia.

¹⁶ For an anthropological account of the “Gujarat Massacre” see Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ The global reading audience may, however, encounter the Gujarat riots of 2002 in Arundhati Roy’s recent novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, (London: Penguin 2017) in which they appear as a defining event of the story.

Concluding discussion

I have above discussed two books from the starting point that there are essential distinctions between two Indian English literatures: one international, “literary fiction” and one domestic, “commercial fiction”. As I have tried to show, these differences are rather easy to find; in the framing of the stories, in the convergence with other media forms as well as in how they relate to actual political realities. In that sense this analyses would confirm the distinction that both Francesca Orsini and Suman Gupta identify between an international and a national Indian fiction written in English.

However, this presumption could also be challenged, not least on empirical grounds. *The White Tiger* is published, read and has a reputation within India – and it definitely has a commercial value – while *The Three Mistakes* circulates internationally, at least within a large Indian diaspora. Furthermore, it is very possible that other distinctions are more important than those between international and national texts, for example within fields of vernacular literary production.¹⁸ In one of very few anthropological studies of literature in India, Sadana Rashmi draws the attention to a context in which distinctions between literary fields are completely irrelevant. That is where most books are traded in India: by vendors at railway stations, on pavements or at major road crossings in large cities. In these places, all sorts of Indian books are hawked, often in pirated editions, alongside international best-sellers by authors such as John Grisham, Paulo Coelho and Dan Brown.¹⁹ Distinctions that one may find between fictional worlds of particular texts might soon blur when looking at the social reality where books are produced, sold, read, reviewed, debated or mixed up with other forms of cultural imaginaries. One example would be to see how distinctions are created and

¹⁸ Suman Gupta, *Consumable Texts in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 39–60.

¹⁹ Rashmi Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland: The Political Life of Literature in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012): 3.

negotiated on book fairs and literature festivals that lately have been mushrooming in India. It is in this direction that I intend to work further on Indian writing within the field of world literature.

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