



ANOTHER CANON
Indian Texts and Traditions in English



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INDIAN TEXTS AND TRADITIONS IN ENGLISH

MAKARAND PARANJPE





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For Pranab and Tom

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CONTENTS

	<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
1	Introduction: Situating the Contemporary Indian (English) Novel	1
2	Conversations in Bloomsbury: T S Eliot through Indian Eyes	13
3	<i>Comrade Kirillov</i> : A Critique of Communism	28
4	'A Horse and Two Goats': Language, Culture and Representation in R K Narayan's Fiction	41
5	The Tale of an Indian Education: The Silver Pilgrimage	51
6	'Clip Joint': Modernity and Its Discontents	61
7	Cultural and Political Allegory in <i>Rich Like Us</i>	72
8	Towards Redefining Boundaries: The Indo-Canadian Encounter in <i>Days and Nights in Calcutta</i>	86
9	<i>The Golden Gate</i> and the Quest for Self-Realization	101
10	Journey to Ithaca: An Epistle on the Fiction of the 1980s and 1990s	114
11	<i>Cuckold</i> in Indian English Fiction	130
12	Stephanians and Others: The Tale of Two Novelists	148



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PREFACE

In my earlier monograph, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel* (2000), I had argued that English novels by Indians had a more complex genealogy than was normally supposed. That they were the inheritors of two different literary traditions, English and Indian, and also of two linguistic ones as Meenakshi Mukherjee suggested by dubbing them ‘twice born’ is by now well-recognized. But what was not equally clear was how we might understand and evaluate their larger civilizational burden. For this, one needed to connect them not only with other fictional works in many Indian languages or with those forms of narrative, such as vernacular prose chronicles or romances, which came before them, but also to the classical literary traditions, particularly the great epics of India. If we did so, we would not only be closer to defining their identity but also to evaluating them.

My earlier project, which tried to do this, was thus an endeavour to ‘define both the commonness and the uniqueness’ of the Indian English [IE] novel (12) and to see ‘how this genre has evolved and developed in the last 150 years’ so as to delineate the ‘tradition of the IE, to identify its main types, and to spell out its relation to the broader cultural formations of our country’ (12–13). I argued that the age-old framework of the *purusharthas*, enunciated not only in the *Manu Smriti* or the *Mahabharata*, but also in Bharata’s *Natyasastra*, could come in handy. Those novels which promoted the cardinal aims of life: *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama* and *Moksha* would be the ones which would survive the test of time. In addition, my book tried to offer a typology or a taxonomy of the Indian novel based partly on the framework suggested by Bhalachandra Nemade.

One of the responses to that monograph was that it was too theoretical and hardly contained any detailed readings of literary texts. In a way, this book of comprehensive readings, interpretations and expositions of select Indian English mostly fictional texts, is meant to redress that deficit. But the contents of this volume are by no means obvious or predictable. While some of the constituent texts, such as Vikram Seth’s *The Golden Gate*, are not only well-known but also widely-studied, others, such as M Anantanarayanan’s *The Silver Pilgrimage* are hardly known at all. Texts such as R K Narayan’s ‘A Horse and Two Goats’ or U R Anantha Murthy’s ‘Clip Joint,’ are not even novels but short stories, the latter originally written in Kannada. Mulk Raj Anand’s *Conversations in Bloomsbury* and Clarke Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee’s *Days and Nights in Calcutta* are

non-fictional works, but with rich narrative content. Still others like Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca*, and Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold*, though reasonably well-known and significant, are not considered canonical. In all, the texts discussed may at first seem a motley, if unusual, bunch.

Yet, on closer examination, we discover that they may actually constitute what we might call 'another canon'. This canon is 'another' in at least two senses of the word. First, nearly all the authors included are considered well-known, even canonical, though the chosen texts are not. So we might call this a reading of not so well known, though not necessarily minor works, by major writers. Such works, I believe, require careful study if we wish to understand not only these major authors or their better-known texts, but also the growth and development of Indian English literature itself. In the second sense, both the works and their writers are not well known, but even so I think that studying them is crucial to the larger project of making sense of Indian English literature. Why? – because these works at once, and sometimes paradoxically, exemplify both the strengths and weaknesses of this literature. Each of them is special and outstanding, even spectacular, in one way or another. But many of these works are also flawed so that, in the end, they do not fully achieve their potential. This invites us to wonder if such a failing to achieve full potency may be a generic feature of this literature.

'Another canon' also consists of books which, for a variety of reasons, are at once of vital importance and yet, in most cases, not actually studied. For instance, Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov*, a minor work no doubt, but one that offers special, even prophetic political insights. Or Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold* – especially accomplished as a literary artefact, but difficult to teach in classrooms. Or Anantanarayanan's *The Silver Pilgrimage*, an exceptional single text by an author who published nothing else and was practically unknown. Two texts, 'A Horse and Two Goats,' and 'Clip Joint,' are crucial to the understanding of what we might call the Indian English mentality. 'A Horse and Two Goats' illustrates both the failures and the successes of English in India. A long short story set in England, 'Clip Joint,' tells of the narrator's disillusionment with Western civilization symbolized by a stripper in a London night club. Two major women novelists, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai are represented by one text each, not their best known. Both *Rich Like Us* by the former and *Journey to Ithaca* by the latter are fascinating, yet flawed texts as I shall show. Anand's *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, Clarke Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee's *Days and Nights in Calcutta* are not even novels, but contain strong narrative and ideological overtones.

In addition, 'Another canon' also refers not only to the special selection of texts in question, but also to alternative ways of reading them. The chapter *Journey to Ithaca*, for instance, is an experiment in academic discourse, originally written in the form of a letter. The last chapter on the Stephanian school of writing is also a narrative going back to the college days of one of our most accomplished Indian English writer, Upamanyu Chatterjee. In one way or another, then, each chapter in this book looks a bit askance at its subject, either in its choice of text or in its manner of treatment. This is what makes this book an extended exploration of what it might mean to belong to another canon.

The overall purpose of this book, however, is not just to construct another canon but also to make sense of Indian textuality and traditions in English. It engages with the India of the last seven decades or so, as it is constructed primarily through the English language. This India, grappling with modernity, constructed as it is through literary texts, is as much fictitious as it is real. It is a whole cultural and literary milieu, a mentality and mindset, a culturescape and ideology. It abuts into vernacular India, its Other, through a two-way translation process. On the one hand, it translates Indian culture into English in 'original' works and, on the other, renders texts from Indian languages into English translations. Hence, the India that is invented or represented through these works is what my book is really about.

As we read these texts cumulatively, a picture of this India gradually emerges, which is rich, complex, and many-dimensional. It is an India which both anglicizes itself but also nativizes English in very unusual ways. Each text at once brings into focus some facet or the other of this India. The most important of the latter is the ongoing struggle with modernization, both literary and social. Many texts touch on this issue, directly or indirectly. Naturally, it becomes crucial to my readings too. From the challenge of inventing a literary modernism in India, which Anand's encounters with T S Eliot grapple with, to an analysis of the mythos and ethos of St Stephen's College, this question looms large. I take a somewhat critical stand on Indian modernity, arguing that its failure to connect with the civilizational genius of India deprives it of enduring power and depth. The texts that it engenders, too, are consequently deficient in meaningfulness and value.

This book is also preoccupied with the traditions and techniques of these reconstructions of India, in fictional form and content. That is why I have endeavoured to read and explicate each text carefully and coherently so as to offer glimpses into larger questions such as the nature of the Indo-British encounter, culture and colonialism, resistance and native self

assertion, tradition and modernity, self and society, domination and autonomy and so on. To complement these readings of specific texts, one or two chapters also engage in broader issues and generalizations about the nature of Indian English writing. Overall, the book tries to offer a sketch of Indian English literary and textual practice over a period of seven decades.

The chapters are arranged on the basis of what I consider the decade under consideration and not necessarily the year of publication. The former does not always match the latter. For instance, Anand's *Conversations in Bloomsbury* is set in the 1930s in London, but was published only as late as 1981. Similarly, Raja Rao's *Comrade Kirillov*, though first published in a French translation in 1965 and subsequently in the English original in 1976, is actually set in the 1940s around the Quit India movement. Consequently, it appears after *Conversations in Bloomsbury* as Chapter 3. Narayan's 'A Horse and Two Goats' was published in *The Hindu* in 1960, but appears to be set in pre-independence India. Anantha Murthy's 'Clip Joint,' published in 1973, is set in the 1960's. Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) is clearly an 'Emergency' novel, set in the 1970s, as is Blaise and Mukherjee's non-fictional travelogue *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977). Seth's *The Golden Gate* (1986) is quintessentially a 1980s California text, while the following chapter on Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) is a critical overview of the fiction of the 1980s and 1990s. The only two texts which are not contemporary in their settings are Anantanarayanan's *The Silver Pilgrimage*, set in medieval Tamil Nadu and Nagarkar's *Cuckold* set in sixteenth century Rajasthan. Yet, Anantanarayanan's novel belongs very much to the decade of the 1960s even in so far as its publishing history is concerned. It is an unusual Indian text finding a one-off publishing slot in the Western market so much before the boom in Indian English fiction abroad. Nagarkar's *Cuckold* (1997), though set in a totally different age and time, may be seen to represent, somewhat atypically, the creative genius of the 1990s. The Introduction, which tries to situate the Indian English novel, is too large in its scope to belong to any particular decade, but sets the stage for the analysis of the texts. The concluding chapter on Stephanian writers is, properly speaking, set in the 1980s, but it is written from a perspective that only became available to me very recently, in the second half of this first decade of the twenty-first century. In that sense, it is really a looking back and garnering of experience and understanding. It is also the most autobiographical of the chapters so ought to come, I felt, at the end of the book as a retrospective finale to these explorations.

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Makarand Paranjape

Guru Purnima, 18 July 2008

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INTRODUCTION

Situating the Contemporary Indian
(English) Novel

The task of situating the contemporary Indian English novel will necessarily be a tentative rather than a normative one, marked perhaps by the sputtering, flickering, even involuntary exertions of the illocutionary subject. In fact, when I first wrote this Introduction.¹ I remember starting off by admitting that it had been crosshatched between two contrary discursive impulses, or should I say, compulsions – on the one hand, the cordial and insistent invitation to embark upon such an exercise and on the other hand, my own inner reluctance to undertake the kind of ‘fixing’ that the word situating implies. On further reflection, I think that the contrary impulses were deeper and had to do with the nature of the project of situating the Indian novel itself rather than merely the tussle between having to write and needing to remain silent, vocalizing and reflecting, going out and staying at home.

The word ‘situate’, itself has an interesting etymology. It may not be out of place to mention here that the tendency to use etymology to clarify what we mean should not be alien to us in India because our learned ancestors often resorted to *Nirukta* to establish meanings in Vedic exegesis. Thus, the recourse to etymology and derivations is not alien to our hermeneutic traditions. As an aside, we may bear in mind that *Nirukta* and etymology are not the same. *Nirukta* enjoins us to go to word origins, especially to the verb roots or *dhatu*s of words in order to understand and interpret their meanings. Etymology, in Western tradition, usually implies the history of the development and usage of

¹ It was the Keynote Address delivered on 23 March 2002 to a conference on Contemporary Indian Novel at Panjab University, Chandigarh.

the word. But be that as it may, *situate*, is related to *site*, which goes back to the Latin word *situs*, meaning position or location. So to *situate* means to locate, to position, and therefore to define.

But the word *situs* is also related to *seed*, and comes from the Indo-European root *sei*, which suggests the sense of casting out, letting fall, as we would a seed. *Site* is thus related not only to sow, plant, deposit, scatter, but to semen. When we try to *situate* something, therefore, we try to trace it back to its seedling. This is one sort of etymological conclusion that we can draw. There is, of course, another kind which, to those who, after Michel Foucault, seek meanings not through continuities, but through discontinuities, would be far more appealing. To *situate* is also to cast out. The seed is situated when it falls from the fruit or flower to the ground, just as semen has to be ejected before it can fertilize an egg. Every act of casting out, of scattering, of dissemination is, then, also, as Homi Bhabha would remind us, an act of gathering, of coming together, of being reborn. That which is scattered, regroups elsewhere, in a different location. The word '*situate*', then, suggests two contrary processes: being cast out and taking root, breaking off and breaking forth, dispersal and emergence, migration and colonization, departure and arrival.

Before venturing ahead, we need to bear in mind that every act of situating involves, at the epistemological level, some prior notion of causality. As I suggested earlier, the two senses of the word – to fall off and to be located – have built into them a complex causal relationship. Therefore, the first point I would like to make is that the manner in which we *situate* the Indian novel will depend on the kind of causality we subscribe to. Personally, theories which are predicated on various kinds of monocausality are unattractive. A sort of *anekantavada*², which allows for multiple determinants of complex effects. Another way of putting it would be to propose that most ideologies (perhaps most people too) can be put into one of the two categories – the Hinayana and the Mahayana, or the lesser and the greater vehicle. The former adhere to literal, monistic and simple causality, while the latter to metaphoric, plural and complex causality. Of course, such a categorization may itself be seen as limiting and thus self-contradictory, but we must consider it for its heuristic efficacy. It will at once be clear to which category I would like this very book to belong. From the Mahayana position of situating, it would stand to reason that the novel, both Western and Indian, ought to be situated in multiple ways. These ways may, moreover, reinforce or contradict each other. From this perspective, how we *situate* the novel will tell us something not only about the

² '*Aneka*' means 'not one' and '*vada*' means philosophy, view, or –logy. So *anekantavada* means manifold view or non-absolutism or perspectivism. It is an important Jaina doctrine, emphasizing the many-sidedness of truth.

novel, but also something about ourselves. All such acts of situating will, thus, depend on how we are ourselves situated. Where the seed falls off from is then as important as where it falls to and places itself. To sum up, this exercise of situating involves three things – the situator, the situated and the situation. Such a process, consequently, cannot be either subjective or objective, but is, to invent a new word, multijjective. I would therefore agree with Marthe Robert who, in her book *Origins of the Novel*, says that ‘the novel is constitutively an “undefined genre”’ (225).

With these qualifications in mind, we may turn to the main question before us: how to situate the Indian English novel. I might say that a similar question exercised literary historians and critics in the West for a couple of hundred years. The novel, a new form, as its very word implies, struck Europeans as something unprecedented, just as it strikes us in India as being something altogether new even today. In Europe, of course, after much debate, the consensus is that the novel embodies a new kind of consciousness, which is best defined as the outcome of the rise of individualism. This, as we shall remember, is Ian Watt’s argument in *The Rise of the Novel*. The novel came to be distinguished from older prose or verse narratives that preceded it; it also supplanted the latter and became the dominant literary genre from the eighteenth century onwards.

In most European languages, the word for the novel is *roman*, which suggests its roots in the medieval romance, long, often fantastic stories involving aristocratic or supernatural personages, perhaps the best example of which is Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1350). Another important precursor to the Western novel was the picaresque tale, which emerged in sixteenth century Spain. The picaro was a rogue; the episodic and loose structure of his adventures became the basis for one of the major traditions of the later Western novels, including those by Cervantes, Fielding, Defoe and Twain. But what makes the novel special is that it embodied a new way of apprehending the world. This new way, called ‘realism’, has to do with complex characters, highly developed social structure, a plausible plot, in a word a certain way of capturing human experience. According to Watt, the ‘defining characteristic’ of this distinct form of writing is ‘realism’ which he explains as the ‘position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses’ (12).

Many years before Watt, Mikhail Bakhtin wrote what is perhaps the best work on the novel. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929), he argued that the novel, especially the kind of novel that Dostoevsky wrote, represents something new and unprecedented in the history of human consciousness. In ‘Discourse in the Novel’ (1934–5), Bakhtin coined the now-famous phrase ‘polyphonic novel’ to describe this kind of writing. Bakhtin contended that Dostoevsky’s characters were ‘not voiceless slaves [...] but free people, capable

of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him' (*Problems*, 30). Bakhtin later considered polyphony to be characteristic of the whole genre of the novel itself. For Bakhtin, dialogism, which implied the interaction and interplay of at least two embodied voices, was the prerequisite for a new mode of consciousness that emerged in the novel. In his pioneering idea of the chronotope, which is the matrix of presumptions about the works of time and space that underlies every text, Bakhtin makes a powerful case of the new consciousness that the novel embodies, a consciousness that at once necessitates a different idea of time, space, causality and human agency.

To sum up this section of my argument, I would like to suggest that the rise of the Western novel was an outcome of the rise of a new way of apprehending reality and that this new way was linked to the rise of individualism. Now individualism is not something that emerges in isolation of various social, economic, political and technological factors. Therefore, the rise of the novel was deeply interconnected with the rise of modernity itself, in all its diverse manifestations and ramifications. But if we stick to this one key feature, individualism, then we can see the progress of the Western novel as the history of the metamorphosis of the individual in Western society. Starting with the emergence of modern sovereign subject defined in terms of the rationalism of Descartes, the empiricism of Locke and Hume and the idealism of Kant, the novel has gradually moved to express less autonomous and stable versions of the self. From what might be generally perceived as the social construction of the self, to its inversion into less cohesive and more fragmentary portrayals of inner subjectivity, the Western novel may be said to have moved from outer to inner 'realism' in the last two hundred years or so. More recently, with the postmodernists' proclamation of the death of man, the novel has had to rely increasingly on its own codes of representation for its material. The movement, in other words, may be described as – society to self to language itself.

In contrast, I would argue that the novel in India has been deeply implicated not in individualism, but in some form of the larger collective to constitute which its initial energies were harnessed. Yes, the novel arose not so much to capture the emergence of individualism in India but to manifest the birth of a nation. A close examination of the conditions under which the form developed in India will support such an argument. We at once discern, for instance, that the rise of the novel in India was linked to certain conditions of colonialism, the chief of which is the spread of literacy and of the technology of printing. Print capitalism, as Benedict Anderson tells us, plays a key role in the imagination of the nation. Thus a new community is born which, though separated by time and space, conceives of itself as one. This is all the more remarkable because the people involved not only belonged to different places, but, in the case of India, were also separated by language, religion, caste and

other forms of primordial identity. In India, the novel, along with other forms of printed literary material, thus, played an important role in the formation and imagination of this community.

In other words, the rise of the novel in India is deeply implicated not in the rise of individualism but in the rise of a modern national consciousness. Of course, one might argue that the rise of national consciousness was also conducive to the rise of individualism or vice versa. That is, the new individual – bourgeois, liberal, Western educated – was also the champion of Indian nationalism. But the manner in which the two are interlinked and interdependent would suggest that we would consider Frederic Jameson's thesis of the third world novel as a national allegory a little more seriously. The fact is that the novel in India, had a much different role to play than in the West. Here it carried out a much greater investment in community building, while in the West, its primary concern was with 'realism' and with the creation of individual subjectivity. This may be a little difficult for us to understand today because other media like TV or cinema have supplanted the primacy of the novel specifically and of the print culture in general as the carriers of collective consciousness. But if we go back to the mid and late nineteenth century, the novel in India had played a role similar to what serials like *Ramayan*, *Mahabharat* or *Buniyad* played in the last decades of the twentieth century in India.

The other thing to remember about the novel in India was that it was by no means the product of the subaltern classes. We may recall Ranajit Guha's definition of the subalterns as those who do not belong to elite groups. Further, he defines three kinds of elite groups not belonging to any of which marks the 'identity as difference' of the subalterns. These three elites are: dominant foreign groups, dominant indigenous groups at the all-India level and dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels. The rest of the people or the subalterns are defined by Guha as representing 'the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the "elite"' (*Subaltern Studies I*). From such a definition it would be clear that the early novelists of India belonged either to national or regional elites and were therefore not subalterns at all, except in so far as we may wish to complicate Guha's definition by turning it relational, instead of essential. I think what I have said, with some qualifications, applies to the novelists of today as well. Whether belonging to Dalits or women or other minority groups, these novelists cannot be described as subalterns except in relation to more privileged groups than themselves. This distinction needs to be borne in mind if we want to opt for a politics of the possible instead of a politics of the popular. In my own book *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*, was used the word 'sub-imperial' to characterize the Indian English novel.

Now, the various dominant classes who were the writers and readers of early Indian novels were, of course, also the founders of Indian nationalism. We cannot think of a better example of this combination than Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who was a pioneer of not only modern Bengali prose, but also of modern Hindu consciousness. He was not only among the first graduates of Calcutta University, but also an important member of the British civil service that ruled India. Thus, modern Hindu consciousness was itself constructed out of usable and reinvigorated elements from the past, from traditions which stretched back to thousands of years, combined with elements borrowed, absorbed and assimilated from the West. The Indian novel itself was a specific example of such a creative and hybrid fusion. What is perhaps more important is that this modern Hindu consciousness that emerged in the nineteenth century or thereabouts also had a critical element in it which allowed change, reform and progress.

This does not imply that modern India is the product of modern Hindu consciousness and that the Indian novel is therefore the same as the Hindu novel. While modern Hindu consciousness had a crucial role to play in the formation of modern India, I would not go to the extent of claiming that it was the only component or even the dominant one. The fact is that modern Hindu consciousness and modern Indian national consciousness are both by definition anti-sectarian, anti-regional, and therefore tend to cosmopolitanism or universalism. In other words, the *Sanatana* tradition is inherently incompatible with a theocratic state or theological exclusivism. This, I believe, is what prompted Mahatma Gandhi and other Congress leaders to insist on a state which if not secular in the Western sense was nonetheless not captive to any one religious group or denomination.

I have dwelt so long on the nature of Indian modernity and on its relationship with modern Hindu consciousness because they are crucial to any project that tries to situate the Indian novel. In *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*, my modest effort in trying to understand this phenomenon, I tried to situate the Indian novel by placing it in the grids of ideology, politics, caste, cross-cultural representation and, most crucially, in traditions of Indian narratology. Those arguments need not be repeated, but the scope of that framework could be extended. In the earlier book, there was, however, one grid that I did not employ, except tangentially – this was the grid of language, the status of the English novel vis-à-vis its (distant) country cousins.

I would like to do so briefly, before returning to the earlier concerns. In another paper, which was also originally the keynote address at a conference on the Indian English novel, I argued that the Indian English, that is not just the language, but its entire range of literary and cultural production, as argued