

fortnightly column

The Shape of a Future Indian English Literature?

by Fakrul Alam

1997, the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence, was of course also the year that Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*. Was this one more sign that Indian English literature as well as the country had come of age, or was Roy's achievement another flash in the pan, another prize garnered because of the Raj nostalgia the West has luxuriated in lately? As to answer this question three collections of Indian English Literature came out in England and America that year — a special double issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* and *The Granta Book of India*. It is my intention to review them one by one in this column to see if Indian English Literature has really arrived, or is an arrive strutting about as the newly rich are wont to do. This piece, the first of what I hope will be three essays of these collections, will examine the evidence offered in the June 23 & 30 issue of America's *The New Yorker*.

This special double issue of America's most famous literary magazine is edited by Bill Buford, (ex-editor of *Granta*) and consists of his Introduction to the collection, John Updike's review of Roy's novel and Ardashir Vakil's *Beach Boy*, four short stories, four poems, two longish essays, excerpts from a journal, a short essay, and the usual *New Yorker* sections ("Talk of the Town", "Life and Letters", "Showcase" and "Briefly Noted") all of them with "Indian" content. In fact, except for the inimitably droll and quintessentially New York cartoons and the "Crossword" and "Shouts and Murmurs" section, this is as un-American and as Indian an issue of *The New Yorker* as we are ever likely to get!

Buford's Introduction sets out to answer the question "why are there suddenly so many Indian novelists?" Buford's question is undoubtedly an irritating one; surely, it is only because he does not know much about the rich vernacular languages of India as well as its official language, Hindi, that he can assume there was no efflorescence of Indian novelists before now. Nevertheless, he is right in hailing the cornucopia of the Indian English novel. As he notes in his Introduction, the message Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* had for Indians writing in English has been taken to heart: "great novels could be fashioned from Indian stories, with an Indian sensibility, and a distinctly Indian use of the English language." Moreover, books by an Indian writing in English could sell. No wonder then so many Indian writers are arriving in the scene nearly every month; no wonder the international literary world is made to buzz with excitement everytime a writers such as Vikram Seth writes something or someone like Arundhati Roy arrives on the scene. The evidence



Salman Rushdie

seems incontrovertible: in the subcontinent "a new kind of English is finding a voice, a distinctly Indian English, one that is at once local and international, of its culture and of the globe."

If anyone thinks that Buford is trumpeting Indian English literature to attract attention to the special issue of *The New Yorker*, she should read Salman Rushdie's typically brash contribution to the issue, "Damme, this is the Oriental Scene for You" where he makes the claim that "the prose writing — both fiction and nonfiction — 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 eighteen 'recognized' languages of India, the so-called 'vernacular languages' during the same time." Combative as usual, Salman the showman is prepared to make an even larger claim: "Indo-Anglian literature represents the most valuable contribution India has made to the world of books."

This is not the place to debate Rushdie's provocative thesis and since his essay was reprinted a few months later as the Introduction to the *Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, I will save my comments on it for my assessment of that book, but John Updike's review of *The God of Small Things* and *Beach Boys* certainly seems to indicate that the literary world outside India has given Rushdie reasons to boast about the splash Indian writing has made internationally through Indian English literature. Updike, one of America's leading novelists, notes what many of us had also sensed in reading Arundhati Roy: her "confidently unorthodox prose... owes something to Salman Rushdie's jazzy riffs". Updike is also shrewd in his observation on what makes Roy's treatment of what is in some ways an unexceptionable tale of doomed love so unique: the adroitness with which "Roy peels away the layers of her mysteries." But for me the most important point he makes about the two



Amitav Ghosh

novels he is reviewing is how delicately Indian Roy (and Ardashir Vakil) are: they "give us an India remembered, a land, like Nabokov's Russia, glistening with the dew of early impressions and ominous with the dimly seen, uncontrollable machinations of adults."

The four short stories in the special issue of *The New Yorker* are by Kiran Desai, Rushdie, Vikram Chandra, and Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Kiran Desai, we discover, is making her debut as a writer in the pages of *The New Yorker* through her story "The Sermon in the Guava Tree." The opening line of her story — "The day that Sampath Chawla moved into a guava tree..." — reminds me of Katka's amazing opening sentence in "The Metamorphosis": "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." Almost as deftly as Kafka, Desai matter-of-factly takes us into the world of the absurd. Although her tale does not have the archetypal elements of the story by the Czech-German writer, a longer work by Desai, it can be said on the basis of the evidence provided by "The Sermon in the Guava Tree", will be well worth looking forward to. That she happens also to be Anita Desai's daughter is of some significance too: we are watching midnight's grandchildren hit the western literary world now!

Inevitably, though, Salman Rushdie's short story "The Firebird's Nest" steals the show staged by *The New Yorker* to celebrate India's fiftieth anniversary. Always at his best, when he fabulizes reality, Rushdie spins here a magical tale where, among other things, he brings to our notice "the combustibility of [Indian] women" and the "outdated socialism that had hobbled" the country's economy for so long only to give way to rampant desperado capitalism. He juxtaposes the western world, where one witnesses the "reification of the real" with the eastern one where "the possibility of the terrible" is a fact of life. Self-reflexive as is the best



Vikram Seth

of his fiction, "The Firebird's Nest" describes neatly the feeling one has in reading Rushdie at his best: the feeling "of passing through an invisible membrane, a looking glass, into another kind of truth; into fiction."

I have not read Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, the novel for which he got the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in 1996, but I do not find the story that he has contributed to *The New Yorker* special issue, "Eternal India" particularly impressive. Chandra sets this story in Mumbai's underworld and in it a Sikh inspector sets out to capture a mafioso type or more precisely, "a fillum villain." In the end the inspector, predictably, gets him man, but I am not too sure that Chandra has captured accurately in print the underworld bosses and their links with the power that are. In contrast, the Polish-Indian writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, displays in her short story "Husband and Son" the unique blend of sharp observation and calm acceptance of autumnal passions that has been her trademark as she offers one more tale about the lengths Indian women will go to out of unrequited passions.

While writers such as Rushdie, Jhabvala, Chandra, and Roy have been showered with prizes as well as praise, Indian English poets have been mostly ignored in the West. This is a pity, for as the three Indian poets assembled in *The New Yorker* commemorative issue testify, they too have their distinctive strengths and claims to worldwide attention. Thus the late A K Ramanujan's delicate juxtaposition of humanity in distress in Indian and American streets in the poem "Invisible Bodies" remind us of the quiet but vivid poems he used to write till his death in 1993. Jayanta Mahapatra evokes exquisitely an Indian scene in the opening stanza of his poem "Silence": "Rain, all night./Capacious, like the body of a woman./And the heat, intolerable./ A

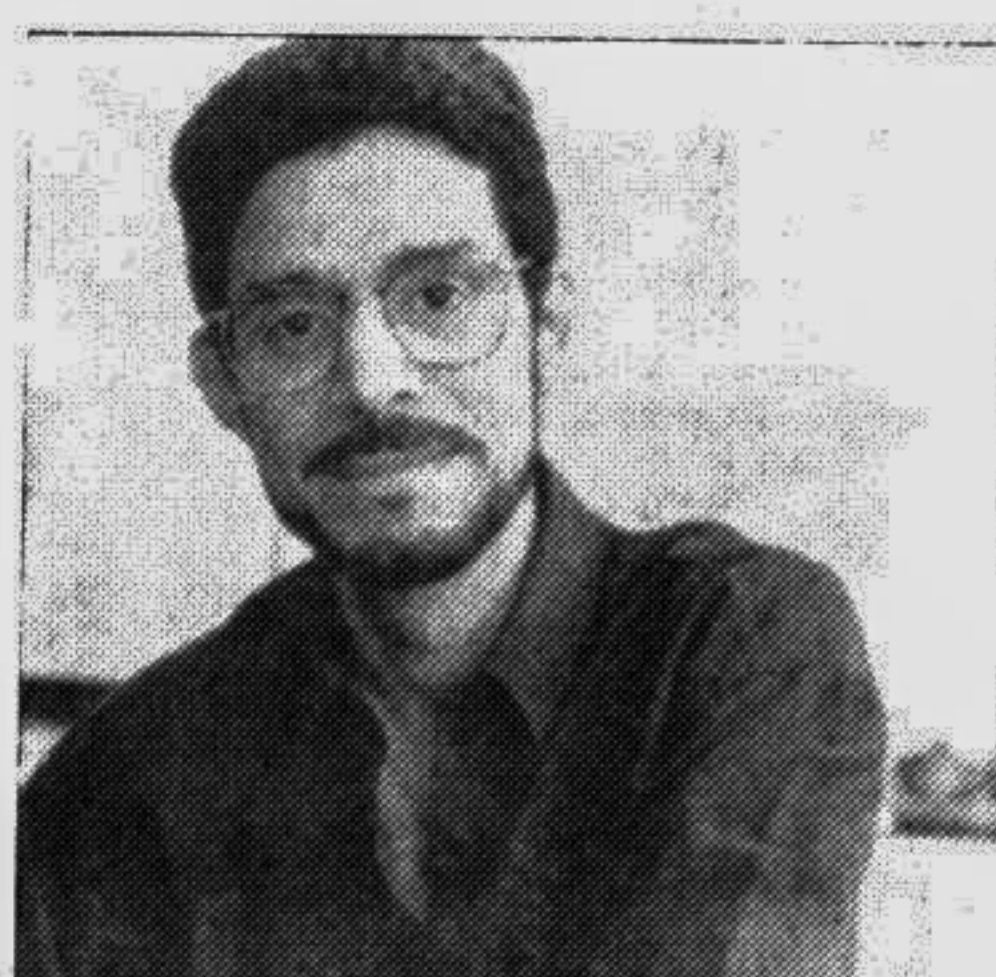


Arundhati Roy

cow lows once." Unlike Ramanujan and Mahapatra, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a new voice in Indian English poetry, but she too presents us polished verse in "The Maimed Dancing Men", a poem inspired by a paining with beautiful lines such as these: "Our proclaim bodies cannot/know pain, our ink hair/cannot thin into grayness."

Of the two long essays collected in the special issue of *The New Yorker*, one deals with the record of an Indian physician's expatriation to America while the other is an investigative piece on the Indian National Army which fought against the British in the Second World War. The Indian doctor who has emigrated to the United States is Abraham Verghese and the title of his essay, "The Cowpath to America" indicates the unglamorous but well-trodden route followed by herds of Indians dissatisfied with their work in their country. Verghese's essays shows not only how expatriation is one of the dominant themes of Indian English writing but also how effortlessly writers from the subcontinent has been wielding English prose to write about their lives and their vocations. The piece on the Indian National Army, Amitav Ghosh's "India's Untold War of Independence" representing as it does the "A Reporter at Large" section of *The New Yorker* underscores the rich tradition of English language journalism in India. Ghosh, however, is also a master story-teller, and his account of the rise and fall of the Indian National Army and the way it has been almost occluded in the writing of the history of India's independence is absorbing reading as much for his control of pace and presentation of character and setting as for details he has gathered from original research into the subject.

The big disappointment for me in *The New Yorker* showcase of Indian English writing is the excerpt from G V Desani's journal titled "India, for the Plain Hell of It." Readers of Desani's bravura novel *All About Hatter* (1948) will look vainly in the journal entries



Rohinton Mistry

for the idiosyncratic, carnivalesque qualities of that pioneering work. In fact, readers from the sub-continent may find Desani's musings on a trip to his homeland after a life spent almost entirely in the West somewhat off-putting; his cynicism and disillusionment at best makes him sound like an inferior Naipaul. On the other hand, Amit Chaudhuri's brief piece on his childhood, "Beyond Translation" is a typically evocative piece by this underestimated writer about growing up in a Calcutta in decline.

On the whole, then, the special double issue of *The New Yorker* published to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence does confirm that Indian English writing (and writers such as Arundhati Roy) like the country has come of age and will continue to register its presence in the literary world. A novelist such as R K Narayan — profiled in the magazine through a photograph with a text by an Updike — continues to be productive; Rushdie and his generation are firmly in center stage; and we can only expect more good things from the likes of Roy and Kiran Desai and Amit Chaudhuri. To quote Rushdie for the last time in this review: "India's encounter with the English language, far from providing abortive, continues to give birth to new children, endowed with lavish gifts."

A postscript to this review: among the poems included in *The New Yorker* special issue is one by a Bangladeshi poet. However, Shamim Azad's "The Most Beautiful Sweet Thing" has been translated from Bangla by Carolyne Wright and Syed Manzoorul Islam, and while it is good to have a Bangladeshi poet writing lovingly about our country represented in *The New Yorker* it would have been even better to have a Bangladeshi English writer in the collection. One can only hope that the time is not far off when we will have them on view in the literary world on occasions such as this one!

cinema

Revisiting Pather Pachali with Durga

by Syed Maqsood Jamil

OF the many pleasures of life, love of literature can develop into a lifelong interest. It has a profound effect on our hearts and minds. The love begins in the teens. When our hearts are tender, our minds are keen, our imagination has learnt to soar. Generally, the love begins with mystery and detective stories. The detectives become the heroes of the age.

Once, it was the time of Dasyu Mohon, Kirti Roy, Dasyu Bahram. It was a time, when there was no Humayun Ahmed. My love with literature started with them. It was however "Devdas" which made our hearts to flutter with love. With a deep yearning for a "Parbat" of our own.

But it is *Pather Pachali* which made its permanent place in my heart. I am still grateful to my friend who gave me the copy of *Aam Anthur Bhepu*, a children's version of *Pather Pachali*. It had illustration by Satyajit Ray. The love with the *dasyus* and detectives was over. The tender heart of a teenager was overcome with great kindness and sympathy for Durga. It told the tale in tears with a deeply absorbing narration. About the indignities suffered by her at the house of their rich relations and neighbours. And about the harsh cir-

cumstances of the life of poverty.

In one of this tragic episode, Durga was trying to draw away Apu's attention from the insult they suffered at the hands of Bhuban Mukhujje's children, Sotu and Tunu. They were being rudely driven away from collecting green mangoes from the Mukhujje courtyard. The pain was palpable on Apu's face. It was deeply moving to see the fondness of Durga for her brother. She did not want that the humiliation should rub onto Apu. When you have a sister like that, the angels tread in your childhood.

In a bid to lift the spirits of her brother, she was cheering him up by holding out the attraction of a far bigger mango tree, somewhere else. There was in fact no such tree. It was just a ploy so that the indignity may not crush Apu. She was mothering her brother — an emotional protection which we seek throughout our life. This is something which is specially endearing about Durga.

In our society, beating up children is not disapproved as a part of correcting them. The mental scars are however carried for a lifetime. It was an oft applied prescription for juvenile transgression. With time, its scope and effectiveness have declined. Today's children are, therefore, perhaps, fortunate. We lived under its fear in our time. Naturally, the two tragic occurrences where Durga receives merciless beatings,

brought tears to my eyes.

Harihar's family was poor and in debt. But Sarbajaya's self-esteem although battered, lived defiantly. Seja Thakrun of the Mukhujje's rubbed into its wounds cruelly by abusively reacting to Sarbajaya's pleading to protect her child, Durga, from wholesale accusations of theft. The little dignity left in Sarbajaya could no longer see Durga subjected to such ugly verbal assault for the suspected crime of stealing Tunu's string of beads. It became even more unbearable when the cries of stealing green mangoes was added to it. That was not her day to carry. So the frustrations of badly savaged self-esteem had only one way of coming out. Of wounding her further. Durga was taken by the locks of her hair and pounded furiously on her back.

The persecution of Durga for stealing took a macabre proportion when the same Seja Thakrun on another occasion pounded Durga's head on the wall leading her to bleed profusely from the nose. The devilish lady was hell-bent sure that it was Durga who had stolen the golden casket for keeping vermilion. The trauma of this kind of emotional turmoil can shrink anyone, anytime. The world seemed to be a cruel place, and poverty, the severest punishment. At least, I felt like Apu and continue to feel like him. A deep sad-

ness overpowers you when Bibhuti Babu puts words to Apu's injured thoughts. "কেনন বেন মনে হয় দিদির কেহ কোথায়ও নেই, - সে বেন একা কোথা হইতে আসিয়াছে - উহার সার্থী কেহ এখানে নেই।"

(I have the inexplicable feeling that my sister has no one anywhere — as if she had alone come from somewhere — she does not have any friend here).

The innocence of childhood has a magical quality. It finds its due place among our deeply cherished assortment of remembrances. There is a profound pleasure in re-living those memories in our minds. We keep going back where we can never go.

The great curiosity of Durga and Apu to see steam engine trains has the same magical innocence. They once ran through marshes, bamboo bushes, paddy fields, along the pond, over the Nawabgonj road, to have a glimpse of it. The rail lines stretched far, but there was no train to catch a glimpse. It was a thrilling adventure that captured their imagination. Most of us can fondly recall such adventures of our own. Their memories bring an air of freshness in our minds. The interest nestled inside Durga. Even the seriousness of malaria could not drive it out. When she had few more days to live, from sickbed, Durga whispered into Apu's ear:

"আমায় ভূই একদিন রেলগাড়ী দেখাবি।"
(Would you someday show me the steam engine train).

Perhaps Durga's inner self could hear the footsteps of death. She was gripped by pain of the inevitable departure from her dear world. It was difficult for her to accept the reality of going away to a far away place. For her, it was destined, not to be the husband's house, but a world 'from whose bourne no traveller returns' (Shakespeare).

Durga was therefore clinging with all her inner resolve to her familiar world of the trees, the trails, the bamboo bushes, the dear shades of the river bank. And above all, her brother Apu! Could there be a life without him? But death was lurking in the corner. Bibhuti Babu sadly ponders on the ironies of life.

"আকাশের নীল আন্তরণ ভেদ করিয়া মাঝে মাঝে অনন্তের হাতছানি আসে - পৃথিবীর বুক থেকে ছেলেমেয়েরা চকল হইয়া ছুটিয়া পিয়া অনন্ত নীলিমার মধ্যে ডুবিয়া নিজেদের হারাইয়া ফেলে - পরিচিত ও গতানুগতিক পথের বন্ধুর পাশে কোন্ পথচীন পথে।"

(From time to time, the call of eternity comes, piercing the blue firmament — children from the bosom of the world turn restless, rush forward, losing themselves in the eternal blue — in the traceless trails, far beyond the familiar and oft used path).

Durga was the sacrifice life offers to conciliate the heavens. I learnt look upon Durga's death as an eternal injustice that traumatizes mankind. It is an inexorable fact that life has to move on.

Durga, is a piece of fiction. But real life Durgas like her deliver the statement "Life is unfair."

It takes away those we hold dear. We mourn, we grieve. But life moves on. Because we have a contract with destiny. A place to go. A far... far away place. There can not be better words to say what Bibhuti Babu said to express Apu's lamentation.

"আমি চাইনি দিদি, আমি তোকে ভূমিদি, ইচ্ছে করেও ফেলে আসিনি - ওরা আমাকে নিয়ে যাচ্ছে।"
("I did not want it, my dear sister, I have not forgotten you, neither did I leave you behind of my own will....They are taking me away").

The brutal caprices of life, its inexplicable nature, its indignities, its wounds are essentially ruthless realities that prey on men and women, visit and devastate families. In plain terms, there is no joy in it, no sound reason to love them. Yet tales of pain, misery, fictional characters in distress are absorbing reading. It is the authors who put redeeming elements of aesthetic value to add finesse to the crudities of reality. The redeeming elements Bibhuti Babu put into tragic realities of *Pather Pachali*, and the sufferings of Durga, are of lasting emotional and literary value. For me, they have made *Pather Pachali* a greatly humanizing reading and.....Durga, an unforgettable literary character at all times.