

Postliberalization Indian Novels in English: Politics of Global Reception and Awards

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This anthology of essays on Indian fiction in English is an attempt to identify areas of critical and creative concern that have become significant in the field since the nineties. That India's economic liberalization has served to make the country an active participant in the global economy is arguable, but the psychological impact of the New Economic Policy (1991) that declared the nation to be an equal member of the global village is palpably evident everywhere in the socio-cultural sphere. So, although Indian fiction in English has, from its very inception, been received as high culture that is diasporic and transnational in its import, the re-imaging of the idea of India has dramatically transformed the way Indian writing is being produced and received at home and in the world today. Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan brings together essays on sixteen contemporary Indian writers who enjoy global visibility to explore these transformative changes. Her subject of inquiry traverses a tremendous range – from literary to popular writing and from diasporic to India-based writers.

Viswamohan candidly admits in her brief introduction that she could have easily included another thirty writers within the same rubric. She usefully pin-points the purpose of her inquiry by identifying seven issues that the anthology explores: cultural and critical frameworks that define reception; shift in reception in the age of liberalization; award-giving bodies and their attitude towards the newly liberalized nation; marketing strategies of big publishing houses; the impact of the market on the writers; the influence of the media; and the issue of saleable themes and representations in the literary works themselves. However, one wishes that her introduction had gone on to theorize the contemporary market for fiction and provide direction for locating, in the global flows of commerce, the different kinds of writings and writers included in the anthology.

Public discussions on India's economic liberalization have been polarized and volatile. Left-inclined theorists, cutting across disciplines, have tended to conceptualize this turn in policy as pro-rich, conservative (even reactionary), and a betrayal of the promise of a socialist, progressive nation. In fact, as might be inferred from references in the essays, many writers included in the anthology join the debate from the left, with a trenchant critique of India's elite. However, as far as political criticism goes, the anthology has provided equal space to both theorists who critique the neo-liberal ethos and globalization enthusiasts who uncritically welcome the multi-

nationalization of the publishing industry and proliferation of books on the market. This objectivity has paid off by creating a forum for a non-judgmental description of the contemporary market and authorial strategies.

A wonderfully nuanced use of the objective perspective is made by Shaleena Koruth in “Whatever Happened to Kaavya Viswanathan?” Her essay provides an intellectually stimulating exposition of the new ways in which South Asian American fiction and writers are being received in the USA and is relevant not only because the writer she is discussing is of Indian origin but also because her framework ultimately leads to a critique of the new economic order. Koruth relates the story of Viswanathan, a nineteen-year-old Indian-American who was first catapulted to celebrity on the strength of a ‘chick lit’ novel that she wrote while studying full-time at Harvard, then accused of plagiarism and vengefully denounced by the media. Koruth contextualizes the scandal, which had rocked the literary world in 2006, by exploring the “subtle negotiations between the publishing world, the media and the public” (152). She describes the ruthless business of marketing that has transformed authorship into a collaborative venture set up to feed consumers’ demand for exotic fare and how a young, personable, high-achieving author was overwhelmed by the magnitude of success that was being promised. Koruth’s essay argues for a more compassionate understanding of the author caught in market forces. Following her informative description of the contemporary market, the reader quickly begins to appreciate that the socio-economic order that she is describing—and which India is fast gravitating towards—not only over-emphasizes material success but has also generated family-norms and institutions to encourage hazardous risk-taking in the young.

Viswamohan’s own essay on Chetan Bhagat and the essays on Vassanji, Suketu Mehta, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, and Chitra Divakaruni discuss the response of the literary establishment to the perceived demand from readers-consumers without necessarily leading to a critique of socio-economic processes in the way Koruth’s essay does. These essays begin from the premise that India’s liberalization has led to a phenomenal increase in the constituency of Indian fiction in English. The successful author is conceptualized as someone who is proactively making use of this opportunity and addressing the new readers in ways that are comprehensible to them. Viswamohan delineates the new readership of Indian “aspirant-yuppies” that Bhagat has cultivated without evaluative judgment. However, other essayists are less invested in establishing how the increased global readership is “new,” or how and why the demand for stock themes from the Indian writer, like East-West encounters or representation of an exotic East, are larger and more inexorable today than they were before the 1990s.

Two essays that discuss strategies employed respectively by authors Vikas Swarup and Aravind Adiga are in contrast extraordinarily successful in illuminating the new challenges of liberalization. In his essay “Vikas Swarup: Writing India in Global Times” Chinmoy Banerjee accurately locates Swarup’s spectacular success in his “oblivion” to the question of language: “The quest for an

authentic Indian voice is not relevant to him because English as the language of the global market is a deterritorialized vehicle for communication of information, not an inflected medium of embodying a socioculturally embodied subject” (32). Banerjee goes on to give several insightful examples of the denuding of language in Swarup’s work which makes it easily accessible to a mass audience and also serves to make it eminently suitable for a certain kind of cinema dealing with the stock theme of India’s poverty. Banerjee concludes his essay by drawing a contrast between Indian popular and literary fiction, positing the former as the bearer of the dominant ideology of globalization and the latter as interventional. John Masterson, in his essay “Aravind Adiga: The White Elephant? Post-Liberalization, The Politics of Reception and the Globalization of Literary Prizes,” eschews controversial distinctions between the literary and the popular while affirming the values that Kar ascribes to literary fiction. He makes a persuasive case for reading globally celebrated literature not in terms of authenticity but with an eye to the details of life it includes and excludes. In his layered analysis of Adiga’s work Masterston argues that his allegedly inauthentic representation of India draws attention to the economic base of society, providing an opportunity for renewed wrestling with questions of subalternity, representation, and resistance, and thereby is not bereft of oppositional politics. In his view, fetishized postcolonial texts may still “get their reader’s brains humming with counterhegemonic urgency” (52). In both essays the writers’ role as an activist is considered essential in the present time.

The anthology also includes many essays on how writers negotiate the terrain between creativity and commerce on the one hand and the global and the local on the other: Kunal Basu’s work is discussed as operating outside the kind of “India” and “Indianness” popularized globally by Rushdie; Kiran Desai is situated as glocal – simultaneously global and local; whereas Manju Kapur’s work is seen to point to the need of redefining global and essentialized categories. Rohinton Mistry is commended for writing realist fiction based in India and successfully broadening the definition of Canadian literature whereas Vassanji is valorized as the quintessentially global writer. Pankaj Mishra and Tabish Khair are described as writing against the market as contrasted with the maiden novel of Arundhati Roy. But several essays, including that on Vikram Chandra and Suketu Mehta defend the “strategic exoticism” of Indian postcolonial writing.

In a work that attempts the kind of scope that this anthology does, there is danger that the material would be unequal as far as the quality of writing and thematic aptness are concerned. Along with the well-argued and theorized essays there are, unfortunately, some that do not contribute to the theme and purpose of the anthology. However, it is important to emphasize that the editor deserves commendation for choosing a still largely unexplored territory as her subject. On the whole the anthology establishes the significance of global reception for Indian fiction in English and, even more usefully, opens up new areas for research. It more than lives up to the publisher’s claim that it bears

on its jacket: “A critical handbook that investigates the perception of Indian novels in English at a global level.”