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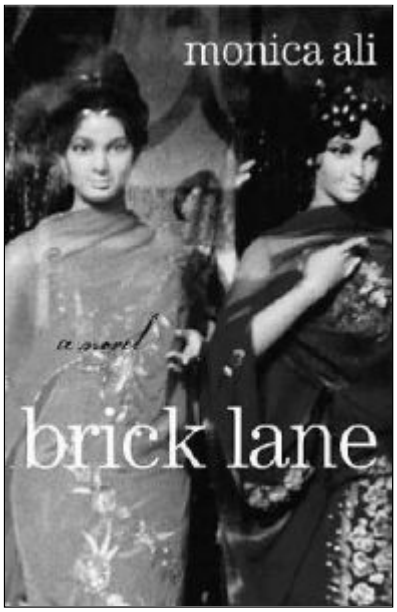
COMMENTARY

A rose by another name

Certain gaps and silences in a chunk of contemporary fiction points to a disturbing trend, says TABISH KHAIR. It marks the wilful construction of an ahistorical reader who passively celebrates the text.



ZADIE SMITH'S Booker-prize-winning **White Teeth** appears to make careful use of "history". And yet, if one reads it from outside the celebratory space of multicultural Britain, one notices intriguing gaps and silences. The one that I still remember relates to Samad Miah Iqbal who claims to be and is portrayed by the text as the great-grandson of Mangal Pande, the sepoy who fired the first shot of the 1857 revolt. A religious Muslim descendant of a religious Hindu hero? How? Why? The novel does not provide any answer. It doesn't even seem to be aware of the discrepancy.

A similar problem confronts the sceptical reader in another celebrated novel, Yann Martel's **Life of Pi**, which — in spite of its solid adherence to certain textual and mainstream definitions of religions (particularly "Hinduism") — is rather shaky in the field of names. Take, for instance, this extract: "He was a Sufi, a Muslim mystic... His name was Satish Kumar. These are common names in Tamil Nadu... "

The death of the reader

One wonders what such errors signify? Of course, one can choose not to notice them. One can also answer, as Salman Rushdie did when some historical errors were noted in **Midnight's Children**, that we are talking of an art form and an unreliable narrator. In Rushdie's case, the errors — intentional or not — did consolidate the general discourse of the novel. It was, after

all, a novel about history versus "his" stories. I am not sure that the same can be said of Smith's or Martel's novel, and a host of other, less celebrated or less accomplished novels. One can of course "explain away" these "errors", but only by detracting considerably from the art of the novelist.

But this bothers me not because of what it says about the novelist, but because of what it does to the reader. It marks the death of the reader. The reader, not as a blank receptor of the intentions of the author or the text, but as someone who actually reads. The reader as the critic. Here the etymology of the word "read" has to be kept in mind: to read is to "think, suppose, guess; discern the meaning of (chiefly in *read a riddle, a dream*); inspect and interpret... " Related, as the word is, to the Sanskrit *rãdh* and the Old Slavonic *raditi*, it also includes the active sense of "accomplish" and "attend to" respectively. Moreover, one of the original senses of the Germanic root is that of "taking charge" and the act of interpreting written symbols is suggested by its Old English root.

All of this reminds me of the way in which, for example, Seamus Heaney sees the act of writing. In one of his early poems, "Digging", he depicts his father digging outside while he, the poet and scholar, sits at a table writing. The poem notes the separate nature of the two acts, but also suggests that writing is a sort of digging: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rests./ I'll dig with it." Reading is also an act of digging. A reader is not only someone who stays on the surface of the text, but an active thinker and interpreter. She attends to the text, but she also accomplishes and takes charge.

Is it then that we have moved from the death of the author to the death of the reader?

Inscribed space

In 1968, Roland Barthes published the definitive obituary of the author. Writing begins, he noted, when the author enters his death. It is language that speaks, not the author, he claimed, which was not incorrect if rather hyperbolic. In proclaiming the death of the author, Barthes also proclaimed the death of the critic and celebrated the birth of the reader. The reader, he claimed, is "the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed." The reader, he added, is without history, biography, psychology; she is simply that space in which the traces by which the written text is constituted come together.

It might be churlish to proclaim the death of the reader in the wake of Barthes's and other theorists' announcement of the return to life of the reader. But there is some indication that a chunk of contemporary fiction seeks to cast the reader in a rather passive and celebratory role. And it appears that it is often this kind of writing — suave, polished, talented at times — that is celebrated in many cosmopolitan circles.

Digging history

I have avoided the obvious colonial allusion. I have not suggested that as the times get more and more neo-colonial, it is perhaps inevitable that some colonial tendencies return to novel writing. After all, there was a long tradition in the 19th Century of British writers writing about India with scant regard to specific matters, to local identities, to nomenclature. I wish to avoid this line of argument, for it appears to lead to a statement rather than an analysis. And I concede that nomenclature is always a problem. More so, when one writes of other times or classes or cultures. What one expects in these cases — that is, if one wants to stay alive as a reader — what one expects is the presence of "textual traces" that enable the reader to fill the gaps, smoothen the rough patches, justify the "errors", "authenticise" the fiction.

No, I am not talking of veracity. Take for example one other recent example: Philip Hensher's **The Mulberry Empire**. Hensher is by no means an Afghan and he has not, to the best of my knowledge, ever lived in the 19th Century. But his novel narrates events that take place

(largely) in Afghanistan around 1839. It features a number of Afghan characters, some based on historical personages and some blatantly fictional. Hensher was obviously faced with the problem of finding appropriate names for these characters. He appears to have solved it by taking recourse to a narrative device that highlights the artificial aspect of the novel and also fictionally authenticates its narrative. He introduces a short initial chapter — framed like a fairytale or a fable — that presents the (historical) Afghan king on his deathbed. He is surrounded by his 50-plus children, and Hensher lists their names. Then, as he moves on to the rest of the narratives, these are the historical names that he chooses for his fictional characters.

I believe that a device like this opens up a space for the reader to "interpret", "accomplish", be active. This is obviously not the only option. Writers as talented as Smith or Martel can surely think up many others. But if this space of active reading is foreclosed — not just in the text, which leaves unexplained and uncontextualised gaps, but also in criticism, which refuses to note these gaps — then all one can have is a kind of celebratory echoing of dominant whims. The author might or might not be dead, but the reader is surely expected not to think much for herself — not to "read" in other words.

`Upbeat' multiculturalism

Another celebrated and talented novel comes to mind: Monica Ali's **Brick Lane**. Take, for instance, the last pages of **Brick Lane**, where the main protagonist approaches a skating rink wearing a *sari*. But you cannot skate wearing a *sari*, her friend says. "This is England," the protagonist replies, "You can do whatever you like."

My only wish when I finished reading **Brick Lane** was that I were a protagonist in Ali's novel. It would make my life simpler, and more pleasant. For my history, regardless of Barthes, does not set me free either as a reader or a person. I am bound to notice names, for my name is always noticeable. I am liable to be kept from boarding planes to multicultural Britain and melting pot U.S. So are other people with names like mine, or for that matter, names like Samad Iqbal and even Satish Kumar.

Even though I have eschewed the easy colonial explanation, I cannot help wondering whether a line does not run from Ali's unironic ending, Smith's and Martel's misplaced names and similar slippages in recent fiction to Barthes's and other theorists' critical midwifery at the birth of the Reader-without-History. While this is somewhat unfair to Barthes, one can only imagine the Reader-without-History as a non-reader, as a passive receptor, as a simple celebrator of the text, not as someone who interprets, guesses, digs. It is at best a reader — to the extent that she is brought into being — who wants to escape from history. It is a reader who wants to feel good about being who or what she is, and a knowledge of history — even one's own history — does not always cause one to feel good.

Lack of literary will

The construction of this wilfully ahistorical reader might explain not only the upbeat "multicultural-England" ending of Ali's novel but also the slippages in Smith's and Martel's novels. Slippages that could have been avoided, if only the literary will had been there, for of course there are names — Kabir, Shabnam etc. — shared by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs in India. But then in order to dig up such names one would have to put one's shoulder to the hard ground of history; one would not be able to float away, as Martel's protagonist-narrator puts it, from the realm of "mere believability" to that of beautiful stories.

Tabish Khair recently published a new novel, The Bus Stopped *(Picador, 2004).*