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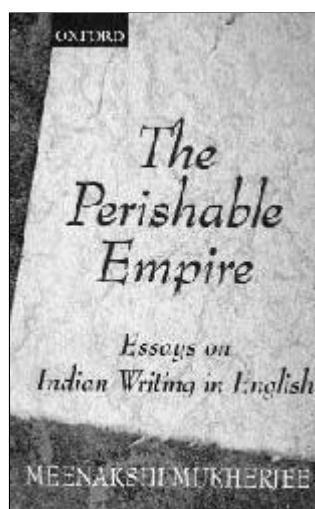
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Intimations of immortality

The first Indian novel in English was written in 1864 and we have certainly not seen the last of them yet. RUKMINI BHAYA NAIR reviews two books that look at the legacy of colonialism in literature.

WHEN the British finally left India in 1947, they bequeathed us three gifts - the magic mirror of Pakistan, the seven-league boots of the English language and the wondrous apparatus of Babudom. It is these ambiguous legacies, especially the second and third, which constitute the main subject of the books reviewed here.



Exactly how do we go about assessing the perishability of the intellectual goods and services once provided for us by our erstwhile "rulers"? And how may we understand the fictive nature of colonial self-advertisement - its capacity to induce a debilitating alienation among the "ruled"? These appear to be the basic, inter-linked questions raised by Meenakshi Mukherji and Tabish Khair. In this sense, there is a natural continuity between the works of the two critics; Khair more or less begins his commentary where Mukherjee leaves off. The trajectory of their enquiries runs from Mukherjee's essay on the first Indian novel in English - Rajmohan's Wife by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, written in 1864 - to Khair's discussion of The Calcutta Chromosome by Amitav Ghosh, published in 1996 - certainly not the last Indian novel in English by a long shot!

The century and a half between Bankimchandra's solitary attempt at the English novel and Ghosh's multiple experiments with the same form is, of course, fraught with irony. Today, Indian novelists in English stride blithely across international boundaries and the hold of the Babus over the indigene "masses" - Khair calls them Coolies - has, if anything, grown. The alienating fictions of empire, it appears, continue to flourish. Genre and language - both undeniably colonial "implants" in the case of the Indian English novel - combine in ever more powerful, market-driven ways to exercise a seductive hold over the sub- continental imagination.

As Mukerjee pithily puts it, a once nearly invisible form is now visible

with a vengeance. The "nameless" enthusiasts - Soshee Chunder Dutt, Panchkouree Khan, T. Ramakrishna Pillai, A. Madahavaiah - who embraced the genre of the novel in the 19th and early 20th Centuries have yielded to a millenium glamour brigade - feted at book-launches, much photographed and well-publicised in review-journals. Consequently, it requires considerable ingenuity to sustain the argument that we have definitively dumped our colonial baggage, but Mukherjee attacks her task with zest and subtlety. Unsurprisingly, she begins with a reverberating quotation from Thomas Babington himself:

There is an empire exempt from all natural causes of decay. that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws.

If the British Empire really did come with a "sell-by" date stamped on it, then it is certainly legitimate on the part of scholars to seek to discover the internal causes that contributed - despite Macaulay's protestations - to the decay of the imperium. But Mukherjee's thesis is more complicated - her point is not so much that the empire has inevitably "perished" as that Macaulay could not "have anticipated the way history would rewrite the terms" of his prophesy. Her project is thus "an attempt to consider the complex and evolving relationship between English and India through literary texts [by taking] into consideration the layered context of the other Indian languages surrounding English and the socio-economic pressures that impinge on literary production".

Yet, the emphasis on "socio-economic pressures" in the opening paragraph of her work notwithstanding, Mukherjee stays mostly with textual analysis in the ten occasional essays that make up her book. Only the last couple of pieces refer to the economic impact of globalisation on Indian writing and even in these, her primary concern is really with the relationship between English and the bhashas.

Khair's work, on the other hand, makes Marxist socio-economic theory the bedrock on which the super-structure of his literary analysis rests although, like Mukherjee, he is at pains to deny any exclusive allegiance. His opening remarks contain the following caveat: "While recognising socio-economic alienation, I have stressed that the socio-economic (material) and discursive (symbolic) aspects of alienation are dialectically related and mutually constitutive".

In short, Khair and Mukherjee seem at all times to maintain a gracious balance. They speak in counterpoint and display a genuine respect for each others' different methodologies - presumably because they are bound by what we may call, for want of a better name, the fellow-feeling of postcolonial solidarity. Which brings me to one of the main strands in Mukherjee's argument - the issue of "homogenisation". Unlike the bhashas, Mukherjee suggests that English language writing in India tends to blend and blur cultural differences; it appeals to a metropolitan, international audience and has a shifting rather than grounded presence in the literary field. She writes felicitously, for example, of R. K. Narayan's novels:

Like other imaginary towns in literature, we do not know the latitude or longitude of Malgudi. Nor do we know its different languages, its ethnic

or communal tensions. Malgudi is Hindu, upper-caste pan-India, resistant to change, eternal and immutable - very different, say, from Marygunj in Phaniswar Renu's *Maila Anchal* (Hindi: 1954) or Purnea in Satinath Bhaduri's *Jagori* (Bangla: 1946), both in North Bihar, variegated in terms of caste and sub-caste, language and dialect, and in the throes of constant turmoil.

I would not for a moment deny the validity of Mukherjee's thesis here vis-a-vis "creative writing" in English by Indians. At the same time, a repeated query came back to haunt me as I read through Mukherjee's appealing doctrine. Is not English language criticism subject to exactly the same constraints of homogenisation? Can it help but define itself in relation to, say, the international POCO band-wagon or the category "Commonwealth Literature" - recently made newsworthy again by Amitav Ghosh when he withdrew his book from the Commonwealth Prize stakes? For all the talk of "critical resistance" and "reclaiming language", I feel sure that an analyst as honest as Mukherjee would admit that in its terminology, its alliances and its self-image, Indian literary criticism in English is in as much a socio-political bind as English language creativity. For myself, I would have preferred a more reflexive self-critique on Mukherjee's part on this crucial issue.

A certain alienation comes with the turf; that, at any rate, is Khair's conclusion after an extensive examination of the Indian English novel from Raja Rao to Rushdie. Writing in English constitutes both an act of atonement and of heartrending betrayal. That is the simple paradox of colonial inheritance. Even expressed attachment to the subaltern subject turns into alienation when couched in a language actually invented for elite exploitation by the "servants of empire" - Macaulay to Montague. Khair's epigraph says:

This book is dedicated to family servants, village relatives and those friends of the first twenty-four years of my life who could not read Indian English fiction, but whom Indian English fiction claims to have read:

Be with me when they cauterise the facts

Be with me to the bottom of this page

Insisting on what history exacts

Be memory, be conscience, will and rage.

The idea of the emblematic coolie as the hidden and silent voice of conscience dogging every page of babu fictioneering is an attractive one. Yet, I can't seem to rid myself of the thought that Khair's strategy, too, in the end replicates that very "reading" of the subaltern that he wishes to eschew. As he plunges into detailed textual analysis, the force of his initial insight is stifled by the always onerous exigencies of genre.

It is painfully clear that Khair's book began life as a Ph.D.dissertation - than which no form can be more "cauterising"! *Babu Fictions* weighs in at 407 closely printed pages and the "bottom of the page" (or chapter) is far too burdened with footnotes to accommodate the "will and rage" that so inspire Khair. To be fair, as I've mentioned, this is hardly his fault. The

form of the thesis requires it to wear its learning upon its indexed sleeves, to display the thoroughness of its scholarship via its flounced appendices. Thesisitis, after all, has been a babu affliction for a long while - but pare it down to its essentials and this book is a fine addition to the archive of Indian English criticism.

Laden with theory, Khair's text moves slowly and with gravitas. Not so Mukherjee's, which is light and airy, full of gossip and charm - her essay on her encounter with Nirad Choudhuri being a case in point. Again, therefore, I would emphasise the complementary character of these volumes. Unlike Khair - much the younger critic - Mukherjee has already produced her weighty tomes: *The Twice-born Fiction* (1971); *Realism and Reality* (1984) and so forth, while Khair has been far more eclectic, having earlier published a novella and two volumes of poetry. Yet often, in surprising conjunction, both critics choose to home in on the same book - for example, Rushdie's *Haroun*. At such times, reading them side-by-side is especially satisfying. More importantly, though, what these critics share is an attitude of transparent sincerity and a sophisticated understanding of the enigmatic twists and turns of history.

Investigating the "historical events" that mark the years 1884 (when the first Indian novel in English was published) and 1996 (when Ghosh's *Calcutta Chromosome* appeared), I myself find much that seems eerily comparable. For, instance, the same processes of "renaming" prevail - in 1884, Calcutta Industrial Arts Society is converted into Calcutta Govt. College for Art, while in 1996 Madras comes to be known as Chennai. Losing battles are still waged by the bureaucracy against the ravages of nature - in 1884, immense damage is reaped by a cyclone in 24 Parganas, with 50,000 lives feared lost and in 1996, a severe cyclone hits coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh, leaving death and destruction in its wake. Advances in technology are announced with equal panache - in 1884, the East Indian railway system from Calcutta to Delhi is completed, and the Post office in Calcutta built on the site of the "Black Hole"; in 1996, P.V. Narasimha Rao dedicates the satellite INSAT-2C to the nation and India launches its Remote Sensing Satellite - PSLV-D3. And in the field of literature, Rajmohan's *Wife* is serially published in 1884, while in 1996 Mahashweta Devi gets the *Jnanpith*. (I am indebted for these "facts" about 1884 and 1996 to Gopa Sabharwal's *The Indian Millennium: AD 1000-2000*.)

While it is true that they do not specifically mention most of the events listed above, Mukherjee and Khair show a rooted sensitivity to the way in which the Indian novel in English, however "alienated", shares a historical context with the bhashas. This common history is both a measure of the power of Indian English writing and its possible weaknesses. *The Perishable Empire* and *Babu Fictions* take pains to emphasise this: that is their signal strength.

At the start of this review, I mentioned the legendary triad of *aina*, *yantra* aur *zaban* (mirror, machinery and language) through which the British may have sought to ensure their immortal presence on the Indian subcontinent. In the final analysis, Mukherjee and Khair deserve our gratitude for the convincing links they establish between that imperial troika and the sturdy, battered three-wheeler of *roti*, *kapda* aur *makaan* which animates our national debates today.

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The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Oxford University Press, 2000, Rs. 545.

Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels, Tabish Khair, Oxford University Press, 2001, Rs. 575.

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