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Indian visions

Michael Wood considers subaltern agency and alienation in contemporary Indian English novels in this exclusive online essay from the London Review of Books

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Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels by Tabish Khair. Oxford, 407 pp., £21.50, 8 March, 0 19 565296 7
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An Obedient Father by Akhil Sharma. Faber, 282 pp., £9.99, 22 January, 0 571 20673 5
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The Death of Vishnu by Manil Suri. Bloomsbury, 329 pp., £16.99, 22 February, 0 7475 5270 3
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The Glass Palace by Amitav Ghosh. HarperCollins, 551 pp., £16.99, 3 July 2000, 0 00 226102 2
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In Anita Desai's recent novel Fasting, Feasting, there is a delicately framed moment of what looks like reconciliation. An unmarried daughter has seen her last chance of a career and a life independent from the family vanish into the demands of her mother's real or feigned illness. Feigned, the daughter is sure: the crafty parental stranglehold. But then daughter and mother attend a ceremony of mourning, where a dead woman's ashes are consigned to the river. Each clasps the other's hand, the mother weeps, and the daughter thinks "they are together still, they have the comfort of each other." 'Together still' means neither is dead, not that the daughter has failed to get away, and the chapter ends as the daughter "dips her jar in the river, and lifts it high over her head. When she tilts it and pours it out, the murky water catches the blaze of the sun and flashes fire." The blaze of the sun is the final flaring of the daughter's anger, perhaps, the prelude to a long acceptance of an unchangeable condition.

The context makes this settled reading untenable, though, or at least insufficient. The ceremony that daughter and mother are attending is for a woman who after many years

do with the two images. At the very least an act of violence has crept into the scene of calm, and the blaze of the sun looks altogether different, a reminder of the sheer intensity of the despair or hostility which can lurk in quiet days.

All the characters here are Indian. The emotions are all in the cultural family, so to speak, and we don't need to leap to thoughts of post-colonial or subaltern repression and resistance. But since the novel is written in English, the language is itself a historical marker, a relic of empire. The characters in the novel certainly speak English (go to a convent school, drink whisky, drive a Rover, read Ella Wheeler Wilcox, although they don't each of them do all of those things), but they don't speak only English, and it's not clear when they switch languages. When the priest recites his prayers at the ceremony or tells the boatman to "Turn back now, it's done," he is presumably not speaking English. When the daughter says 'Mama', I think perhaps she is. Although Desai dedicates this novel To Those Whose Stories I've Told, part of her discretion is her refusal to speak at length for her characters, to represent directly, for instance, the rage that may haunt their obedience. She speaks another language, or rather two other languages, English and the language of images.

Desai's awareness of these languages is one answer to the question Tabish Khair puts in his intelligent and argumentative book on contemporary Indian English novels: "how can agency be expressed and recognised when the medium of expression is not the agent's?" This is a fine question, but it's about a sense of language rather than a linguistic fact. It's not, I think, that English doesn't belong to the Indians who speak it: why wouldn't it belong to them as much as to anyone else? Or better, does it make any sense to think of language as belonging to anyone? But assumptions of possession and dispossession are everywhere, and full of intimations of class and power. "This language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine," Stephen Dedalus thinks while talking to an English priest in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. The language isn't the priest's and isn't Stephen's, but the priest talks as if he owned it and Stephen feels he never will. Neither, we may wish to recall, has any other language except those he has learned in school.

There are 16 official languages in India. Some 5 per cent of the population can read English, but mostly for vocational or technical purposes, while about 40 per cent know Hindi. I'm taking these figures both from Khair and from an article by Pankaj Mishra in the New York Review of Books. Readers and writers of English are thus a tiny minority, but Khair quotes the critic Harish Travedi as saying "it is this tiny minority which is the privileged, prosperous, decision-making new ruling caste of the country." The privilege and the proportion exclude so much of what is there (although the exclusions work in different ways) that I'm not sure where this leaves non-Indian readers of Indian English fiction, except with a huge reminder of everything we don't know and perhaps can't know. We should remember, too, that much Indian fiction in English is written for readers abroad, or indeed written abroad. All three of the novelists discussed in this review live in the United States, Khair in Copenhagen.

Khair's topic is 'aspects and effects of alienation in Indian English fiction', and he prefers "the now unfashionable term alienation" to more current concepts like hybridity, and says why at length. A more troublesome term might be the 'Babu' of his title, since it seems hard to shake off its pejorative tone. Khair says he is using the term descriptively, in accordance with a now accepted usage in subaltern studies - Babus "are middle or upper class, mostly urban (at times cosmopolitan), Brahminised and/or 'westernised', and fluent in English" - but of course a lingering flicker of the pejorative helps to say what he means by 'alienation'. 'Babu fictions' are "literature written by a privileged section (elite) of a once-colonised people (colonial subalterns)". The sense of this writing as "subaltern and privileged" is at the heart of Khair's critical project. Having mapped out the fiction, worried about questions of exile and hybridity, he turns to issues of language, city life, gender and class, before settling into detailed analyses of work by Raja Rao, RK Narayan, VS Naipaul, Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh is Khair's anti-Rushdie ("Rushdie continues to write with only a fractional awareness of the complexities of alienation"), a sort of demystified, theoretically alert version of Narayan or Naipaul, particularly in the novel The Calcutta Chromosome. But then Khair has some generous things to say about Rushdie's talents, and gets a little nervous about his own enthusiasm for Ghosh. "This concluding chapter . . . is not meant to be read as a eulogy of Ghosh and The Calcutta Chromosome," he says sternly. He means there's still work to be done, because "any narration of subaltern agency may well end up as nothing more than entertainment." It's a risk.

An Obedient Father is a harsh and elegant novel which is about as far from entertainment as you could get. It is set in Delhi in and around 1992, and it describes the earlier, repeated violation of a daughter by her father with grim, unloving detail, as if Humbert Humbert had been stripped of his wit and forced to make a seedy documentary. The daughter, now grown up and widowed, still lives with her father because she has nowhere else to go, and her own daughter is at risk from the father's muddy and unfocused appetites. All but three of 12 chapters are narrated by the father, one Ram Karan, and the triumph of the book is not to make this character appealing or defensible - how could it do that and why would it want to? - but to make him such an intelligent witness of his own disarray. Remembering his wife, who died a year ago, he evokes her abandonment of all care for her appearance or odour (at the age of 30 she "stopped oiling her hair and changing her clothes regularly", her teeth were splayed because she clenched them so tightly giving birth), and says: "Radha became, like my children, only a reminder of all the things I had done wrong." Later he thinks of the sadness of his granddaughter's life as making him "imagine a world where I had not committed my crimes". Even here, though, he is not apologising, and not seriously penitent; he is mainly feeling sorry for himself. In this sense, he is like Humbert: he can't imagine a story of which he is not the unhappy centre.

He has committed other crimes too. At the start of the book he is a bagman for a Mr Gupta, a civil servant in the Delhi education department whose art is to move the bribes he gets from schools into the coffers of the Congress party. The novel opens, in Ram

Karan's voice, with this wonderful sentence: "I needed to force money from Father Joseph, and it made me nervous." The Delhi details of the novel are profuse and precise - apartment buildings, houses, roofs, streets, surrounding countryside, buses, food, movies, rickshaws, cows, boys playing cricket, takeout from Pizza King - but the low-level gangster atmosphere resembles that of the New Jersey of Jim Jarmusch's film Ghost Dog. When Rajiv Gandhi is killed, Mr Gupta is asked to switch his loyalties to the Hindu nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata party), indeed to stand as one of the party's candidates for parliament, and thinks this is a good idea. This involves raising and embezzling a lot more money, and Ram Karan is soon caught up in this new project, although he thinks it is doomed. Mr Gupta's campaign does not go well, his son is killed, and he himself is murdered for stealing the Congress party's stolen money, but not before Ram Karan, in an unusual moment of astuteness, has managed to betray his boss, and protect at least his own life if not his cash. There is a grim, calculating humour in the way Ram Karan rates Mr Gupta's chances: "I thought that if Mr Gupta was relying on me to save him, it was time to leave Mr Gupta"; "I had to betray Mr Gupta soon, I thought, or I would be betrayed. Here was a man who could not scare people away from killing his son. How was he going to win an election?"

There is something Brechtian about the bleak wit of these lines, and the same tone recurs, in a more openly comic mode, towards the end of the novel. Ram Karan is dead, and his other daughter has come to take her niece to America. Asked how the girl is doing in school, her mother says she would be top of her class "but the father of the student who is first is a doctor and gives free medicine to the principal". Is this conspiracy theory, parental delusion or cynical realism? When challenged, the mother says: "It's true. This is India." And then the girl startles them all by saying: "Mummy says the secret to success is working hard and cheating." Is this India or just what India (or any place) feels like when you're frightened and angry and poor?

The Death of Vishnu also has a wonderful opening sentence: "Not wanting to arouse Vishnu in case he hadn't died yet, Mrs Asrani tiptoed down to the third step above the landing on which he lived, teakettle in hand." After that, though, the novel settles for a comfortable, entertaining India, where lyrical visions ("Then, thinking about the sea behind his building, the water that stretched past the horizon, the lands, the countries, the continents, that lay beyond, and above them all, the sky, with its unexplored worlds, its planets, its moons, its sun, and its endless constellations of stars, Vinod continues his homeward journey") alternate easily with broad comedy - "Mrs Mirchandani . . . inexpertly toppled her plate inwards, depositing cubes of cheese in her sari, some of which she only found (and ate) at home, later." The setting is an apartment house in Bombay, where the otherwise homeless Vishnu lives on the landing. He is dying, and does die at the novel's end, having remembered much of his life in technicolour before he goes. The implication is that this miserable human Vishnu is also a version of the mighty god Vishnu, that quite different perceptions of a person meet in the name, but the final vision of a mythological forest and a meeting with the boy god Krishna seems too bland for the effect of transcendence it is after. Vishnu's dying is placed in

counterpoint with the various stories of the less homeless inhabitants of the building: the wives who nag their husbands and quarrel with each other; the Hindu girl who elopes with a Muslim boy because it will make her life like a movie; the long-grieving widower; the atheist who has begun fanatically to seek religious enlightenment. Everything is amusing and agreeable here, and the alienated agency Khair would have us look for has vanished into sentences like "Perfumes perch along the periphery of his perception, flitting away at his approach."

Ghosh's new novel, The Glass Palace, is all about subaltern agency and its presence or absence; about what it means to claim it or have it, and under what conditions the notion crumbles into incoherence. The action begins in Mandalay in 1885, as the British invade and take over Burma, exiling the last King to a lonely town on the west coast of India. A sovereign becomes a subaltern before our eyes. All he can do is worry about lost or slighted rituals and watch the ships as they enter and leave the harbour. This is how Ghosh describes the King settling into his captivity with its 'magnificent' view: "He sat in one of the armchairs and watched the ghostly shadows of coconut palms swaying on the room's white plaster walls. In this room the hours would accumulate like grains of sand until they buried him."

There is more, though. The King's captors are (mainly) English, but the British army which took his kingdom was largely Indian. Why would Indian soldiers serve in such a cause? "Chinese peasants would never do this," a Malayan Chinese says - that is, "allow themselves to be used to fight other people's wars with so little profit for themselves". He thinks of this submission "without protest and without conscience" as 'evil', consciously borrowing a word from the moral language of the conqueror. "What other term could you use to describe their willingness to kill for their masters, to follow any command, no matter what it entailed?" And yet, the reflection continues, these soldiers also seemed innocent in their way. "An innocent evil. I could think of nothing more dangerous." There is a little whiff of anachronism here, as if Adolf Eichmann had been transported back into 19th-century Burma. The comparison helps, though, because the innocence of evil is not the same as its banality. Innocence can be ended, although not without pain or damage. It can also be avoided from the start. The rather Kiplingesque Indian boy the Malayan Chinese is talking to has already survived a disease which killed off the rest of his family, and he plans to make his fortune, and he does, by first transporting Indian labour to Burma, and then buying a teak plantation with the proceeds. From the start, the Chinese sees "no simplicity" in the boy's face, "no innocence: his eyes were filled with worldliness, curiosity, hunger." "He was, in a way, a feral creature," the narrator says later. Similarly, the Chinese peasants who would not fight other people's wars are not members of any independence movement: they just don't see the point of difficult action that isn't for profit. Conversely, the very virtues one might think of in such a context - honour, loyalty, the capacity for self-sacrifice - are employed in the service of an exploitative empire, and therefore versions of subaltern illusion. This debate resounds throughout the novel.

A wounded Indian officer fighting for the British against the Japanese in world war two suddenly has a sense of himself as a pawn in a game where he imagined he was a player.

"He had never experienced the slightest doubt about his personal sovereignty; never imagined himself to be dealing with anything other than the full range of human choice. But if it were true that his life had somehow been moulded by acts of power of which he was unaware - then it would follow that he had never acted of his own volition; never had a moment of true self-consciousness."

A little later he asserts his volition and consciousness by going over to the Indian Independence League, an organisation designed to use the Japanese against the British, but he can't do this without facing a host of troubling questions.

"He knew that nothing - nothing important - was possible without loyalty, without faith. But who would claim his loyalty now? The old loyalties of India, the ancient ones - they'd been destroyed long ago; the British had built their Empire by effacing them. But the Empire was dead now - he knew this because he had felt it die within himself, where it had held its strongest dominion - and with whom was he now to keep faith?"

Why had the Empire died (and lived) within him? Because in happier, less self-conscious days, he and his fellow officers had seen themselves as "the first modern Indians; the first Indians to be truly free". "'Look at us' - they would say - 'Punjabis, Marathas, Bengalis, Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims. Where else in India would you come across a group such as ours - where region and religion don't matter - where we can all drink together and eat beef and pork and think nothing of it?'" This is not entirely deluded - the British brought certain liberations and modernisations to India, much as Napoleon's empire had spread them across Europe at the end of the 18th century - but it is historically blinkered, and it rests on a fallacy which Ghosh returns to again and again in this novel: the defence of the indefensible because it did some accidental good. The most lucid moment in the book is also the bleakest. The officer's rebellion against the British empire, while courageous and clear-sighted, is hopeless because he is too thoroughly the empire's creature. "Just look at us," he says to a colleague. "What are we? We've learned to dance the tango and we know how to eat roast beef with a knife and fork. The truth is that except for the colour of our skin, most people in India wouldn't even recognise us as Indians." And later: "Did we ever have a hope? We rebelled against an empire that has shaped everything in our lives; coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge, indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves." His friend, a photographer and not a military man, thinks: "this is the greatest danger, this point . . . where, in resisting the powers that form us, we allow them to gain control of all meaning; this is their moment of victory: it is in this way that they inflict their final and most terrible defeat." This is not the whole story, of course. There are less contaminated creatures of empire, and there are visions of independence which include the freedom to tango and eat beef. But the question here, as with the ownership or non-ownership of language, is one of

consciousness, and it is hard to take the control of meaning from the enemy, even when you have got him to put down his arms or go home.

The Glass Palace has a terrific historical sweep, from the old Raj to the contemporary United States. We learn about elephants and the management of teak forests, the rise of Indian independence movements, the growth of rubber plantations in Burma, the Asian fronts of world war two, the complicated politics of Burma/Myanmar after the war. The characters, in addition to the Chinese and Indian figures I've already mentioned, include an Indian district collector who becomes the King of Burma's keeper, the collector's wife (then widow), who travels to Europe and the United States and returns to India as a political activist; her Burmese friend, who was a palace servant in Mandalay and ends up, after marriage, children and many adventures, in a Buddhist monastery in her native country; this woman's children, one of whom is the photographer we've just seen; the widow's brother's children, one of whom is the officer I've been talking about; the son and grandchildren of the reflective Chinese man, who become owners of (and then lose) a vast rubber plantation.

For all this book's bleak intelligence about empire and freedom, it is a deeply romantic work. I say this more in admiration than complaint, but nevertheless with some surprise. The characters have their differences, but they are courteous, understanding people, even the ruthless ones. They fall in love, they follow their hearts, and female beauty sometimes seems to be more of an engine for action than politics or empire. "She was by far the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld, of a loveliness beyond imagining"; as "beautiful as a fairytale princess"; "perhaps the loveliest woman she'd ever set eyes on"; "beautiful beyond belief, beyond comprehension"; "she was, without a doubt, the most beautiful woman he'd ever spoken to"; "She was beautiful almost beyond belief." The first four of these quotations refer to Dolly, the Burmese palace servant who finally joins a monastery; the last two to two different women, one Indian, one Burmese. What are these creatures (and these descriptions) doing in this novel?

Among other things they are reminding us that this work is not only romantic, it is a form of romance. Henry James says romance as a genre deals with "experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it". The implication is that the writer of such works does the disengaging, disembroiling and disencumbering from experience as we know it, while the author of novels reports faithfully on all our encumbrances. Ghosh is doing something of this with his fairytale women, but there is more to it, since all his characters have extraordinary grace, even if they don't have beauty. The implication, I think, is that history itself has its romances, that actual people do survive its horrors and defeats, or succumb to them with a dignity we wish we ourselves had. When Ghosh has one of his characters say that "politics . . . cannot be allowed to cannibalise all of life," the context is Myanmar and the legacy of empire, and the point is similar to the one that the same character has already made about the 'greatest danger' and the 'final defeat'. But the survival of dignity and generosity and honour is different from mere survival,

and Ghosh's characters are not so much idealised as highlighted against the darkness, creatures whose luck and kindness go hand in hand. Is this an answer to the bleakness of his political vision? It is not a political answer, and it is certainly not a solution. But it is a response to the terrible, intricate history he evokes so well, and it could perhaps be a condition of his, or anyone's, acceptance of this inheritance that we refuse the despair it so plausibly urges on us.

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