

Geetha Ganapathy-Doré 2011: *The Postcolonial Indian Novel in English*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. xvi + 193 pp. ISBN 978-1-4438-2723-2

Christopher Rollason
Independent scholar, Luxembourg
Rollason54@gmail.com

This book, by the Paris-based India scholar Dr Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, appears on the literary academic market to fill a significant gap. If there is no lack of treatises of established value, in various languages, on postcolonial theory and literature in general (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1998; Albertazzi 2000), or of monographs on individual Indian English writers, studies offering a broad conspectus of IWE (Indian Writing in English) for our times remain a rarity – albeit in France one may point to the useful survey by Michel Renouard, *La littérature indienne de langue anglaise* (1997). Certainly, Dr Ganapathy-Doré, who has been Associate Professor of English at the University of Paris XIII since 1997 and has over the years authored a raft of articles and book chapters on a very wide range of IWE works and writers (e.g. Ganapathy-Doré 2009, 2010), is eminently qualified for this important task.

The volume appears as essentially what might be called a second-order manual, presupposing a certain prior knowledge of the field and offering a series of analytic observations and proposals for further study of the IWE universe as a whole. While the book contains, as is inevitable, a number of general reflections on the broader field of postcoloniality as such, it remains the case that the wider picture has already been amply studied: meanwhile, a volume like this stands or falls on the quality and usefulness of its insights into its more specific chosen domain. This review will, therefore, concentrate on what the author has to offer concretely for the study of IWE – that being this book's main interest, along with the closely related issue of the use of English in India.

The volume opens with a foreword by the US-based scholar Sangeeta Ray and a brief introduction by the author. The first chapter, 'Postcolonialism: A Theoretical Overview', is followed by five chapters on multiple aspects of IWE (the approach throughout being thematic rather than author-based), a seventh on 'Making English an Indian Language' and a concluding chapter. There is a select bibliography (numerous other writings are referenced in the copious footnotes), an appendix listing specialised journals and web links, and an index (of concepts, not writers or works). Thus, the book does not include any kind of IWE chronology or author-by-author list, an aspect that reinforces the sense of it being very much a second-order manual, in no way aimed at beginners in the field. It has, alas, to be added that the proof-reading leaves a great deal to be desired: its pages are marred by a plethora of typos, inaccurately cited titles, factual slips and onomastic misspellings like "Jane Austin [*sic*]" (at one point even the author's own name is misspelt!). This can, unfortunately, detract from the pleasure of reading.

The book's title merits closer attention, for what it purports both to include and exclude: every one of its keywords calls out for comment, insofar as each should serve in

principle to delimit the object of study. *Postcolonial* implies that only works written since Independence should be considered, thus excluding the pre-1947 writings of such eminent forerunners as Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand; *Indian* would rule out works from anywhere in the subcontinent except India, and implies a need for guidelines as to how far diasporic writers are 'Indian' (should the Trinidad-born, UK-resident V.S. Naipaul qualify?); *novel* supposes exclusive concentration on that genre at the expense of short stories, poetry and drama, not to mention (auto)biography, travel-writing, journalism, essays and any other non-fiction; while *in English* should restrict the field to works written directly in that language, while leaving a question mark over writers who also publish in one or more Indian languages, as well as over the status to be accorded to Indian-language fiction translated into English. Of these keywords, the most problematic is probably *novel*, since in Indian literary studies there is not always a consensus as to whether genre-problematic texts such as Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* or Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* are novels or works of non-fiction: it is also a moot point whether a discussion of the novel should include works that are by novelists but are not novels, the prolifically protean Salman Rushdie being an example.

In fact, the author has not provided a formal definition of the object of study, even if that would have offered a useful starting-point. The nature of the object is thus allowed to emerge empirically from the book's pages. In fact, every one of the keywords is on occasion interpreted freely. Raja Rao's anti-British novel *Kanthapura*, published in 1938, is brought in as a pre-postcolonial text (96). Diasporic writers are implicitly taken as being legitimately 'Indian', even to the point of including the Sri Lankan-Canadian Michael Ondaatje; Bangladeshi and Pakistani writers are allowed an occasional look-in, as are Tamil or Bengali writers expressing themselves in their native language: thus, Rabindranath Tagore's canonic novel *The Home and the World*, originally published in Bengali in 1916, appears as a point of reference (92). Short stories, such as those of the Indian-American Jhumpa Lahiri, are also allowed in. In particular, the term *novel* is stretched far enough to permit a whole chapter on 'self-writing' (i.e. biography and autobiography), Seth's *Two Lives* included – a methodological choice that may, certainly, have its justifications but still calls out for an explanation that is lacking.

It being assumed that the scope of the book's title is to be embraced broadly and non-exclusively, what we have in Geetha Ganapathy-Doré's study is a thematically organised, wide-ranging and multidimensional exploration of IWE, its past, its present and its perspectives for the future. Her range of reference is impressive, indeed exhilarating, with massive swathes of Indian and diasporic literature falling under her critic's gaze. Certain key writers recur insistently, with Rushdie leading the pack and Arundhati Roy and Vikram Chandra close behind. Rushdie seems clearly to be the author's favourite, and she is careful, in particular, to scrutinise that writer's all-too-famous novel *The Satanic Verses* not only from the (politically and ideologically unavoidable, but *non-literary*) vantage point of the 'Rushdie affair', the fundamentalist campaign against the book and Khomeini's fatwa (24-26), but also and vitally, not as a tract but as what it is, a complex *work of literature*: "the classical example of the mutation that the postcolonial subject undergoes in the space of the Other" (73). Meanwhile, before going on to examine some of the themes the author teases out from the multicoloured fabric of IWE, it may be useful to consider how she positions herself on a crucial aspect, namely the use of English by Indian writers as a linguistic, socio-political and literary phenomenon.

English is one of the 23 languages legitimated in the Indian Constitution, and has co-official status with Hindi as one of the two de facto national languages. Though used by a

relatively small percentage of the population, it is, crucially, the only language whose users have a degree of even distribution across the country, and it is more acceptable to Dravidian-speaking southern Indians, particularly Tamils, than is Hindi. Given, furthermore, its use as the medium of university instruction nationwide and its key role in India's coveted status as world IT power, it should be blindingly obvious that English is not going to go away – neither from Indian society in general nor from Indian literature. At the same time, its past as colonial language and present as lingua franca of the still-potent American imperium mean there will inevitably be polemics over its use by Indian writers. In this respect, Ganapathy-Doré quite correctly devotes a chapter to the issue.

In that chapter, she examines the history of English in India, all the way from Thomas Babington Macaulay's controversial project, as set out in his celebrated *Minute on Indian Education* of 1835, of creating an English-speaking class of Indian civil servants, "Indian in blood ..., but English in taste" (Macaulay 1835), through the co-option of English at Independence as co-official language, to how today "the postcolonial Indian novel in English has appropriated and transformed the English language which the Honourable T.B. Macaulay could never have conceived" (143). She finds in IWE – rewriting Macaulay against himself – "a language that is English in form, but Indian in tone, in terms, in make and in mindset" (149), quoting racy examples from writers from Rushdie to Aravind Adiga, and stressing how in her Booker-winning novel *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy adapts English to the rhythms of her native Malayalam. As the author sees it, English as used by Indian writers is a language reshaped for autochthonous purposes, replete with loan-words and loan-translations – comprehensible, certainly, to outsiders willing to jump the cultural divide, but the "voice of India, not Her Majesty's" (150).

The author nonetheless neglects to make certain important points on the language issue. Firstly, writers like Seth or Chandra who have received their entire education in English are obviously going to be more comfortable in that language than in any Indian language, and have the same right as all to write in the language whose resources they best master; secondly, English is the only language which allows an Indian writer to reach a fully national audience immediately without having to go through translation; and thirdly, not all IWE writers by any means are expatriates or diasporics who have 'crossed the black water', for there is a significant constituency of India-resident writers who produce in English for a largely Indian readership and are scarcely known internationally other than to experts, examples being Khushwant Singh and Shobha Dé. Meanwhile, linguistic experimentation dominates in recent works by Chandra (*Sacred Games*) and Ghosh (*Sea of Poppies*, the first part of that writer's in-progress *Ibis* trilogy). Novels like these, incorporating multiple terms from Indian languages into an overall framework of English, are creating a new linguistic hybrid that – though acceptable to, and accepted by, international Anglophone readers – constitutes a language phenomenon that, surely, is not quite 'English as we know it'.

As regards the thematic multiplicity of IWE fiction, the author views its kaleidoscopic nature from a conception of the novel as a fundamentally democratic form. Through this prism, she sees the genre's hold-all, ragbag nature as, when practised at its best, underwriting a multiplicity of viewpoints that seems particularly suited to Indian culture. Attuning herself to "the big dance of democracy which is performed in the arena of the novel" (32), Ganapathy-Doré sees this metamorphic genre as offering a potential antidote to theocratic bigotry ("its structural heterogeneity is a remedy against the univocal vision of monotheistic religions"), boldly arguing – and thus fruitfully fusing the two Rushdies,

literary and non-literary – that “the Rushdie affair has shown that the novel helps ... squarely tackle religious questions on a desecrated mode” (33).

From this perspective of the novel as an innately secular genre, the study identifies a number of key motifs across the IWE canon, in an unfolding series of thematic cameos enlivened by the author’s wholehearted identification with “the vast culture, many sided talents and bubbling enthusiasm of the [Indian] novelists” (142). The themes examined, through evocation of the pertinent novels, are manifold, as befits the endless multiplicity of the subcontinent. Independence and Partition inevitably loom large (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*), as do subsequent developments such as Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, the creation of Bangladesh, the Hindu-Muslim conflict over the Ayodhya mosque (Manju Kapur, *A Married Woman*), or the decline of Urdu culture (Anita Desai, *In Custody*). Women’s issues necessarily come under the microscope (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*; Anita Nair, *Ladies Coupé*); on another level, also pointed up are IWE writers’ experimentations with time, be it cyclical, mythical or dream time, or in rewritings of the supposedly timeless classical Indian epics. Of major importance, too, is the sense of place, notably in the central role accorded by writers to postcolonial cities as part of a “worldwide metropolitan archipelago” (75), and above all, to the emblematic megapolis of Bombay/Mumbai (Rushdie, Chandra, Rohinton Mistry); while also stressed is the notion of local homeland as onetime utopia or damaged paradise (as in Rushdie’s Kashmir or Roy’s Kerala).

There is, beyond doubt, already an enormously rich heritage constituted by the post-1947 Indian English novel, including no few recognised modern classics. In today’s conditions, however, a new key question arises for IWE, namely whether the literature being produced at this moment can still, in the twenty-first century, be called postcolonial, or whether that phase of Indian writing has now come to an end, with writers, readers and critics alike confronted with an emerging literature of globalisation. On the issue of globalisation in general, Ganapathy-Doré exhibits a degree of ambivalence. At the start of the first chapter she cites Arundhati Roy’s surely by now worn-out gibe from 2004 that it is nothing but a new-fangled “form of American imperialism” (1) – a contention which, though expressing a viewpoint still to be found in unreconstructed old-Left circles, is surely disproved by such phenomena as the worldwide brand-image of Indian IT, the global reach of Indian or Indian-diasporic companies from the Mittal, Reliance or Tata stable, the growing popularity of Bollywood cinema with non-Indian audiences, or, indeed, the success of IWE itself as a planetary publishing phenomenon. China, of course, is another story again (that country’s rise is not ignored by the author), and the ever-growing weight in the global economy of the so-called emerging economies is creating a multipolar world that cannot be reduced to the old binaries of ‘rich-world’ dominance and ‘third-world’ subordination. In the book’s later sections, the author does, in fact, offer a different take, recalling such incontrovertible facts as “India’s lead in information technology” (93) and, ultimately, identifying a “transnational logic” of globalisation (172), of which an increasingly cosmopolitan Indian culture is by now very much a part.

Recent IWE novels such as Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (taking in Kashmir but also the US and Europe), Anita Desai’s *The Zigzag Way* (set in Mexico), or, as already mentioned, Ghosh’s ongoing ‘*Ibis* trilogy’ represent an increasing tendency to fan out from the subcontinent or locate its concerns within wider global processes. One may cite here, as Ganapathy-Doré notes, how Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, another Booker winner, uses the narrative strategy of having its arriviste protagonist address his story as if to the Chinese prime minister – in what she reads as “the revenge of the subaltern” (122). It is worth adding that the second part of Ghosh’s trilogy, *River of Smoke* (which came out in mid-2011, postdating this study), has turned

out to be especially pertinent to a new model of globalised literature, in its dense exploration – surely for our times too – of India-China relations as they unfolded at community and individual level in the nineteenth century. At the level of language too, Ghosh continues the line set in its predecessor *Sea of Poppies*, pushing English in a globalising direction, even more audaciously than Chandra in *Sacred Games*, melding elements of various Indian languages, Mauritian creole and Chinese pidgin within the syntactic framework of Standard English and producing what is all but a new hybrid language.

In her closing chapter, Ganapathy-Doré concludes her study on an upbeat note, praising IWE novelists for their ever more visible presence on the global market, recalling such accolades as Naipaul's Nobel, Lahiri's Pulitzer and the Bookers awarded to Rushdie, Roy, Adiga and Kiran Desai, and affirming that “the Postcolonial Indian Novel in English has become an incontrovertible institution of world culture” (162). This formulation, as well as that, also employed by her, of a “world literature” (168), would point to an emerging generic universe in which the postcolonial is increasingly subsumed into the global, now, however, from a position not of subalternhood vis-à-vis Western literature but of the consolidation of alternative sites of power. In such an evolving context, Geetha Ganapathy-Doré's evident enthusiasm and passion for Indian writing will surely have a contagious effect on her readers that cannot but be beneficial. If her eloquent road-map serves to open up the world of IWE to those less familiar with it while offering new insights and connections to the cognoscenti, it will more than have served its purpose.

Works Cited

- Albertazzi, Silvia 2000: *Lo sguardo dell'altro: le letterature postcoloniali*. Rome: Carocci.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin 1998: *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Ganapathy-Doré, Geetha 2009: 'Shakespeare in Rushdie / Shakespearean Rushdie'. *Atlantis* XXXI.2: 9-22.
- 2010: 'Supermodernity's Meganarratives: A Comparative Study of Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram* and Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*'. Sheobhushan Shukla, Christopher Rollason and Anu Shukla, eds. *Entwining Narratives: Critical Explorations into Vikram Chandra's Fiction*. New Delhi: Sarup. 114-30.
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington 1835: *Minute on Indian Education*. University of California at Santa Barbara. Department of English <www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/rrollason/research/english/macaulay.html> (Accessed 1 July, 2011)
- Renouard, Michel 1997: *La littérature indienne de langue anglaise*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France (Collection *Que sais-je?*).

Received 15 August 2011

Accepted 9 October 2011

Christopher Rollason (BA and MA Cambridge, PhD York) is an independent British scholar living in Luxembourg. He has lectured at the University of Coimbra and collaborated as a guest lecturer with several Indian universities, including Jahawarlal Nehru University (Delhi). He has been Language Editor for the *Atlantic Literary Review* (Delhi). He has co-edited the anthology *Modern Criticism* (2002) and a volume on Vikram Chandra (2010) and has many articles published, e.g. on Indian Writing in English, Edgar Allan Poe, Hispanic literatures and cultural and translation theory, in journals including: *Atlantis*; *JSL* (Delhi); *Hispanic Horizon* (Delhi); and *Boletín de la Academia Peruana de la Lengua* (Lima).

Address: 2-4 rue Boltgen. L-4038 Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg. Tel.: +352 4300 23090. Fax: +352 4300 23905