

***PANEL ON “HISTORY AND THE SOUTH ASIAN NOVEL WRITTEN IN ENGLISH”,
20th EUROPEAN CONFERENCE ON MODERN SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES,
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From 8 to 11 July 2008, the city often described as England’s “Capital of the North” played host to the 20th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies (ECMSAS). The University of Manchester’s Humanities Building was the backdrop to this vast event, whose participants were also regaled with an official reception in the city’s superb Victorian Town Hall and, suitably enough, a conference dinner at the Lal Qila restaurant on Manchester’s fabled ‘Curry Mile’. The conference ranged across remarkably wide swathes of South Asian studies, from ‘Political economy of Bangladesh’ to ‘The Sanskrit tradition in the modern world’, taking in history, sociology, economics, fine arts, popular culture, regional studies and more. So enormous an event, split as it was into almost forty panels, each one virtually a conference within the conference, could not usefully be summarised by any one participant: the present writer will therefore describe only a small portion of the elephant, and will concentrate on teasing out the significance of Panel 13 (capably and sympathetically organised by Nicole Weickgennant of Manchester Metropolitan University), whose subject was ‘History and the South Asian novel written in English’.

The rubric of the panel was clear: the theme of debate was the modern (20th and 21st century) English-language novel as practised by writers from India/ South Asia and their diasporas, in its relation to history, whether of the region or also of the wider world. The panel consisted of 14 papers and took place over the last two days of the conference, 10 and 11 July 2008. The authors of the papers - subcontinental/diasporic, European or North American – were mostly literary scholars, but other disciplines – translation studies, history – were also represented. The discussions following each sub-panel of two to four papers were as lively as they were passionate, and a strong sense of camaraderie was generated among the participants as the two hard-working days unfolded.

The writers whose work was analysed in detail in the various papers (others of course being mentioned in passing) were: from India and its diaspora, Mulk Raj Anand, Amitav Ghosh, Manju Kapur, Rohinton Mistry, V.S. Naipaul, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie; and from Pakistan, Kamila Shamsie. The selection of authors may certainly be considered representative, in terms of period, geographical location and gender, though one may note the absence of, say, Vikram Chandra, Shobha Dé, Anita Desai or Vikram Seth. Certain key works, significantly enough, were examined in more than one paper: Ghosh’s ‘The Shadow Lines’ (in three), Mistry’s ‘A Fine Balance’ (in two), Roy’s ‘The God of Small Things’ (in two) and, inevitably, the one that – at least for many in the west - started it all, Rushdie’s ‘Midnight’s Children’. Thematically, many of the papers criss-crossed over time and space, and it therefore seems best here to summarise them in their chronological order of delivery.

The historical theme was challengingly introduced by Raita Merivita-Chakrabarti (La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia and University of Turku, Finland), who spoke on ‘History and Historiography in (Post-Emergency) Indian Novels in English’, focusing on ‘Midnight’s Children’ and a number of its successors and arguing that the models of history adopted by the novelists

concerned tend to subvert and question the dominant notions of historiography emanating from the West, notably the idea of linear progress. This orientation was echoed by Susmita Roye (University of Bristol, England), whose paper ('Salvaging the "Past" from "History" and Etching it into "His Story": Stories of Rushdie's Saleem and Ghosh's Tridib'), explored the tension in 'Midnight's Children' and 'The Shadow Lines' between the canonic events of the official history of South Asia and the more personalised, incomplete but intensively lived experiences of the protagonists. Still exploring Rushdie, Jenni Ramone (Newman University College, Birmingham), in 'Happy Endings: Rushdie's History of Kashmir' examined a more localised strand of South Asian history – in, once again, 'Midnight's Children' and also in Rushdie's more recent 'Shalimar the Clown' - showing how those two novels foreground Kashmir as a metonym for both communal politics and a threatened subcontinental tradition of diversity.

Next, moving out into a wider area of comparative studies, John Schwetman (University of Minnesota – Duluth, USA) offered, in 'Prejudicial Encounters: Race, Caste and Extrajudicial Killings in Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" and William Faulkner's "Light in August"', a side-by-side analysis of Roy's Booker-winning novel and Faulkner's US classic, showing how both narratives, albeit written by non-subalterns, dramatise the plight of the subaltern (Dalit and African-American) in societies (Kerala and the American South) where an allegedly compassionate Christianity is a major component of the dominant order. Also concerned with India's interaction with the wider world was the paper by Kumar Parag (University of Allahabad), 'Exile, Alienation and Identity Crisis in V.S. Naipaul's "Half A Life"', in which, tracing the odyssey of Naipaul's failed-writer protagonist Willie Chandan from India to England to Mozambique, he read the Nobel laureate's novel as emblematic of a fractured and hybridated postcolonial identity.

The Dalit/subaltern theme was again highlighted in the next two papers. Rajeshwar Mittapalli (Kakatiya University, Warangal, India), in 'Subaltern Subjectivity and Resistance: Dalit Social History in Postcolonial Indian Fiction in English', showed how the official narrative of state-sponsored Dalit emancipation is challenged and exposed in the pages of three novels by non-Dalits – 'The God of Small Things' (again), Mulk Raj Anand's 'The Road', and Rohinton Mistry's 'A Fine Balance'. The last-named novel was taken up in more detail in the contribution of the panel organiser Nicole Weickgenannt (Manchester Metropolitan University), 'Rohinton Mistry's "A Fine Balance": Dalits, Subaltern History and the Emergency', in which she read Mistry's novel as a narrative of both Indira Gandhi's Emergency and of an alternative history foregrounding the marginalised community of Dalits. The notion of alternative historiography received further support from the following paper, 'Scripting the Unwritten: "Little History" in Indian Fiction', by Meenakshi Bharat (Sri Venkateswara College, University of Delhi, India), which, drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's celebrated postmodernist critique of "grand narratives", focused on how a number of postcolonial novels, especially Ghosh's "The Shadow Lines", choose to home in, not on the "big" events of Independence and Partition, but on "lesser" moments such as the 1963-1964 Calcutta/Dhaka riots described by Ghosh, thus questioning the dominant official narratives of South Asian history.

The subaltern theme recurred in a different context, indeed being returned to its origins (it was first used in its modern sense as a military metaphor by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci) in the contribution by Talat Ahmed, a historian from the University of Leeds (England), 'Sepoys and World War One: A subaltern perspective'. Eloquently testifying in her paper to the value of

literature for historians as a source of historical evidence, she analysed Mulk Raj Anand's novel of World War I, 'Across the Black Water', as a fictionalised account of the complex experiences of Indian sepoy soldiers as foot-soldiers 'defending' one enemy (the colonial oppressor) against another. This was followed by a paper - "'To build or to destroy'": History and the individual in Manju Kapur's "A Married Woman"', by Christopher Rollason (independent scholar, Metz, France) - focusing on a more exclusively subcontinental event (nonetheless located in Kapur's novel in a wider context of globalisation), namely the destruction by Hindu militants of the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya in 1992. This contribution showed how this novel's text underscores both the objective status of the city of Ayodhya as an emblem of Indian pluralism and the appropriation of that same city by the Hindutva tendency as a politically charged locus of communalism.

Major Indian historical events returned to the fore in the paper by Kamayani Kaushiva (Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi), 'Editing the "gaps" and "silences" in "historical truth" of Partition through "memory's truth"', which, like Susmita Roye's, examined the Rushdie-Ghosh dyad of 'Midnight's Children' and 'The Shadow Lines', showing how the two novels privilege heterogeneous and disparate accounts of history over the official totalising versions. Next came the panel's sole paper entirely on Pakistan, 'Karachi as a Map: Kamila Shamsie's "Kartography"', by Dalia Said Mostafa (University of Manchester), which examined the multiplicities and complexities of that country's biggest metropolis as revealed in Shamsie's novel. This was followed by a re-examination of major components of modern Indian iconography, featuring Anand once again, this time in the company of R.K. Narayan: Sejal Sutaria (Monmouth University, New Jersey, USA), in 'Writing the Mahatma: Literary Renderings of Gandhi and his India by Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan', showed how the two fictions, Anand's 'Untouchable' and Narayan's 'Waiting for the Mahatma', both embody, yet endeavour to resolve, Indian tensions over tradition and modernity. Finally, in the panel's closing paper, Letizia Alterno (University of Manchester), in 'Re-constructed history in Raja Rao's "Kanthapura": Dynamics of Hindu Nationalism and Anti-colonial Politics', offered a reading of Rao's famous Gandhian novel in terms of Homi Bhabha's concept of liminality, suggesting that the narrative of resistance in 'Kanthapura' offers an alternative notion of historical dynamics that permits a specifically Indian interpretation of history in the modern period.

All told, the papers of this panel, while diverse in their subject-matter and ranging widely over modern subcontinental history, may be said as a group to have thrown up, or indeed shared, certain underlying concerns. One may here identify: interest in the smaller and more personal areas of historical experience as opposed to totalising 'grand narratives' (though it is hard to see how one can narrate the modern subcontinent without referring to Independence and Partition); identification of autochthonous models of history that are diverse and heterogeneous in contrast to both triumphalist Western and homegrown nationalist-communalist discourses; and, perhaps most important for the convergence of literature and history, the privileging of non-linear, indeed traditional Indian forms of narrative. The debates will continue, and conference and panel offered a fruitful contribution to them. Meanwhile, the present report is humbly offered as, in its way, the "little history" of a panel whose work and discussions have helped to enrich the ongoing greater history of modern South Asian studies.