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ABSTRACT

This packet includes the syllabus of a trimester-long senior elective course on India, designed to begin with two writers of Indian descent, Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee. The packet contains the daily assignments for the first half of the trimester, which include all of the reading assignments from Rushdie and Mukherjee, as well as the guide for viewing "Salaam Bombay!" an Indian film. It also contains a handout detailing an approach to a Rushdie short story, "Yorick," and two handouts for in-class writing assignments on Rushdie. Additional handouts in the packet are a reprint on the English of India from "The New York Times" magazine, a review of "East West" from "The New Yorker," and an article by Rushdie, also from "The New Yorker." A handout describing a student research project also is included. (BT)

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**CURRICULUM PROJECTS DEVELOPED BY 1998
SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS**

Contemporary World Classics in Literature and Film
Fall, 1998

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To Whom It May Concern:

I have enclosed my first project based on the work I did this summer. What is included in the packet is the following:

1. The syllabus of my new trimester-long senior elective, "Contemporary World Classics in Literature and Film." The course was designed to begin with two writers of Indian descent, Salman Rushdie and Bharati Mukherjee.
2. The daily assignments for the first half of the trimester, which include all of the reading assignments from Rushdie and Mukherjee, as well as the viewing of *Salaam Bombay!*, the film from India that the students viewed.
3. A handout detailing a way to approach Rushdie's "Yorick," a story my students found difficult.
4. Two handouts for in-class writing assignments on Rushdie.
5. Three additional handouts: one on the English of India from *The New York Times* magazine; one a review of *East West*, in *The New Yorker* magazine and, the final, an article by Rushdie, also from *The New Yorker*.
6. I have also included a handout describing the students' research project, as several students did research projects on India writers.

The unit on India was the most successful of the year. Students appreciated both the novel by Mukherjee and the short fiction of Rushdie, and enjoyed struggling with the difficulty that those works present. *Salaam Bombay!* was the favorite movie of the course; students found it moving and well made. I had research projects on many topics, but several explored topics related to India. One student wrote on Rushdie's political difficulties; one wrote on the critical reception of *Midnight's Children*, a book she read on her own; one wrote about women in India, using a number of contemporary sources; one wrote on Rushdie's allusions in "Yorick," reading some Sterne and some Saxo Grammaticus; another read another novel by Mukherjee and evaluated it in comparison to *Jasmine*..



Without my trip to India, I would have been unable to approach the topic with as much energy and excitement as I did, fresh from the Fulbright experience. That excitement communicated itself to the students, who gave the course very favorable evaluations.

With many thanks for your efforts in making the Fulbright seminar so valuable to me, personally and professionally.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Leslie J. Altman". The signature is fluid and matches the printed name below it.

Leslie J. Altman

Contemporary World Classics in Literature and Film
Fall, 1998

Altman

Office hours: Bands 2, 4, 7 and 8

Office location: AC Lobby

Required texts:

Andre Brink, *A Dry, White Season*

Athol Fugard, *Master Harold. . . and the boys*

Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*

Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*

Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine*

Salman Rushdie, *East, West*

Selected handouts

Expectations and course requirements:

- A paper on each group of readings or book that we read, about one every two weeks
- An oral presentation on a film clip
- A research project due during the second six weeks. A proposal will be due early in October
- Class participation

This course will examine works by a group of "post colonial" writers and filmmakers from India, the Caribbean, South Africa, and Australia. In addition to reading the required texts, students will have an opportunity to pursue further their individual interests in papers and projects.

Another goal of the course is to develop criteria for evaluating films. During the first six weeks students will be asked to prepare an oral presentation in which they present an analysis of a short film clip. We will watch three complete films together: *Salaam Bombay!* (from India), *Sugar Cane Alley* (from Martinique), and *A World Apart* (from South Africa).

Schedule

- August 31--Introductions, syllabus, texts, assignments
September 1--*East, West*: "Good Advice Is Rarer Than Rubies"
Sept. 2--"The Free Radio" (Group work on language)
Sept. 3--"The Prophet's Hair"
Sept. 4-- "Yorick" (Free writing)
- Sept. 7--Holiday
Sept. 8--"At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers"; in-class writing on "Prophet" and "Slippers"
Sept. 9--"Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consummate Their Relationship" (*Santa Fe*, AD 1492)"
Sept. 10--Catching up. Presenting film clips
Sept. 11--"The Harmony of the Spheres"
- Sept. 14--"Checkov and Zulu"
Sept. 15--"The Courter" Begin viewing *Salaam Bombay*
Sept. 16--Short Wednesday: Finish viewing *Salaam Bombay*
Sept. 17--*Jasmine* Read Chs. 1-7
Sept. 18--Chapters 8-13. Catching up. Presenting film clips.
- Sept. 21--Rushdie paper due
Sept. 22--*Jasmine*, chapters 14-19
Sept. 23--No class: Short Wednesday, bands 5-8
Sept. 24--*Jasmine*, chapters 20-23
Sept. 25--Finish *Jasmine*
- Sept. 28--Begin *Annie John*:. Catching up. Presenting film clips
Sept. 29--"Figures in the Distance" and "The Circling Hand"
Sept. 30--Paper on *Jasmine*, *East,West*, *Salaam Bombay*
Oct. 1--"Gwen"
Oct. 2--"The Red Girl"
- Oct. 5--"Columbus in Chains" Presenting film clips.
Oct. 6--"Somewhere, Belgium"
Oct. 7--"The Long Rain"
Oct. 8--"A Walk to the Jetty"
Oct. 9--In-class writing on *Annie John*. End of six weeks' grading period.

Alas, poor Yorick! I fear we will run out of time before we can talk about this story on Friday, so here's some information that may help you approach it:

Rushdie is quoted as saying that the two most influential novels in English are *Clarissa*, (1747-1748) by Samuel Richardson, and *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767) by Laurence Sterne. (The full title of the work is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. The novel, supposedly an account by Tristram of his life from the time of his conception to the present, shows how much Sterne was influenced by John Locke's theory of the irrational nature of the association of ideas. (Do you see one connection between Sterne and Rushdie so far?) In fact, the novel never gets beyond the second or third year of Tristram's life, it is so full of his "opinions," philosophical digressions on everything, including the account of the life of Yorick, a humorous parson who claims descent from the Yorick of *Hamlet*. *Tristram Shandy* is also filled with typographical eccentricities--dots, dashes, asterisks, one sentence chapters, blank pages, unfinished sentences, and more. (Do you see another connection to Rushdie's story?)

To look closely at just a small piece--try the paragraph on p, 65 that begins with "Yorick's saga . . ."

Do the math: Yorick's saga is the same one that fell into the hands of a certain Tristram 235 years ago: 1994, when *East, West* was published, less 235 equals 1759, the year *Tristram Shandy* was first published. Pun on "certain." Then pun on "Tristram," a version of Tristan, lover of Iseult in the medieval romances. Then another, "neither triste [sad] nor ram [male goat]. Pun on "Shandy," which in Britain, is also the name of a pub drink that combines beer and lemonade, fizzy if not frothy, called a lemonade shandy. Pun on vellum, from the preceding paragraph: for "a velluminous history" read also "voluminous" as *Tristram Shandy* clearly is). Look up "palatinate." What is "permanganate"? Where does "juice of cursed hebona" come from? (Did you recognize the phrase?)

Does one have to be an English teacher to enjoy this story?

On Tuesday, you will have a chance to write about "The Prophet's Hair" and "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers." Think, as you read ". . . Ruby Slippers," about the relationship between the two and how one represents "East" and one "West." What assumptions operate in the world of "The Prophet's Hair"? What assumptions operate in the world of ". . . Ruby Slippers"? Will ever the twain meet?

Also, over the long weekend, start thinking about a film clip you would like to show to the group and what you want us to notice about the film technically speaking. Do you need me to provide a glossary of film terminology? I'll be working on that this weekend.

In-class writing on *East, West*
"The Prophet's Hair" and "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers"

You may use your books.

Consider the hair of the prophet and the ruby slippers as icons of their respective cultures. An "icon" in this case means "a symbol, . . . particularly a representation of a sacred personage." What does each icon reveal about the culture which it symbolizes, particularly the values of that culture?

(Please think and plan before you begin writing.)

In-class writing on *East, West*

You have now read the first story in the "West" section. What is your reaction? Specifically, does it feel more familiar than the stories in the "East" section? Is there less you feel you need to come to terms with before you can understand the story? Are there "in-jokes" you get? If not, if in fact "Yorick" feels more difficult than, say, "The Prophet's Hair," what does that tell you about (a) Rushdie and his education, and (b) what Rushdie may be trying to say, his "point, fundamentally."

Guide for watching *Salaam Bombay!*

1. The protagonist, Krishna, is named for one of the avatars of Vishnu. He is sometimes seen as a baby, sometimes as a shepherd, sometimes as a lover, sometimes as a warrior, in stories told about his adventures.

Krishna will be called Chaipu, or "tea boy," after his chief occupation in Bombay.

2. Ganesh, the brand of tobacco, is the name of the god of beginnings. He is often invoked at the start of an enterprise to ensure its success. He is the son of Siva and Parvati. See if you can find the story that explains why Ganesh has an elephant's head. The festival and parade that leads Krishna to lose his "second mother" is a festival honoring Ganesh.

3. While you are watching, take notes. When we have finished viewing the film, we will talk about what makes it successful (or unsuccessful), both in terms of its literary, dramatic, and cinematic aspects. Use this sheet to list ideas to share in class, as well as questions you have and your comments.

Research Project Guidelines
Contemporary World Classics
Fall, 1998

Due November 20: a 5-8 page paper answering a research question on a subject relevant to the course

Requirements:

1. You must submit a proposal by October 26 outlining your topic and listing your working bibliography.
2. You may use as many primary sources as you wish; you must use a minimum of 5 sources, of which two must be secondary sources.
3. A summary of your progress will be due at a research conference, to be held during the week of November 2.

Some areas to investigate:

1. Comparison of one of the works read for class and another work or works by the same author (e.g., *East, West* and *Midnight's Children* (too long, probably) or *Jasmine* and another work by Mukherjee.)
2. Comparison of one of the films and another film from the same country, by the same director (e.g., *Salaam Bombay!* and *Mississippi Masala* or *Salaam Bombay!* and a contemporary Hindi film)
3. Analysis of works by another contemporary world authors not read for class: e.g., Anita Desai (India), Michelle Cliff (Jamaica) or Derek Walcott (Trinidad), J. M. Coetzee (South Africa), David Malouf (Australia). Read Keri Hulme's new book or Patricia Grace (New Zealand). Tell me what you're interested in, and I will make suggestions.
4. Contemporary reception of one of the works read for class, here and in other countries
5. Connections between one of the writers and other political, historical, social, or cultural events
6. Social or cultural issues reflected in the works

Documentation:

Students are required to follow a system of documenting the sources that they use. MLA (textual citations with a full bibliography) is one acceptable format.

Evaluation:

Students will be evaluated on the final project, as well as on completing the following steps:

Proposal

Working bibliography

Research conference with written summary of progress

Proper documentation of sources

Presentation of final paper to the class

English in India: Still All the Raj

THE assault began, really, as soon as I set foot in Bombay a few months before the golden jubilee of Indian independence. "If Aggrieved," advised the sign in the airport arrival hall, "Please Consult Asst. Commissioner Customs." At the counter where I went to change my money, a notice told me, "PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOUR DRAWERS ARE LOCKED PROPERLY," and after I'd done so, looking down demurely, I stepped into a wheezing old knock-off of a Morris Oxford to lurch through streets that said "Free Left Turn" on one side and "Passenger Alighting Point" on the other. The crazy Indian dialectic was in full swing all around, buses demanding "SILENCE PLEASE" on their exteriors, a few truck mudguards responding, "HORN O.K. PLEASE," and my own little car making its own small contribution to democracy with a sticker that read: "Blow Your Horn / Pay a Fine."

India is the most talkative country in the world, it often seems, and it comes at you in almost 200 languages, 1,652 dialects and a million signs and slogans screaming out of every store and taxicab. Many of them are just familiar enough to be quite strange. We passed Textoriums as we drove into town, and a Toilet Complex, Stomach Trimmer palaces and Police Beat Boxes. We passed the Clip Joint Beauty Clinic and Nota Bene Cleaners of Distinction. A sign outside one apartment block offered: "No Parking for Out Siders. If Found Guilty, All Tyres Will Be Deflated With Extreme Prejudice." An ad for a lecture informed me that "Yogic laughter is multi-dimensional." I could only imagine that like most of the city's notices, it had been fashioned by some proud graduate of the course I saw advertised in the local newspaper: "We make you big boss in English conversation. Hypnotize people by your highly impressive talks. Exclusive courses for exporters, business tycoons."

Malcolm Muggeridge famously remarked that the last true Englishman would be an Indian, and it's easy to believe that when you hear the "jolly goods" and "out of station chappies" ricocheting around the Willingdon Club in Bombay, or any of the other old canteens and cantonments and Civil List houses that fill the country's dusty enclaves. Much of the fascination of Indian English lies in the fact that it is as flavorful a monument to the Raj as the white-flannel cricketers along the Oval, the "Whispering Pines" cottages around the hills and the mossy, overgrown gravestones commemorating forgotten personages like Sarah Chandy and the Bombay Color Sergeants.

But a deeper fascination is that modern India has so thoroughly made the language imposed on it its own, so vigorously adding condiments that it isn't quite English and isn't quite not. The history of Indlish or Englian, or whatever you want to call this hyperactive offspring of a marriage of inconvenience, begins with the merchants and adventurers of the East India Company, who first came over in the mid-17th century, and were soon taking back cashmeres and juggernauts and other semi-demi-pukka terms stolen from the Indian Empire. But it culminated most vividly in the soldiers and teachers and high-minded civil servants of later centuries, who made it their business to domesticate the East, and often got thoroughly domesticated themselves. We all know that Victoria sent railroads and bewigged solicitors and Thomas Babington Macaulay to India; what we're liable to forget is that by the middle of the 19th century, according to one account, India had sent 26,000 words back into English, many of them as familiar as your pajamas or veranda.

The grand old mildewed registry of this communion, of course, is "Hobson-Jobson," "a portly double-columned edifice," as Henry Yule calls it in his preface

Pico Iyer is the author, most recently, of "Tropical Classical."

of 1886, which began with a series of letters and took its name, improbably, from an Englished version of "the wallings of the Mohammedans as they beat their breasts in the procession of Moharram — 'Ya Hasan! Ya Hosain!'" Three centuries of backstairs meetings seem to hide out in this monumental dictionary of Anglo-Indian speech, and a whole world comes into view when one reads that a "Lady Kenny" is a "black ball-shaped syrupy confection" named after the Lady Canning to whom it was first presented, and a "James and Mary" is the name of "a famous sandbank in the Hooghly River behind Calcutta." Every inflection of what was once known as Butler English and Kitchen English is spelled out with a gravity worthy of the facts of life, and besides reading solemn explications of "pish-posh" and "ticky-tock" and the derivation of "burra-beebie," you can learn that "a four and twenty" meant "a criminal" and "ducks" referred to the "gentlemen belonging to the Bombay service." "Home," the venerable archive informs one, "in Anglo-Indian and colonial speech... means England."

Nowadays, as Salman Rushdie notes, imperialism is reversed not only on the page, and any Englishman worth his salt — any tycoon or pundit or thug, in fact —



HENRIK DRESCHER

knows all about gurus and mantras and yoga. "They gave us the language," as a character says in Hanif Kureishi's novel "The Black Album," "but it is only we who know how to use it." Those who marvel at the rutputty masala mixes in Rushdie's novels are apt to exaggerate the magic and underestimate the realism. A walk down any Bombay street is not unlike a journey through any chapter of "Midnight's Children."

The shouting vitality of Indian English is mostly enshrined in the signs and sentences — and even sentiments — that bombard you as you bump around a land of Eve-teasers and newspaper wallahs, symptoms of a palimpsest culture that never throws anything away but takes every new influence or import and throws it into the mix. Sometimes it seems the whole subcontinent is just a mess of bromides, axioms, apothegms and rules, all religiously observed in the breach. Even the simplest trip down any Indian street becomes a pilgrimage through a gallery of warnings. Some of them — "Do Not Cross Verge" or (on a narrow mountain road) "Watch for Shooting Stones" — make a certain kind of antic sense; but others — "Stop for Octroi," for example — I'm still trying to puzzle out.

A stranger aspect of this somewhat bossy strain is that every injunction, however sublime, is undone by a habitual conversion into singsong. India to this day remains a jingler's paradise, and the "Lane Driving Is Sane Driving" signs I recall from a decade ago have

now been joined by tinkly little caveats that trill, "Reckless Drivers Kill and Die / Leaving All Behind to Cry" (or, more laconically, "Risk-Taker Is Accident-Maker"). One of the abiding delights of Indian English is that much of it reads as if it had been composed by a schoolmaster conspiring with a maiden aunt (called Mrs. Malaprop, perhaps) and drawing, principally, on the works of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. How can one resist a place where the "matrimonial notices" in local newspapers offer brides who are "artful, homely and wheat-colored"? And where a "cousin-in-law" said hopefully to me at a Matrimonial Felicitation Function last year, "The ceremonies should be quite pompous."

Yet in the right hands this curious hybrid's very affectations can seem merely aspirations, and it is often the straining toward a grandeur vanished or always out of reach that is so touching here. Tiny, ramshackle huts present themselves as "Marriage Palaces" and rickety buses that cannot write "Stage Carriage" on their sides inscribe "Semi-Deluxe." Even a public toilet I encountered had, with a trademark Indian mix of strictness and idealism, "Beautification" written on one side and "Coordination" on the other.

It is as if words in the subcontinent were still assumed to have a magic they've lost at home, as if calling a place "Reliable" or "Honesty" were the first step toward making it so. Not that Indian courtesy is always innocent. "Any Exchange Fault or Communications Error," a sign in a public phone office advised me, "Is on Customer's Account. Thanks." Some of the terms you see in India have curious meanings (the cafes advertising "fingers," I learned, were only selling "finger chips," or french fries), and some of them just look as if they do. ("Video Shooting We Undertake," a tiny photo shop informed me.) Some meticulously preserve now fading customs, and some confer a gay Edwardian tilt on even the most everyday transactions. ("I'm sorry," I was told when I called up the editor of a movie magazine, "Miss Sonaya is not in her cabin just now," which made me imagine her, perhaps not incorrectly, on a cruise ship.) At Elphinstone College, in the redbrick Victorian heart of the University of Bombay, I was greeted by an "Institute of Distance Education" just down the corridor from a "Backward Class Cell." And in the city's most famous Hindu temple a sign advised, "Devotees are warned that to sit on the rocks much deep in the sea water away from the sea shore is not only encroachment on government property but is also dangerous to their lives, including valuable ornaments."

Whether or not my life was a valuable ornament, I came away feeling that Indian English is not just a savory stepmother tongue to hundreds of millions of Indians (more Indians, after all, speak English than Englishmen do), and not just an invaluable memento of a centuries-long mishmash, but also a grand and distinctive product of a culture as verbally supple and full of energy as any I know. Six years ago, India at last opened its borders wide to foreign companies, and when last I was in Bombay, "cyberprofessional" and "brand name equity" were the terms of the moment, banded about by the young in their MTV-furnished pubs, as they spoke with studied casualness of "air-dashing." In the newspapers, editorials that still drew, with surprising frequency, upon the example and wisdom of Bertram Wooster sat next to ads that promised a "Mega Exhibition Showcase of Ideal Lifestyle."

Yet this stubbornly anachronistic tongue, out of date even when it was first imported, suggests that there'll always be an England, if only because there'll always be an India. As I prepared to air-dash away — being asked my "good name" one last time, in Delhi's airport, near signs that said "Be Like Venus: Unarmed" and an office on the runway labeled "Apron Control" — I wondered how far I was really going. "Blighty," after all, is the Hindi word for "foreign." □

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THE EMPIRE WRITES BACK

Worlds collide in Salman Rushdie's new collection.

BY HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

REALISM can break a writer's heart," says the narrator of Salman Rushdie's 1983 novel "Shame." "Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale, so that's all right; nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either. What a relief!" It's impossible to read these lines today without the sense that grim literalism has revenged itself upon irony. Rushdie, the Pandora of postmodernism, has forever dispelled any doubt about the potency of the modern fairy tale.

"East, West" (Pantheon; \$21) is a collection of nine such fairy tales; in one of them, fictional characters have been detaching themselves from the novels, films, and paintings where they belong and taking their place among the flesh-and-blood. "This permeation of the real world by the fictional is a symptom of the moral decay of our post-millennial culture," the narrator soberly intones. "There can be little doubt that a large majority of us opposes the free, unrestricted migration of imaginary beings into an already damaged reality." It's a fable that nimbly reminds us how vast a gulf exists between Rushdie and the literalists who seek to destroy him. They read fiction as fact; Rushdie urges us to consider the ways in which "fact"—what we take to be natural and real—may be fiction. In a 1985 essay he wrote, "The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature."

The literature of migrancy may be the literature of border-crossing, but Rushdie reminds us that borders crossed aren't merely the kind drawn in dirt. His restless intelligence is forever challenging the lines between East and West, the past and the present, *Homo ludens* and *Homo sapiens*, realism and fantasy. (He has admitted that the technophantasmagorias of J. G. Ballard strike him as much more "realistic" than the ostensibly ordinary settings conjured by Anita Brookner.) If there are cultural traditions that belong to the West and

to the East, there is also, he insists, a third tradition, a tradition of displacement and exile which belongs to neither. Of course, the big themes of migrancy—cultural heterogeneity, the fragmented and hybrid nature of identity—are equally the pet themes of literary postmodernism. And make no mistake: there isn't an artist more self-conscious than Salman Rushdie. (His critical essays bristle with references to such postmodernist pashas as Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard.) But the literary resources of migrancy are more than theoretical. It hasn't escaped the British literary establishment that a lot of what's most compelling in contemporary fiction has been written by people with names like David Malouf, Timothy Mo, V. S. Naipaul, Caryl Phillips, and, yes, Salman Rushdie—people who have, in one way or another, dwelled at the margins of the Commonwealth. "Literature is not in the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups," Rushdie has wisely cautioned. Still, we've all had a chance to see what happens when, as the saying goes, the Empire writes back.

Rushdie's new book is divided into three sections of three stories each—the headings are "East," "West," and "East, West"—but such a division seems designed to illustrate the instability of divisions. Inevitably, the "East" stories are also about the West; the "West" stories are also about the East; and the "East, West" stories are about both but also neither. There are stories about totems—Dorothy's ruby slippers, the Prophet's hair. There are stories that weirdly refract characters from other sources, including "The Wizard of Oz" and "Star Trek." And there are stories whose sheer literary effrontery takes your breath away—like one entitled "Yorick," a tour de force of pastiche. It's "Hamlet" as retold by Laurence Sterne's Parson Yorick, complete with Sternean dashes and asterisks; but it's also an assertion of literary genealogy, invoking as it does Rushdie's great precursor in the

art of nonlinear and fragmented narrative.

What makes the collection work as a collection is its juxtaposition of contrasting voices, from the windy cadences of "Yorick" 's eighteenth-century wit—"It's a true fact that men take an equal pleasure in annihilating both the ground upon which they stand while they live and the substance (I mean paper) upon which they may remain, immortalized, once this same ground is over their heads instead of under their feet"—to the snappish tone of the Indian narrator of "The Free Radio": "The boy was an innocent, a real donkey's child, you can't teach such people." Rushdie's mastery of ventriloquism is such that it's finally beside the point to ask (as the old Charlie McCarthy routine has it) who's the dummy.

It's another futile exercise to look for a centering theme in a book so distrustful of all centers; but there may be a centering *non*-theme in the book's repudiation of the idea, and ideology, of "home." While fashionable revisionists have been peddling the story of Christopher Columbus as vile proto-imperialist, Rushdie's "Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain Consume Their Relationship" refigures Columbus as the ultimate migrant, whose voyage is a means of breaking away from the very patronage that makes it possible. A more expeditious way of leaving home is to take leave of your senses, as does Eliot, the Welsh guru in "The Harmony of the Spheres." And in "The Courter" the narrator's beloved ayah develops a mysterious heart ailment that turns out to be a quite literal form of homesickness, and prompts her to return to the Subcontinent. Something like this must have been in the minds of the eighteenth-century physiologists who coined the word "nostalgia" (compounded from the Greek *nostos*, "a return home," and *algos*, "pain"). If Rushdie isn't wholly free of nostalgia himself, his larger aim is to critique nostalgia, the specious comforts of home

and homelands. Pace Robert Frost, Rushdie sees home as a place where, when you have to go there, you're *really* out of luck.

The seductions of home are most squarely the preoccupation of "At the Auction of the Ruby Slippers," a story that evokes Donald Barthelme in its lunatic stolidity. "Behind bullet-proof glass, the ruby slippers sparkle. We do not know the limits of their powers. We suspect that these limits may not exist." While the slippers repose in their high-security case, the whole world prepares to bid for them: they're an item of unquantifiable value. "Around the—let us say—shrine of the ruby-sequined slippers, pools of saliva have been forming. There are those of us who lack restraint, who drool. The jumpsuited Latino janitor moves amongst us, a pail in one hand and a squeegee mop in the other." (At the same time, "disapproving critiques of the fetishizing of the slippers are offered by religious fundamentalists." They want to buy the slippers in order to burn them.) But can the slippers do what they are supposed to?

"Home" has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. . . . How hard can we expect even a pair of magic shoes to work? They promised to take us *home*, but are metaphors of homeliness comprehensible to them, are abstractions permissible? Are they literalists, or will they permit us to redefine the blessed word?

Dorothy's shibboleth gradually assumes another meaning in this reverie: there is indeed no place like home, precisely in the sense that there's no such place as home. Click your heels together three times and say *that*, and you're well on your way to entering Rushdie's vision of migrancy as the very condition of cultural modernity. If Rushdie's persecutors have made the experience of rootless nomadism all too literal for him, he's still teaching the rest of us why we can't go home again. ♦

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AVEDON
Salman Rushdie, London, September 26, 1994.

DAMME, THIS IS THE ORIENTAL SCENE FOR YOU!

Indians are writing some of the most adventurous fiction today. Why isn't it in Hindi (or Assamese, or Bengali, or one of the fifteen other national languages)?

BY SALMAN RUSHDIE

ONCE gave a reading to a gathering of university students in Delhi, and when I'd finished a young woman put up her hand. "Mr. Rushdie, I read through your novel 'Midnight's Children,'" she said. "It is a very long book, but never mind, I read it through. And the question I want to ask you is this: Fundamentally, what's your point?"

Before I could attempt an answer, she spoke again: "Oh, I know what you're going to say. You're going to say that the whole effort, from cover to cover—that is the point of the exercise. Isn't that what you were going to say?"

"Something like that, perhaps," I got out.

She snorted. "It won't do."

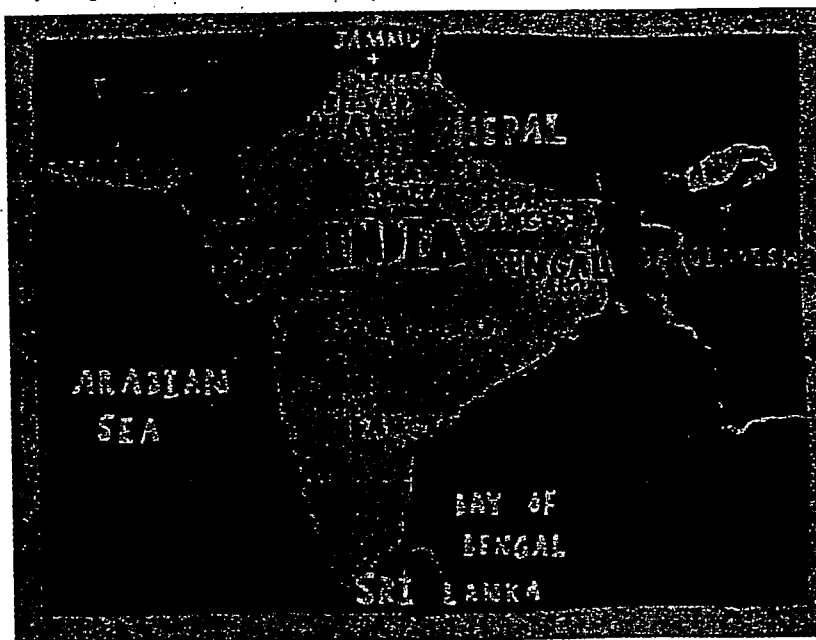
"Please," I begged.

"Do I have to have just one point?"

"Fundamentally," she said, with impressive firmness, "yes."

Contemporary Indian literature remains largely unknown in the United States, in spite of its considerable present-day energy and diversity. The few writers who have made an impression (R. K. Narayan, Vikram Seth) are inevitably read in a kind of literary isolation: texts without context. Some writers of Indian descent, such as V. S. Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee, reject the ethnic label "Indian writers," perhaps in an effort to place themselves in other, better-understood literary contexts. Mukherjee sees herself nowadays as an American writer, while Naipaul would perhaps prefer to be read as an artist from nowhere and everywhere. Indians—and, following the partition of the subcontinent almost

fifty years ago, one should also say Pakistanis—have long been migrants, seeking their fortunes in Africa, Australia, Britain, the Caribbean, and America, and this diaspora has produced many writers who lay claim to an excess of roots: writers like the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, whose verses look toward Srinagar from Am-



herst, Massachusetts, by way of other catastrophes. He writes:

what else besides God disappears at the altar?

○ Kashmir, Armenia once vanished.
Words are nothing,
just rumors—like roses—to embellish a slaughter.

How, then, is one to make any simple, summarizing statement—"Fundamentally, what's your point?"—about so multifarious a literature, hailing from that huge crowd of a country (close to a billion people at the last count), that vast, metamorphic, continent-size culture, which feels, both to Indians and to visitors, like a non-stop assault on the senses, the emotions, the imagination, and the spirit? Put the Indian subcontinent in the

Atlantic Ocean and it would reach from Europe to America; put it together with China and you've got almost half the population of the world.

These days, new Indian writers seem to emerge every few weeks. Their work is as polymorphous as the place. The approaching fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence is a useful pretext for a survey of half a century of postliberation writing. For many months now, I have been reading my way through this literature, and my Delhi interrogator may be pleased to hear that the experience has indeed led me to a single—unexpected and profoundly ironic—conclusion.

THIS is it: The prose writing—both fiction and nonfiction—created in this period by Indian writers working in English is proving to be a stronger and

more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen "recognized" languages of India, the so-called "vernacular languages," during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, "Indo-Anglian" literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. The true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half century has been made in the language the British left behind.

It is a large claim, though it may be an easy one for non-Indian readers to accept; if most of India's English-language writers are still largely unknown in the West, the problem is far greater in the case of the vernacular literatures. Of India's non-English-language authors, perhaps only the name of the 1913 Nobel Prize-winning Bengali writer Rabin-dranath Tagore would be recognized internationally, and even his work, though still popular in Latin America, is now pretty much a closed book in the United States. In any case, it is a claim that runs counter to much of the received critical wisdom within India itself. It is also not a claim that I ever expected to make.

Admittedly, I did my reading only in



"It's me, Tom—Huck Finn!"

English, and there has long been a genuine problem of translation in India—not only into English but between the vernacular languages—and it is possible that good writers have been ill served by their translators' inadequacies. Nowadays, however, such bodies as the Indian Academy of the Arts (the Sahitya Akademi), UNESCO, and Indian publishers themselves have been putting substantial resources into the creation of better translations, and the problem, while not eradicated, is certainly much diminished.

Ironically, the century before independence contains many vernacular-language writers who would merit a place in any anthology: besides Rabindranath Tagore, there are Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, Bibhutibhushan Banerjee (the author of "Pather Panchali," on which Satyajit Ray based his celebrated Apu trilogy of films), and Premchand, the prolific (and therefore rather variable) Hindi author of, among many other works, the famous novel of rural life "Godaan; or, The Gift of a Cow." Those who wish to seek out their leading present-day successors should try, for example, O. V. Vijayan (Malayalam), Suryakant Tripathi, also known as "Nirala" (Hindi), Nirmal Verma (Hindi),

U. R. Ananthamurthy (Kannada), Suresh Joshi (Gujarati), Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Qurratulain Hyder (Urdu), and Ismat Chughtai (Urdu), and make their own assessments. English versions exist of at least some of these writers' works; sometimes, as in the case of Vijayan, translated by the author.

To my own considerable astonishment, however, there is only one Indian writer in translation whom I would place on a par with the Indo-Anglian. (Actually, he's better than most of them.) That is Saadat Hasan Manto, an immensely popular Urdu writer of low-life fictions, whom conservative critics sometimes scorn for his choice of characters and milieus, much as Virginia Woolf snobbishly disparaged the fictional universe of James Joyce's "Ulysses." Manto's masterpiece is the short story "Toba Tek Singh," a parable of the partition of India, in which it is decided that the lunatics, too, must be partitioned—Indian lunatics to India, Pakistani lunatics to the new country of Pakistan. But for the inmates of an asylum in Lahore everything is unclear: the exact site of the frontier, and of the places of origin of the insane persons, too. The lunacies in the asylum become, in this savagely funny story, a perfect metaphor

for the greater insanity of history.

The lack of first-rate writing in translation can only be a matter for regret. However, to speak more positively, it is a delight to be able to celebrate the quality of a growing collective English-language oeuvre, whose status has long been argued over, but which has, in the last twenty years or so, begun to merit a place alongside the most flourishing literatures in the world.

FOR some Indian critics, English-language Indian writing will never be more than a postcolonial anomaly—the bastard child of Empire, sired on India by the departing British. Its continuing use of the old colonial tongue is seen as a fatal flaw that

renders it forever inauthentic. Indo-Anglian literature evokes in these critics the kind of prejudiced reaction shown by some Indians toward the country's community of Anglo-Indians—that is, Eurasians.

Fifty years ago, Jawaharlal Nehru delivered, in English, the great "freedom at midnight" speech that marked the moment of independence:

At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.

Since that indisputably Anglophone oration, the role of English itself has often been disputed in India. Attempts to coin medical, scientific, technological, and everyday neologisms in India's continental shelf of languages to replace the commonly used English words have sometimes succeeded but have more often comically failed. And when the Marxist government of the state of Bengal announced, in the early eighties, that the supposedly elitist, colonialist teaching of English would be discontinued in government-run primary schools, many on the left denounced the decision

itself as élitist, because it would deprive the masses of the many economic and social advantages of speaking the world's language and only the affluent private-school élite would henceforth have that privilege. A well-known Calcutta graffito complained, "My son won't learn English. Your son won't learn English. But Jyoti Basu"—the Chief Minister—"will send his son abroad to learn English." One man's ghetto of privilege is another's road to freedom.

Like the Greek god Dionysius, who was dismembered and afterward reassembled—and who, according to the myths, was one of India's earliest conquerors—Indian writing in English has been called "twice-born" (by the critic Meenakshi Mukherjee) to suggest its double parentage. While I am, I must admit, attracted by the Dionysian resonances of this supposed double birth, it seems to me to rest on the false premise that English, having arrived from outside India, is and must necessarily remain an alien there. But my own mother tongue, Urdu, which was the camp argot of the country's earlier Muslim conquerors, was also an immigrant language, forged from a combination of the conquerors' imported Farsi and the local languages they encountered. However, it became a naturalized subcontinental language long ago; and by now that has happened to English, too. English has become an Indian language. Its colonial origins mean that, like Urdu and unlike all other Indian languages, it has no regional base; but in all other ways it has emphatically come to stay.

(In many parts of South India, people will prefer to converse with visiting North Indians in English rather than in Hindi, which feels, ironically, more like a colonial language to speakers of Tamil, Kannada, or Malayalam than does English, which has acquired in the South an aura of lingua-franca cultural neutrality. The new Silicon Valley-style boom in computer technology which is transforming the economies of Bangalore and Madras has made English in those cities an even more important language than before.)

Indian English, sometimes unattractively called "Hinglish," is not "English" English, to be sure, any more than Irish or American or Caribbean English

is. And part of the achievement of English-language Indian writers is to have found literary voices that are as distinctively Indian, and also as suitable for any and all the purposes of art, as those of other English-language writers in Ireland, Africa, the West Indies, and the United States.

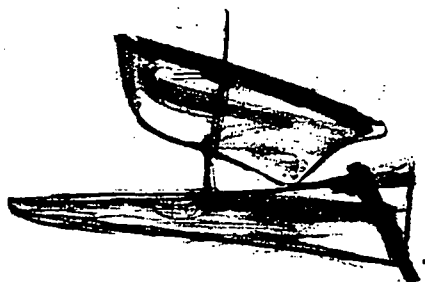
However, Indian critical assaults on this new literature continue to be made from time to time. Its practitioners are denigrated for being too upper-middle-class; for lacking diversity in their choice of themes and techniques; for being less popular in India than outside India; for possessing inflated reputations on account of the international power of the English language, and of the ability of Western critics and publishers to impose their cultural standards on the East; for living, in many cases, outside India; for being deracinated to the point where their work lacks the spiritual dimension essential for a "true" understanding of the soul of India; for being insufficiently grounded in the ancient literary traditions of India; for being the literary equivalent of MTV culture, or of globalizing Coca-Colonization; even, I'm sorry to report, for suffering from a condition that one sprightly recent commentator, Pankaj Mishra, calls "Rushdie-itis . . . a condition that has claimed Rushdie himself in his later works."

It is interesting that so few of these criticisms are literary in the pure sense of the word. For the most part, they do not deal with language, voice, psychological or social insight, imagination, or talent. Rather, they have to do with class, power, and belief. There is a whiff of political correctness about them: the ironic proposition that India's best writing since independence may have been done in the language of the departed imperialists is simply too much for some folks to bear. It ought not to be true, and so must not be permitted to be true. (That many of the attacks on English-language Indian writing are

made in English by Indian writers who are themselves members of the college-educated, English-speaking élite is a further irony.)

LET us quickly concede what must be conceded. It is true that most of these writers come from the educated classes of India; but in a country still bedeviled by high illiteracy levels how could the situation be otherwise? It does not follow, however—unless one holds to a rigid, class-war view of the world—that writers with the privilege of a good education will automatically write novels that seek only to portray the lives of the bourgeoisie. It is true that there tends to be a bias toward metropolitan and cosmopolitan fiction, but there has been, during this half century, a genuine attempt to encompass as many Indian realities as possible, rural as well as urban, sacred as well as profane. This is also, let us remember, a young literature. It is still pushing out the frontiers of the possible.

The point about the power of the English language, and of the Western publishing and critical fraternities, also contains some truth. Perhaps it does seem, to some "home" commentators, that a canon is being foisted on them from outside. The perspective from the West is rather different. Here what seems to be the case is that Western publishers and critics have been growing gradually more and more excited by the voices emerging from India; in England, at least, British writers are often chastised by reviewers for their lack of Indian-style ambition and verve. It feels as if the East were imposing itself on the West, rather than the other way around. And, yes, English is the most powerful medium of communication in the world. Should we not, then, rejoice at these artists' mastery of it, and at their growing influence? To criticize writers for their success in "breaking out" is no more than parochialism (and parochialism is perhaps the main vice of the vernacular literatures). One important dimension of literature is that it is a means of holding a conversation with the world. These writers are insuring that India—or, rather, Indian voices (for they are too good to fall into the trap of writing *nationalistically*)—will henceforth be confident, indispensable parti-



participants in that literary conversation.

Granted, many of these writers do have homes outside India. Henry James, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Mavis Gallant, James Baldwin, Graham Greene, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, and Muriel Spark were or are wanderers, too. Muriel Spark, accepting in March, 1997, the British Literature Prize for a lifetime's achievement, went as far as to say that travel to other countries was essential for all writers. Literature has little or nothing to do with a writer's home address.

The question of religious faith, both as a subject and as an approach to a subject, is clearly important when we speak of a country as near to bursting with devotions as India; but it is surely excessive to use it—as does one leading academic, the redoubtable Professor C. D. Narasimhaiah—as a touchstone, so that Mulk Raj Anand is praised for his “daring” merely because, as a leftist writer, he allows a character to be moved by deep faith, while Arun Kolatkar's poetry is denigrated for “throwing away tradition and creating a vacuum” and thereby “losing relevance” because in “Jejuri,” a cycle of poems about a visit to a temple town, he skeptically likens the stone gods in the temples to the stones on the hillsides nearby (“and every other stone / is god or his cousin”). In fact, many of the writers I admire have a profound knowledge of the “soul of India”; many have deeply spiritual concerns, while others are radically secular, but the need to engage with—to make a reckoning with—India's religious self is everywhere to be found.

The cheapening of artistic response that the allegations of deracination and Westernization imply is notably absent from the Indo-Anglian writers' work. As to the claims of excessive Rushdie-itis, I can't deny that on occasion I've felt something of the sort myself. On the whole, however, it seems to be a short-lived virus, and those whom it affects soon shake it off and find their own, true voices.

(An interesting sidelight. After the 1981 publication of my novel “Midnight's Children,” I learned that the idea of a long saga-novel about a child born at the exact moment of independence—midnight, August 14-15, 1947—had occurred to other writers, too. A poet showed me the first chapter

INVISIBLE BODIES

Turning the corner of the street
he found three newborn puppies
in a gutter with a mother curled
around them.

Turning the corner of the street
she found a newborn naked baby,
male, battered, dead in the manhole
with no mother around.

Turning the corner of the street
the boy stepped on the junkie
lying in the alley, covered with flies,
a dog sniffing his crotch.

Just any day, not only after a riot,
even among the gamboge maples of fall
streets are full of bodies, invisible
to the girl under the twirling parasol.

—A. K. RAMANUJAN
(1929-1993)

of an abandoned novel in which the “midnight child” was born not in Bombay but in Goa. And as I travelled round India I heard of at least two other aborted projects—one in Bengali, the other in Kannada—with nearly similar themes.)

At any rate, there is not, need not be, and should not be an adversarial relationship between English-language Indian literature and the other literatures of India. In my own case—and I suspect in the case of every Indo-Anglian writer—knowing and loving the Indian languages in which I was raised has remained of vital personal and artistic importance. Hindi-Urdu, the “Hindustani” of North India, remains an essential aspect of my sense of self as an individual, while as a writer I have been partly formed by the presence, in my head, of that other music—the rhythms, patterns, and habits of thought and metaphor of all my Indian tongues.

Whatever language we Indians write in, we drink from the same well. India, that inexhaustible horn of plenty, nourishes us all.

THE first Indian novel in English was a dud. “Rajmohan's Wife” (1864) is a poor, melodramatic thing. The writer, Bankim, reverted to Bengali and immedi-

ately achieved great renown. For the next seventy years or so, there was no English-language fiction of any quality. It was the generation of independence—“midnight's parents,” one might call them—who were the true architects of this new tradition. (Jawaharlal Nehru himself was a fine writer, his autobiography and letters are important, influential works. And his niece Nayantara Sahgal, whose early memoir, “Prison and Chocolate Cake,” contains perhaps the finest evocation of the heady time of independence, went on to become a major novelist.)

In that generation, Mulk Raj Anand was influenced by both Joyce and Marx but most of all, perhaps, by the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. He is best known for social-realist works like the novels “Untouchable” (1935) and “Coolie” (1936), studies of the life of the poor, which could be compared to postwar Italian neorealist cinema (De Sica's “The Bicycle Thief,” Rossellini's “Rome, Open City”). Raja Rao, a scholarly Sanskritist, wrote of his determination to make an Indian English for himself, but even his much praised portrait of village life, “Kanthapura,” published in 1938, now seems dated, its approach at once grandiloquent and archaic. The centenarian autobiographer Nirad C. Chaudhuri has

been, throughout his long life, an erudite, contrary, and mischievous presence. His view, if I may paraphrase and summarize it, is that India has no culture of its own, and that whatever we now call Indian culture was brought in from outside by the successive waves of conquerors. This view, polemically and brilliantly expressed, has not endeared him to many of his fellow-Indians. That he has always swum so strongly against the current has not, however, prevented "The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian" from being recognized as a masterpiece.

The most significant writers of this first generation, R. K. Narayan and G. V. Desani, have had opposite careers. Narayan's books fill a good-sized shelf; Desani is the author of a single novel, "All About H. Hatterr," and that volume is already fifty years old. Desani is almost unknown, while Narayan is, of course, a figure of world stature, for his creation of the imaginary town of Malgudi, so lovingly made that it has become more vividly real to us than most real places. (But Narayan's realism is leavened by touches of legend; the river Sarayu, for instance, on whose shores the town sits, is one of the great rivers of Hindu mythology. It is as if William Faulkner had set his Yoknapatawpha County on the banks of the Styx.)

Narayan shows us, over and over again, the quarrel between traditional, static India, on the one hand, and modernity and progress, on the other, represented, in many of his stories and novels, by a confrontation between a "wimp" and a "bully": "The Painter of Signs" and his aggressive beloved with her birth-control campaign; "The Vendor of Sweets" and the emancipated American daughter-in-law with the absurd "novel-writing machine"; and the mild-mannered printer and the extrovert taxidermist in "The Man-Eater of Malgudi." In his gentle, lightly funny art he goes to the heart of the Indian condition and beyond it—into the human condition itself.

The writer I have placed alongside Narayan, G. V. Desani, has fallen so far from favor that the extraordinary "All About H. Hatterr" is at present out of print in India. Milan Kundera once said that all modern literature descends from either Richardson's "Clarissa" or Sterne's "Tristram Shandy," and, if Narayan is India's Richardson, then Desani is his Chandean other. "Hatterr" is dazzling,

puzzling, leaping prose is the first genuine effort to go beyond the Englishness of the English language. Desani's central figure—"fifty-fifty of the species," the half-breed as unabashed antihero—leaps and capers behind the work of many of his successors. Desani writes:

The earth was blotto with the growth of willow, peach, mango-blossom, and flower. Every ugly thing, and smell, was in incognito, as fragrance and freshness.

Being prone, this typical spring-time dash and activity, played an exulting phantasmagoria-note on the inner-man. Medically speaking, the happy circumstances vibrated my ductless glands, and fused me into a wobble-wobble *Whoa, Jamieson!* fillip-and-flair to *live, live!*

Or, again:

The incidents take place in India.

I was exceedingly hard-up of cash: actually, in debts.

And, it is amazing, how, out in the Orient, the shortage of cash gets mixed up with romance and females somehow!

In this England, they say, if a fellow is broke, females, as a matter of course, forsake.

Stands to reason.

Whereas, out in the East, they attach themselves!

Damme, this is the Oriental scene for you!

This is the "babu-English," the semi-literate, half-learned English of the bazaars, transmuted by erudition, highbrow monkeying around, and the impish magic of Desani's unique phrasing and rhythm into an entirely new kind of literary voice. Hard to imagine I. Allan Sealy's more recent, Eurasian comic epic, "The Trotter-Nama"—an enormous tome swirling with digressions, interpolations, exclamations, resumptums, encomiums, and catastrophes—without Desani. My own writing, too, learned a trick or two from him.

VED MEHTA is a writer known both for his astute commentaries on the Indian scene and for his several distinguished volumes of autobiography. The most moving of these is "Vedi," a memoir of a blind boyhood that describes cruelties and kindnesses with equal dispassion and great effect. (More recently, Firdaus Kanga, in his autobiographical fiction "Trying to Grow," has also transcended physical affliction with high style and comic brio.)

Ruth Praver Jhabvala, the author of the Booker Prize-winning "Heat and Dust" (afterward made into a Merchant-Ivory movie), is a master of the short-story form. As a writer, she is sometimes underrated in India because, I think, the

voice of the rootless intellectual (so quintessentially her voice) is such an unfamiliar one in that country, where people's self-definitions are so rooted in their regional identities.

That Jhabvala has a second career as an award-winning screenwriter is well known. But not many people realize that India's greatest film director, the late Satyajit Ray, was also an accomplished author of short stories. His father edited a famous Bengali children's magazine, *Sandesh*, and Ray's biting little fables are made more potent by their childlike charm.

Anita Desai, one of India's major living authors, merits comparison with Jane Austen. In novels such as "Clear Light of Day"—written in a lucid, light English full of subtle atmospheric—she displays both her exceptional skill at social portraiture and an unsparing, Jane-like mordancy of insight into human motivations. "In Custody," perhaps her best novel to date, makes fine use of English to depict the decay of another language, Urdu, and the high literary culture that lived in it. Here the poet, the last, boozing, decrepit custodian of the dying tradition, is (in a reversal of Narayan) the "bully," and the novel's central character, the poet's young admirer, is the "wimp." The dying past, the old world, Desai tells us, can be as much of a burden as the awkward, sometimes wrongheaded present.

Though V. S. Naipaul approaches India as an outsider, his engagement with it has been so intense that no account of its modern literature would be complete without him. His three nonfiction books on India—"An Area of Darkness," "India: A Wounded Civilization," and "India: A Million Mutinies Now"—are key texts, and not only because of the hackles they have raised. Many Indian critics have taken issue with the harshness of his responses. Some have fair-mindedly conceded that he does attack things worth attacking. "I'm anti-Naipaul when I visit the West," one leading South Indian novelist told me, "but I'm often pro-Naipaul back home."

Some of Naipaul's targets, like (this is from "A Wounded Civilization") the intermediate-technology institute that invents "reaping shoes" (with blades attached) for Indian peasants to use in harvesting grain, merit the full weight of

his scorn. At other times, he appears merely supercilious. India, his migrant ancestors' lost paradise, apparently cannot stop disappointing him. By the third volume of the series, however, which was written in 1990, he seems more cheerful about the country's condition. He speaks approvingly of the emergence of "a central will, a central intellect, a national idea," and disarmingly, even movingly, confesses to the atavistic edginess of mood in which he made his first trip almost thirty years earlier: "The India of my fantasy and heart was something lost and irrecoverable. . . . On that first journey, I was a fearful traveller."



In "An Area of Darkness," Naipaul's comments on Indian writers elicit from this reader a characteristic mixture of agreement and dissent. He writes:

The feeling is widespread that, whatever English might have done for Tolstoy, it can never do justice to the Indian "language" writers. This is possible; what little I read of them in translation did not encourage me to read more. Premchand . . . turned out to be a minor fabulist. . . . Other writers quickly fatigued me with their assertions that poverty was sad, that death was sad . . . and many of the "modern" short stories were only refurbished folk tales.

Here he is expressing, in his emphatic, unafraid way, what I have also felt (though I think more highly of Premchand than he). He also says:

The novel is of the West. It is part of that Western concern with the condition of men, a response to the here and now. In India thoughtful men have preferred to turn their backs on the here and now and to satisfy what President Radhakrishnan calls "the basic human hunger for the unseen." It is not a good qualification for the writing or reading of novels.

And here I can accompany him only some of the way. It is true that many learned Indians go in for a sonorously impenetrable form of critico-mysticism. I once heard an Indian writer of some renown, who was much interested in India's ancient wisdoms, expounding his theory of what one might call Motionism. "Consider Water," he advised us. "Water without Motion is—what? Is a lake. Very well. Now, Water plus Motion is—what? Is a river. You see? The Water is still the same Water. Only Motion has been added. By the same token," he continued, making a breathtaking intellectual language is Silence, to which Motion has been added."

(A fine Indian poet, who was sitting beside me in the great man's audience, murmured in my ear, "Bowel without Motion is—what? Is constipation! Bowel plus Motion is—what? Is shit!")

So I agree with Naipaul that mysticism is bad for novelists. But, in the India I know, for every obfuscating Motionist there is a debunking Bowel whispering in one's ear; for every unworldly seeker for the ancient wisdoms of the East there is a clear-eyed witness responding to the here and now in precisely that fashion which Naipaul inaccurately calls uniquely Western. And when Naipaul concludes by saying that in the aftermath of the "abortive" Indo-British encounter India is little more than a (very Naipaulian) community of mimic men—that the country's artistic life has stagnated, that "the creative urge" has "failed," that "Shiva has ceased to dance"—then I fear he and I part company altogether. "An Area of Darkness" was written as long ago as 1964, a mere seventeen years after independence and a little early for an obituary notice. The growing quality of Indian writing in English may yet change his mind.

In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, the flow of that good writing has become a flood. Bapsi Sidhwa is technically Pakistani, but literature has no need of partitions, particularly since Sidhwa's novel "Cracking India" is one of the finest responses made to the horror of the division of the subcontinent. Gita Mehta's "A River Sutra" is an important attempt by a thoroughly modern Indian to make her reckoning with the Hindu culture from which she emerged. Padma Perera, Anjana Appachana (whose major new novel, "Listening Now," will be published next January), and Githa Hariharan, less well known than Sidhwa and Mehta, confirm the quality of contemporary writing by Indian women.

A number of different styles of work are evolving: the Stendhalian realism of a writer like Rohinton Mistry, the author of two acclaimed novels, "Such a Long Journey" and "A Fine Balance," and of a collection of stories, "Tales from Firozsha Baag"; the equally naturalistic but lighter, more readily charming prose of Vikram Seth (there is, admittedly, a kind of perversity in invoking lightness in the con-

text of a book boasting as much sheer avoirdupois as "A Suitable Boy," which runs to a thousand three hundred and forty-nine pages); the elegant social observation of Upamanyu Chatterjee ("English August"); and the more flamboyant manner of Vikram Chandra ("Love and Longing in Bombay"). Amitav Ghosh's most impressive achievement to date is the nonfiction study of India and Egypt "In an Antique Land." It may be that his greatest strength will turn out to be as an essayist of this sort. Sara Suleri, whose memoir "Meatless Days" is, like Bapsi Sidhwa's "Cracking India," a visitor from across the Pakistani frontier, is a nonfiction writer of immense originality and grace. And Amit Chaudhuri's languorous, elliptical, beautiful prose is impressively impossible to place in any category at all.

Most encouragingly, yet another talented generation has begun to emerge. The Bengali-Keralan writer Arundhati Roy has arrived to the accompaniment of a loud fanfare. Her novel, "The God of Small Things," is full of ambition and sparkle, and is written in a highly wrought and utterly personal style. Equally impressive are the debuts of two other first novelists. Ardashir Vakil's "Beach Boy" and Kiran Desai's "Strange Happenings in the Guava Orchard" are, in very unlike ways, highly original books. The Vakil book, a tale of growing up near Juhu Beach, Bombay, is sharp, funny, and fast; the Kiran Desai, a Calvinesque fable of a misfit boy who climbs a tree and becomes a sort of petty guru, is lush and intensely imagined. Kiran Desai is the daughter of Anita: her arrival establishes the first dynasty of modern Indian fiction. But she is very much her own writer, the newest of all these voices, and welcome proof that India's encounter with the English language, far from proving abortive, continues to give birth to new children, endowed with lavish gifts.

THE map of the world in the standard Mercator projection is not kind to India, making it look substantially smaller than, say, Greenland. On the map of world literature, too, India has been undersized for too long. Fifty years after India's independence, however, that age of obscurity is coming to an end. India's writers have torn up the old map and are busily drawing their own. ♦



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