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# The Indian Novel in the 21st Century

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## Summary and Keywords

The Indian novel has been a vibrant and energetic expressive space in the 21st century. While the grand postcolonial gestures characteristic of the late-20th-century Indian novel have been in evidence in new novels by established authors such as Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, and Salman Rushdie, a slate of new authors has emerged in this period as well, charting a range of new novelistic modes. Some of these authors are Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Githa Hariharan, Samina Ali, Karan Mahajan, and Amitava Kumar. In general, there has been a move away from ambitious literary fiction in the form of the "huge, baggy monster" that led to the publication of several monumental postcolonial novels in the 1980s and 1990s; increasingly the most dynamic and influential Indian writing uses new novelistic forms and literary styles tied to the changing landscape of India's current contemporary social and political problems. The newer generation of authors has also eschewed the aspiration to represent the entirety of life in modern India, and instead aimed to explore much more limited regional and cultural narrative frameworks. If a novel like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) took its protagonist all over the Indian subcontinent and indexed a large number of important historical controversies in the interest of broad representation, Padma Viswnanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon* (2008) limits itself to a focus on a single Tamil Brahmin family's orientation to issues of caste and gender, and remains effectively local to Tamil Nadu. There is no central agenda or defining idiom of this emerging literary culture, but three major groupings can be identified that encapsulate the major themes and preoccupations of 21st-century Indian fiction: "New Urban Realism," "Gender and Secular History," and "Globalizing India, Reinscribing the Past."

Keywords: globalization, world literature, gender, secularism, religion, South Asian literature, postcolonial India, Islam, national allegory, mass market fiction

The Indian novel has been a vibrant and energetic expressive space in the 21st century. While the grand "postcolonial" gestures characteristic of some of the most influential 20th-century Indian novels have been in evidence in new novels by established authors



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like Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, and Salman Rushdie, a slate of new authors has emerged in this period as well, charting out a range of new novelistic modes. In general, there has been a move away from ambitious literary fiction in the form of the "huge, baggy monster" that led to the publication of several monumental postcolonial novels in the 1980s and 1990s (Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* [1981], Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* [1993], and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* [1995] being three cases in point). Such novels are still being published—two noteworthy examples might be Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006), and Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015)—but increasingly the most dynamic and influential Indian writing is exploring new novelistic forms and literary styles. Amit Chaudhari once described the "large, postmodernist Indian English novel" as pursuing a "mimesis of form, where the largeness of the book allegorizes the largeness of the country it represents."[1] Another version of this idea might be Fredric Jameson's much-debated "national allegory" concept.[2] Admittedly, not all Indian novelists writing in English even in the 1980s and 1990s aspired toward the baggy nationalist allegory; Chaudhuri himself is a case in point. Still, in the most exciting new Indian fiction published since 2000, the newer generation of authors has eschewed the aspiration to represent the entirety of life in modern India, and instead aimed to explore much more limited regional and cultural narrative frameworks. There is no central agenda or defining idiom of this emerging literary culture—and that is in some ways the point—though three major groupings take up some of the major themes of Indian literature of the early 21st century: "New Urban Realism," "Gender and Religion," and "Globalizing India, Reinscribing the Past." To be clear, these are loose groupings introduced that help describe some important new trends in Indian fiction. In actuality, most texts have elements of more than one of these thematic areas, with some (for instance, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*) straddling all three.

The focus here will largely be on novels written in English, for reasons that will be explored in greater detail in the note on language below. Also, it seems important to state that the emphasis here is on *Indian* novels, rather than *Indian diaspora* fiction. Thus, diaspora-oriented fiction by writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri or Chitra Divakaruni is not our concern in the present essay; the primary interest is in contemporary novels that are set in India, and that can be seen as contributing to the conversation about Indian literature occurring within India in some way. That said, it seems salient to note that here no analytical distinction is made between writers who are based primarily in India and those who are based abroad. Thus, because they are set entirely in India, books like Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon* (2008) or Chandra's *Sacred Games* should be considered "Indian" novels even if their authors live in the United States.

First, a brief section on language (which seems essential in the highly linguistically complicated universe of Indian literature), and the growth of domestic Indian markets for fiction, which has led to the realignment of the Indian publishing industry.



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# A Note on Language

India has about twenty different literary languages. The linguistic limitations of critics, including the author of the present essay, are likely to be an issue in most literary studies of Indian literature, which cannot be understood as a singular national literary tradition in the manner of the European traditions. Rather, Indian literature must be understood as *internally comparative*, and any analysis that claims to represent it in its entirety (and, to be clear, the present essay is not making that claim) must be comparative. All that said, English remains the dominant language for Indian literature, at least in terms of the economy of public prestige. Writers in Indian languages frequently complain that their works remain unknown outside of India, unreviewed, and largely unread by the country's most educated readers. In a recent collection of short stories, Hindi writer Uday Prakash made his complaint about the secondary status of Hindi literature palpable: "When the English were here, it was English that made us into slaves. Now that the English are gone, it's Hindi that's turned us into slaves."[3]

Thanks to colonialism, a large number of Indians speak English, and English is widely taught in schools. However, even optimistic assessments suggest that approximately 10 percent of India's population (more than 100 million people) has some knowledge of the English language, though it is likely that only a small minority of those English-speakers have enough proficiency to be readers of English-language literature.[4] Accurate data to quantify the size of different linguistic literary markets operating in India is also lacking. While there are no hard numbers regarding publishing sales in India—nor is there an official, nationwide "bestsellers list" that crosses linguistic boundaries—the pulp fiction market in such languages as Hindi and Tamil is believed to be much larger than the domestic market for English-language writing. However, much Hindi pulp fiction is sold quite cheaply; an English-language novel might be sold in prestige chain bookstores like Crosswords for ten or even twenty times the price of a work of Tamil or Hindi fiction. It is fair to assume that writers like Prakash (an author of serious literary fiction in Hindi) are not receiving the six-figure advances that writers like Arundhati Roy or Vikram Chandra have been known to get from western publishers.

Several writers in Indian languages have been influential with Indian critics in recent years, including the aforementioned Prakash (Hindi), Geet Chaturvedi (Hindi), Vyomesh Shukla (Hindi), and Vivek Shanbhag (Kannada). Several of these writers have been at least partially translated into English, with notable translations of Prakash (*The Girl With the Golden Parasol* [2003] and *Walls of Delhi* [2008]) and Shanbhag (*Ghachar Ghochar* [2017]) appearing in recent years.

Even *within* English, the language of Indian fiction has been changing in recent years. While earlier postcolonial fiction incorporated italicized words from Indian languages sparingly (and often with supplementary glossaries), many writers in the post-2000 generation of Indian English fiction use a version of English that is much closer to the version of Indian English spoken in contemporary India—with a frequently intense



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sprinkling of terms and ideas from Indian languages that are presented matter-of-factly and without annotation. Moreover, writers Amitava Kumar and Aravind Adiga have written with considerable self-consciousness and sophistication about the challenge of achieving authenticity while writing in English. In Kumar's novel *Home Products* (published in the United States as *Nobody Does the Right Thing*), the protagonist Binod Singh begins his career as a Hindi-language journalist and struggles to make the transition to English, even as he is only too ready to bask in the prestige offered by access to India's elite, English-speaking world. After making the jump to English, Binod finds that everyday life in rural, Hindi-speaking northern India does not seem to register for him in the same way in English as it did when he wrote in Hindi: "Nevertheless, while writing entirely in English, Binod found that he could not talk very easily about villages and small towns. He lacked the idiom to express his feelings directly about harvests or heavy rains that led to flooding, the excitement and then the numbing that followed the news of another caste massacre."[5] The suggestion is that while English may be the medium of choice for Kumar and Adiga, one has to be self-conscious about its limits as a representational tool for the so-called real India. The growing heterogeneity of Indian-English voices and idioms is not necessarily an unambiguously good thing for India's other literary languages; it also seems to have developed alongside the decline of the prospect of any serious contestation of English as India's dominant literary language.

# Markets

While an earlier generation of postcolonial Indian authors often complained that they needed the status of western publication to really break through and gain a broad readership and interest amongst Indian readers, the presumption of western publishing dominance is beginning to shift. The domestic Indian publishing industry continues to gain steam, with growing numbers of new authors being published each year independent of their status or connection to the West. While earlier it was routine for an Indian author to aim for first publication in London or New York, the most commercially successful new Indian writers (i.e., Chetan Bhagat) are increasingly finding interest from western publishers *after* they have already established themselves as popular brands in India itself.

Far and away, the author most identified with the growth in the domestic Indian publishing market is one likely to be totally unknown in the west, Chetan Bhagat. In the 2000s, Bhagat published seven popular novels and two nonfiction books. Several of the novels have either been produced as commercial Hindi films; in some cases, Bhagat himself was involved in the screenplay. *One Night @ the Call Center* (2005) takes a prominent feature of globalizing India—the Internet-based call centers that were set up by multinational corporations in urban centers largely to service the needs of western consumers—and uses it as a framing device to explore the troubles of a group of young Indians. Other Bhagat novels set on college campuses have made the generational focus



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of his fiction even more direct (*Five Point Someone* [2004] and *2 States* [2009]). These novels have been notable for Bhagat's willingness to take on various social issues of importance to metropolitan readers (cross-regional romance in *2 States*, the problems of stress and hazing in Indian universities in *Five Point Someone*, the problem of religious intolerance in *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* [2008]), generally packaged as entertainment for the masses).

Bhagat is well aware that his success has had more to do with the tastes of the masses than with India's cosmopolitan critics ("The book critics, they all hate me," he quipped to the New York Times in 2008).[6] The scale of his success—one statistic indicates that he has sold more than twelve million books—is orders of magnitude greater than that of the most commercially successful writer of serious literary fiction in recent years, Aravind Adiga.[7] Adiga's novels and short story collections have been considered publishing successes, though his success within India has followed the Rushdie-Roy model in that is has been a consequence of his status as a Booker Prize–winning author respected by western critics. Adiga's *The White Tiger* sold 200,000 copies after Adiga won the 2008 Booker Prize, but his subsequent collection *Between the Assassinations* had a much smaller initial print run.[8]

Since 2000, there has been a rapid expansion of genre fiction in the Anglophone Indian fiction market. While pulp fiction has always been part of fiction written in Indian languages, genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and the military/espionage thriller were underserved, especially for prestige-oriented consumers of English-language fiction. With the rise of a new generation of writers like Samit Basu (the *Gameworld Trilogy*; *Turbulence* [2012]; *Resistance* [2013]), there has been a rapid growth of interest in domestic science fiction. Basu's later novels are particularly noteworthy in that they rework the conventions of the western superhero story for Indian readers. As Basu put it in an interview on *Resistance*: "the American superhero story is usually about protecting and preserving the world, with the villain as the agent of change, but I saw no reason to apply that to the Indian subcontinent, where the status quo is really not something that calls for preservation."[9] Fantasy has also become quite popular among English-language Indian readers, with the emergence of Amish Tripathi (see his hugely popular *Shiva Trilogy* [2010–2013]), and Ashok Banker (the *Ramayana* Series 2003–2010). Finally, writers with strong journalistic credentials have also tried their hand at military and espionage fiction oriented specifically towards male readers; one thinks of Aniruddha Bahal's *Bunker 13* (2003) and Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins* (2009).

Alongside the growth of genre fiction, the 2000s have seen the emergence of a large market in graphic novels. Some of these follow the trend towards superhero narratives (and indeed, several authors in the genre fiction market have also published comics), often with a nod toward Indian mythology, mentioned with reference to genre fiction above. Alongside more popular entertainments (comics) a number of graphic novels with a more literary sensibility have also emerged, including Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), and



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Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* (2010). Vishwajyoti Ghosh also edited a collection of graphic Partition narratives, *This Side, That Side: Restorying Partition* (2013).

There is no doubt that the market of Indian fiction in English has been evolving in recent years, and there are good reasons to expect it to continue to evolve. The steady growth in the number of English-language readers in India, the advent of mass-market Indian authors like Bhagat, and the proliferation of genres in recent years, suggest that there are reasons to be optimistic. However, the advent of digital marketplaces, widespread piracy, and the increasing pervasiveness of a middle-class culture increasingly addicted to social media and digital devices leave some uncertainty regarding the future prospects for authors, publishers, and booksellers in India.

# The New Urban Realism

The new urban realism in Indian fiction features a highly realistic style that gives precedence to local details and often an emphasis on regional cities like Patna or Hyderabad, rather than national metropolitan centers (i.e., Delhi and Mumbai). The style also tends to feature an encounter with themes of criminality, violence, corruption, and an open-eyed acceptance of liberal Indian hypocrisy (especially in an era of simultaneous wealth accumulation and urban slum growth) and double standards around topics such as caste and religious biases. The starting point for the burst of writing that emphasized this style might well be a nonfiction book, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004). That book, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2005, caused a sensation both among western readers and readers in India. Mehta's ability to get forthright accounts of police-targeted killings ("encounters"), Bombay gangsters, sex workers, corrupt politicians, and the implication of Bollywood movie stars and producers in all of it set loose a flood of interest in this type of material. Many of the authors we associate with the New Urban Realism are also interested in the tension between state violence and various forms of religious radicalization that feed terrorism. In some ways, the New Urban Realism might be the Indian analogue to "post 9/11 fiction" in the British and American publishing worlds. Finally, it seems important to acknowledge that the New Urban Realism can be seen as a way for a new generation of authors to differentiate itself from what came before; the subgenre generally eschews fanciful elements such as the old magic realism of Rushdie or the preciosity of Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997). While the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* was most directly an adaptation of Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* (2005), the producers and screenplay writers of that hit film have freely admitted that they were also thinking of *Maximum City* in their depiction of Mumbai street crime. Intriguingly, while the over-the-top reception of Roy's first novel set it up as a text that more recent novelists might position themselves against, Roy's most recent novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), might actually be seen as participating in a form of urban realism.



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Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize–winning *The White Tiger* encapsulates the trend towards the new urban realism (though it also can be read as a novel of globalization). Adiga has a typically complex personal history that speaks to the globality of his approach to modern India: He was born in Chennai, raised partly in Australia, and studied at Columbia and Oxford Universities. He worked in India as a journalist for several years, and has indicated that his travels, especially to rural India, were what inspired him to write *The White Tiger*. This novel playfully uses a first-person conceit to follow the rise of a poor man of low-caste background from his modest upbringing in a rural part of the "backward" state of Bihar (described in Adiga's novel as the "Darkness") to a very wealthy and powerful situation in metropolitan Delhi—and eventually the tech hub that is today's Bangalore.

Some critics have noted that the method of Adiga's novel, with its polished style and its play on American "get rich quick" self-help books, might in fact replicate the very marginalization of rural and impoverished areas of Indian society that the novel seems to be questioning. While Adiga's account of globalizing modern India is precise and carefully marked, his accounts of the "Darkness" tend towards the abstract. As Amitava Kumar noted in his critique of the book, there is little in the novel's account of rural Bihar that reflects the protagonist's supposed intimate connection to it.[10] Another critic, Sanjay Surahhmanyam, has questioned the sleight-of-hand that has allowed Adiga to put forward a first-person narrative authored by an individual who, the novel tells us, isn't really fluent in English: "We are meant to believe—even within the conventions of the realist novel—that a person who must really function in Maithili or Bhojpuri can express his thoughts seamlessly in a language that he doesn't speak."[11]

Another line of criticism that overlaps with Subrahmanyam's could be made regarding the novel's sometimes fraught relationship to narrative realism. To wit, in a passage early in the novel, Adiga's protagonist Balram Halwai seems remarkably self-conscious about his uneasy belonging in modern India: "Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an odd museum of ideas." Many readers have noted that this first person account of seems psychologically implausible. Arguably, no one who was "half-formed" in the way described in the passage above would be capable of actually realizing it and articulating it in this way. Such a person could not be at once defined by his ad hoc grasp of the world and self-conscious about it.

However, critics such as Sarah Brouillette have argued that *The White Tiger*'s metafictional critique of the get-rich-quick genre should deflect any concerns about psychological realism.[12] If anything, Adiga's Balram Halwai is a caricature constructed to make a sociopolitical point about India's "dark side": the masses of poor and uneducated who are effectively colonized by the English-speaking elites, who travel around India's big cities behind dark-tinted windows, invulnerable in their air-conditioned "eggs." India's elites, Adiga wants to show, can misbehave with impunity (some of the plot events seem to be inspired by certain very public scandals involving the corruption of the justice system that would have been immediately legible to middle-class Indian readers in the



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first decade of the 2000s). In short, though Adiga's protagonist is a servant, this is really a novel about the misbehavior and fragile authority of the ruling class, not about the subaltern.

Alongside Adiga's novels (his more recent novel, *Selection Day* [2016], continues the exploration of class and urban life, with a pair of cricket-playing brothers in a Mumbai slum), a number of other writers have emerged to explore the new urban realism. Uday Prakash, in his Hindi short stories, is extraordinarily attentive to the everyday lives of working-class people often invisible to English-language writers. His suffering protagonist in the short story "Walls of Delhi" (2008), for instance, notes the city's rapid gentrification will likely lead to his own disappearance from the scene: "The poor, the sick, the street corner prophets, the lowly, the unexceptional--all gone! They've vanished from this new Delhi of wealth and wizardry, never to return, not here, not anywhere else. Not even memories of them will remain."[13] Another Delhi-based urban realist (in English) is Karan Mahajan, whose novels *Family Planning* (2009) and *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016), explore social issues and politics in the city. *Family Planning* is a light and comic coming-of-age novel that works the disjunction between the broken socialist legacies of Indian government bureaucracy (represented by the protagonist's parents—who with thirteen children seem utterly incapable of "family planning") and the globalist and cosmopolitan tendencies of the younger generation on the rise. *The Association of Small Bombs* is more ambitious, exploring the effects of the bombing of a public marketplace on a group of survivors, including a Muslim boy, Mansoor, whose two Hindu friends were killed in the attack, and Deepa and Vikas Khurana, the parents of the boys killed. In a parallel narrative, Mahajan follows the point of view of Shaukat "Shockie" Guru, the Kashmiri militant who made the bomb that killed the Khurana children. Shockie is a young man of modest means who is motivated more by a desire for revenge for past Indian government atrocities against Kashmiris than he is by religious zeal. He is preoccupied with his mother's failing health as well as the poor pay he receives from his domestic and foreign bosses. Mahajan is not so much interested in exploring the inner psychology of a terrorist; this terrorist, for the most part, refuses introspection with regard to the human costs of his actions. Mahajan interlaces raw and poignant details about Shockie's everyday life alongside matter-of-fact reportage about his bomb-making, seemingly humanizing a terrorist as a (dangerously) thoughtless participant in a vicious cycle of violence.

Vikram Chandra's massive doorstop of a book, *Sacred Games* (2006) is the product of meticulous research conducted by the author over seven years; it was released in India as well as the United Kingdom and the United States with considerable fanfare and excitement. In the end, the difficulty of Chandra's prose and the sheer length of the book proved too much for many readers, and Chandra's novel has seemingly made much less of an impact on the culture than that other monumental work of Indian English fiction, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993). Chandra's book shares with *Maximum City* and *The White Tiger* a deep preoccupation with the centrality of violence in everyday life in urban India. Chandra's setting is the urban Mumbai police department, where a police officer, Sartaj Singh, is reaching his breaking point about both his faltering personal life and his



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commitment not to accept bribes. He is brought in to investigate the death of an extremely violent and dangerous gangster named Gaitonde with links to a global criminal underworld as well as a terrorist plot involving a nuclear bomb to be set off in central Mumbai. The dominant ethos is a kind of amoral survivalism, which leads Sartaj Singh to make ethical compromises in order to succeed in his investigation: “We are good men who must be bad to keep the worst men in control. Without us, there would be nothing left, there would only be a jungle.” These sentences perfectly encapsulate the ethical framework of the new urban realism; some version of the sentiment they express could quite easily be found in many other books.

While the genre of the New Urban Realism tends to be dominated by male writers, some women novelists also might be seen as writing in this space, especially Samina Ali. But the most important figure to enter into this space is Arundhati Roy, whose 2017 novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, has a definite emphasis on urban life and adult perspectives that were less evident in her earlier *The God of Small Things*, a novel that had a decided atmosphere of tragic pastorality and a focus on the experiences of young children. Much of Roy’s new novel is set in Delhi, and sensitively explores the life and culture of the Hijra (transgender) community. Another major plot takes the novel into the politics of Kashmiri secessionism and the intensely repressive state response to that movement. But even as much of the middle part of Roy’s novel is set outside of Delhi, its major characters all have a strong connection to Delhi. The emphasis on political violence, the urbanized aesthetics, and the sense that moral judgment in contemporary India is hopelessly vexed—Roy suggests, in an echo of Chandra, that we are all complicit in unspeakable violence—all support *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as an instance of the urban realist aesthetic.

# Gender and Religion

The founding principle of secularism—defined, in distinctly Indian terms, as equal treatment toward all religious communities—has been in crisis in the Indian public sphere since the late 1980s. At the center of many of the fraught public debates is the status of women in Indian religious communities. One of the first serious controversies involved Shah Bano, a Muslim woman who had been divorced by her husband under Muslim personal law; the emerging Hindu right took an interest in her case, though secularists saw their involvement as a self-serving gesture designed to put pressure on the minority Muslim community. Subsequently, a prolonged campaign from the Hindu right led to the disruption of the razing of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992, followed soon thereafter by a wave of bombings in Bombay (Mumbai), and subsequent religious riots that left hundreds dead. Another terrible incident of communal violence occurred in Gujarat in 2002, an event that continues to have ramifications into the present moment. Despite that intense social and political focus, there has not emerged a new body of fiction in the 21st century that deals *primarily* with issues of religious tolerance and



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intolerance, though many novels (including several already mentioned) deal with these topics in some way. By contrast, quite a number of late 20th-century texts did centrally take on the topic of religious violence with an emphasis on the status of women; novels like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, and Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* dealt with gendered communal violence specifically with respect to the Partition of the Indian subcontinent.

That said, since 2000, a number of novels have been published that bring a particularly feminist sensibility to the secularism debates. In some ways, these novels are all written in the shadow of Arundhati Roy's groundbreaking *The God of Small Things* (1997), which was acutely sensitive to the pervasiveness of caste even across religious boundaries in its account of caste violence in a Keralan Christian community. One notable example of such a book written under the rubric of gender and secular history might be Padma Viswanathan's *The Toss of a Lemon*, which explores the lives of a series of Tamil Brahmin women, starting with the protagonist's child marriage at the age of 10 (in 1896), and proceeding forward as she deals with young widowhood as well as various forms of caste bias directed at friends and family.

Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004) was not reviewed as widely as some other novels, but it is noteworthy for several reasons: it documents the isolation of women in the contemporary Indian Muslim community, while also marking the failure of the state to protect their rights in the face of ongoing problem of discrimination against Muslims. Moreover, Ali explores the flaws in the traditional patriarchal system pertaining to women (including Triple Talaq, arranged marriage, and the overreliance on traditional medicine when modern medicine is much more effective at ensuring women's health and bodily integrity). Ali's protagonist is a young woman named Layla, whose family is rooted in the cloistered environs of Old City, Hyderabad, one of India's oldest and most conservative Muslim enclaves. The city was settled more than five hundred years ago by the Qutb Shahi kings, and remained an independent small kingdom for nearly 200 years, when it was conquered via a siege by the all-powerful Mughal Empire.[14] While the Muslim section of Old City has declined a good deal since its Imperial glory days, it remains a formidable neighborhood—with large mansions and a massive, six-mile wall surrounding the area. Within Old City, it is not uncommon to see women in Burqas or to hear the Azan, or call for prayer, from several different Mosques. It is also common to find the tenets of Islamic Sharia—as sanctified in Indian Civil Law by the Muslim Marriage Act—still very much in force.

Ali definitely aims to use her novel to make a feminist argument about the challenge of finding feminist agency in the context of a strongly patriarchal minority community, but importantly, many of the agents of repression in the novel turn out to be women. Ali's Layla has been raised partly in the United States before returning to Hyderabad after her divorce. Layla's mother wants to make sure her daughter's future isn't compromised by her own personal situation—so she arranges Layla's marriage without ever publicly acknowledging that she is in fact divorced herself, as that would ruin the family's reputation. As is common in many stories about the transmission of conservative



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patriarchal values, it is the women in Layla's family—first her mother, then her mother-in-law—who take it upon themselves to present a façade of total respectability to the rest of the community.

Another novel that brings a feminist sensibility together with a focus on the secularism debate is Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003). Hariharan's protagonist, Professor Shiv Murthy, is a professor of medieval Indian history at a correspondence university in New Delhi. Shiv finds himself in hot water when the Hindu right picks up on a series of lessons he's written on a 12th-century reform figure named Basava (also spelled Basavanna). Basava was a critic of religious orthodoxies in his day, but also a bit of a religious prophet himself. He is credited with starting a sect, the Veerashaivas (Warriors of Shiva), but he is nevertheless held up by some Indian secularists as an early example of a critic of Brahminical authority and religious dogma in general. Despite Basava's radical heterodoxy, some contemporary Hindu nationalists have embraced him as one of their own.

The core of Hariharan's novel is the unlikely transformation of a middle-aged academic from an upper-caste Hindu background into a secularist activist. Shiv's lectures at the university, Hariharan informs us, are a bit slanted towards the progressive, secularist interpretation, and a loud group of critics (the "Itihas Suraksha Manch," or "History Protection Platform") publicly calls for an apology, a revised lesson, and a more "balanced" syllabus. The Chair of the department and the Dean are spooked by the national media attention, and attempt to strongarm Shiv to revise the lesson and sign the apology. While Shiv's typical response to such a demand would be to instantly capitulate, his attraction to a young female student from another university leads Shiv to a newfound courage and secularist commitment. Meena is a campus radical from a more prestigious university, and her presence in his life completely transforms Shiv's sense of his role as a historian, leading him to aggressively resist the demands of the History Protection Movement. Hariharan's take on Basava leans postmodernist: the final truth about this 12th-century figure's relationship to religion will never be definitively known, but the lack of closure, she suggests, can actually be a lesson for the always polarized, ideologically volatile contemporary moment.

The emergence of a growing LGBTQ literature, especially since 2000, includes Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2003), which features a woman in a conventional marriage who finds herself involved with another woman, and Sandip Roy's *Don't Let Him Know* (2015), in which a same-sex desire triangle involving a group of married men and women unfolds over forty years. Neither of these novels directly deals with gendered religious violence, though Kapur's novel does revolve around a married protagonist who gets involved with a Muslim man that leads to a political awakening of sorts. Amruta Patil's graphic novel *Kari* also explores a related set of themes, albeit with a superhero twist. Finally, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has broken new ground with respect to the depiction of transgendered people in Indian fiction.



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# Globalizing India, Reinscribing the Past

Engagement with globalization has permeated quite broadly into Indian fiction since the early 1990s, and several of the novels described could very well also be understood with reference to globalization as well (*The White Tiger*, for instance, is deeply interested in the topic). But while the theme is now commonplace, the conceptual territory entailed is not necessarily so simple.

Some writers have opted to explore the impact of globalization via an aesthetic of acceleration and cultural simultaneity: everything is changing and all establishments and traditions are being overturned at the root. Some of Salman Rushdie's work after *Midnight's Children* seems relevant to mention here, especially *The Satanic Verses*, with its embrace of hybridity and displacement. Indeed, in his essay from *Imaginary Homelands* published soon afterwards, Rushdie described his novel with a credo that very well might be that of the globalization aesthetic more broadly: "*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs."[15] More recent novels in this vein are Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2005) and Rana Dasgupta's *Tokyo Cancelled* (2005). These novels, Dasgupta's especially, are so thoroughly invested in establishing a kind of global chic that they seem almost homeless (the only space present in the frame narrative that binds the various episodic shorts in *Tokyo Cancelled* together is an international airport).

Against a presentist, deterritorialized globalism, since 2000 a number of Indian novelists have been exploring an aesthetic that melds the theme of globalization with a deep attention to place, and the ways in which history—ancient and modern—continues to exert itself in the contemporary moment. Here, hybridity is occurring, but so are strong forces of reaction, nationalist assertion, and cultural retrenchment. Rather than breathlessly celebrating globalization as an era when everyone and everything comes together, this new set of novels attempts to find a way out of the impasses and disjunctions that continue to keep us apart.

One highly successful example of a novel that perfectly exemplifies the global in the local is Kiran Desai's Booker Prize–winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). Desai's novel is set in the town of Kalimpong, in the Himalayan mountains (near the border with Bhutan). The primary characters are a group of various displaced Indians from other parts of India who have relocated to this area, many of them with global connections in their pasts, and locals who sometimes view the outsiders with suspicion. Sai, the primary protagonist, has been educated for years in Europe before returning to India to live with her grandfather, Judge Jemubhai Patel. The Judge had his own history abroad as a young man in England, and is now in many ways trapped in a kind of nostalgic Anglophilia that reminds the reader of the ways the legacy of British colonialism continues to impact life in India's present day. Even the family's cook has global connections; his son Biju is living in the United States and working in the food service industry in New York, where his



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prospects are severely limited by his immigration status. Sai's love interest in the novel, Gyan, is part of the indigenous Gurkha ethnic community which resents the economic and political dominance of Hindi-speaking Indians from the plains in their region. As the various competing constituencies in the plot come together, Desai seems to be making a point that even in an era of globalization local identities and the personal histories that go with them remain paramount. And yet we are all intimately connected, as Sai realizes in a meaningful meditation towards the end of the novel: "Never again could she think there was but one narrative and that this narrative belonged only to herself, that she might create her own mean little happiness and live safely within it" (Kiran Desai, *Inheritance of Loss*).

The inscription of the past in stories with a global scope might very well be the signature of one of India's most accomplished novelists, Amitav Ghosh. It is a method he initiated in a highly influential nonfiction work, *In an Antique Land*, and then expanded in his novel *The Glass Palace*. In the 2000s, he has produced some of his most accomplished writing in this vein with *The Hungry Tide* and the *Ibis Trilogy*.

*The Glass Palace* (1996) is virtually an epic of southeast Asia—it simultaneously tells the story of: the Indian National Army during the Second World War; the advent of modernity in Burma, including especially the role of the rubber and teak trades in British colonialism; and the plight of Indian migrant workers in places such as Malaysia at a time of widespread displacement and general chaos. Each of these parallel subplots is essential to the novel's major conceptual plot, and the presence of each is the product of considerable research on the part of the novelist. Through juxtaposition, Ghosh suggests a number of compelling ties between Indian Bengal and the rest of Southeast Asia. Overall, in *The Glass Palace* Ghosh makes a major claim for unifying modern Southeast Asian history—a profoundly integrated Indian Ocean Basin. *The Hungry Tide*, in contrast, is geographically a bit narrower—the main action of the story is limited to the Sunderban islands in the Bay of Bengal, and perhaps by extension Bengal itself. Ghosh's novel explores the plight of displaced peoples—here specifically a group of refugees from Bangladesh who found themselves in a confrontation with the Indian state in 1979. The other conceptual question is how humans share a complex and dangerous ecosystem with animals (here dolphins and tigers).

The environmental theme in *The Hungry Tide* serves as an important conceptual bridge between the global and local. The Irawaddy dolphins are being studied by Piyali Roy, a marine biologist of Bengali descent who discovers some strange behavioral quirks among dolphins in a tide pool while visiting the islands on a grant. The Bay of Bengal is also one of the only habitats where Bengal tigers continue to live in the wild. They are zealously protected by various international environmental groups (who apply economic pressure on the Indian and Bangladeshi governments to maintain the tiger habitats by military force). But in the name of a global priority—namely, tiger preservation—local human lives are threatened, as the tigers routinely maul and often kill islanders. Though there are the obvious modern devices that might be used to protect the islanders, the state allows local deaths to continue in the interest of a highly sought—even commodified—global



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environmental reputation. In the Sunderbans, Ghosh argues, human lives are valued lower than those of tigers as global economic forces and international institutions make local suffering invisible.

Alongside the more social and political critique of borders and national identity that permeates *The Hungry Tide*, the islands themselves are in a flood plain, and their precarious status is a figure for the possible harms that could follow from climate change. In the novel, the land itself is inconstant—subject to sometimes radical alterations as a result of late summer storms. Whole islands are washed away by the cyclones that sweep in with huge tidal surges; thousands of human beings and animals routinely die in these storms, which may get worse as climate change continues to accelerate. Global interests impinge on life in the Sunderbans in ways that are sometimes quite direct (the NGO-driven ban on killing tigers) and sometimes unthinkably vast and abstract.

Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2009–2015) is an ambitious experiment in exploring the connections between the global network of migration and the flow of capital and commodities in a historical context. The implicit argument of the series might well be that the British Empire connected India to an idea of globality in the early 19th century, through seagoing vessels like the eponymous *Ibis*, a former slave ship now used in Ghosh's series as a cargo vessel in the opium trade and, in *Sea of Poppies* (2009), in the movement of indentured workers from India to other parts of the Indian Ocean basin. Ghosh's series features an international and multiracial cast of characters, including a biracial American, Zachary Reid; a poor Indian woman from a rural part of Bihar who is attempting to escape an untenable living situation (an opium-addicted husband who drugs her and then allows her to be raped by her brother); a Frenchwoman brought into service as a governess for a wealthy family in Bengal; and a dispossessed Bengali prince, among others.

Globality is also very much in evidence in what might be the defining feature of the series, namely, Ghosh's use of various slangs, patois, and pidgins amongst his various characters. One version of this is an inventive pidgin spoken amongst the "Lascars" who are taken on board when the *Ibis*'s regular (English-speaking) crew die off from illness early on in the story. The Lascars are a group of sailors from all over the Indian Ocean basin and southeast Asia, and they communicate with one another and others on the ship in a pidgin that is part Hindi ("so muchee buk-buk and big-big hookuming") and partly universal Portuguese ship pidgin ("No sabbi ship-pijjin"), with elements from Chinese and other Asian language thrown into the mix as well. Another patois that appears in the series is the more familiar "Hobson-Jobson" mix of Hindustani and English spoken by the established Anglo-Indian population that, by 1839, has a quite firm grip on the country it rules. Interestingly, the Anglo-Indians who employ this hybridized mode of speech do so deliberately—choosing it over committing fully to Indian languages. At one point, Zachary Reid is told by the pilot of a river schooner to drop "just a little peppering of nigger-talk mixed with a few girleys. But mind your Oordoo and Hindee doesn't sound too good: don't want the world to think you've gone native." In the second and third installments of the series, *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015), Ghosh takes his characters to new settings, including the Fanqui-town in Canton (Guangzhou), China, the primary



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destination for much of the opium being brought into China by the British in the years before the Opium Wars, and Mauritius, where a new hybrid culture and language emerges that is partly influenced by the indigenous community (speaking Kreol) and partly by Hindi, Bengali, and Bhojpuri-speaking laborers from India.

# Discussion of the Literature

Many of the best critics of South Asian literature are novelists themselves. The best might well be Salman Rushdie; his *Imaginary Homelands* laid much of the conceptual groundwork for the scholarship and analysis that has followed.[16] Another helpful novelist-critic who has been exploring the framing of the Indian novel after Rushdie is Amit Chaudhuri; his *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature, and Modernity* opens up a way of thinking about Indian literature after jettisoning the pretense of national allegory.[17] A good starting point for the debate about authenticity in Indian literature post-2000 might be the two essays on *The White Tiger*, Amitava Kumar's essay in *Boston Review*,[18] and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's "Diary."[19] Of course, these essays are reworkings of an earlier essay dealing with authenticity by another novelist, Vikram Chandra's "The Cult of Authenticity."[20]

While by and large the best sources to consult with respect to Indian literature are usually the serious literary reviews (*The New Yorker*, *New York Review of Books*, *London Review of Books*), some excellent academic scholarship has appeared in recent years. One starting point might be Mrinalini Chakravarty's *In Stereotype: South Asia in the Global Literary Imaginary*, particularly chapter 3, "Slumdog or White Tiger? The Abjection and Allure of Slums."[21] Also recommended is Ulka Anjaria's comprehensive anthology, *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, though only later chapters of that text deal with the issues covered here in depth (see especially Priya Joshi's "Chetan Bhagat: Remaking the Novel in India" and Shameem Black's "Post-Humanitarianism and the Indian Novel in English.")[22] On the question of secularism and gender, a notable book is Priya Kumar's *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film*.[23] For a general introduction to late 20th-century South Asian literature that is accessible to undergraduates, Paul Brians' *Modern South Asian Literature in English* can be quite helpful.[24]

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