

Indian Literature in English: An Introduction

Lecture 7:

Indian Fiction in English: Before and After Rushdie

1) The Opening Move:

G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr* (1948)

2) The Strange Case of Arun Joshi

3) Great Indian Novels:

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981)

Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989)

4) Literature in English and Indian Politics:

Raj Kamal Jha, *Fireproof* (2006)

After Independence: Co-ordinates

1947	at midnight, 15 August, India gains independence, with Nehru as Prime Minister; partition, mass migration expulsion; Pakistan becomes Muslim country; severe fighting over Kashmir
1948	Gandhi assassinated by orthodox Hindu fanatic
1965	Nehru dies, his daughter Indira Gandhi becomes PM
1965/66	second Indo-Pakistani war over
1971	Kashmir civil war in Pakistan (East Pakistan > Bangladesh): mass migrations; Indo-Pakistani war won by India
1975-77	Emergency Rule gives PM Indira Gandhi dictatorial powers
1984	PM Indira Gandhi assassinated by two of her Sikh guards after moving against Sikh separatists in Punjab; her son Rajiv Gandhi becomes PM
1990	Hindu march to Ayodhya; mass rioting in many cities Rajiv Gandhi assassinated by Tamil suicide bomber
2002	mass rioting in Gujarat (more than 1000 killed)

Alok Bhalla, ed., *Stories About the Partition of India*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1994 (pb. 1999)

The partition of the Indian subcontinent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history. The violence it unleashed was unprecedented, unexpected and barbaric. Provoked by the hooligan actions of a few, the vengeance that ordinary Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs wreaked on each other coarsened our social sense, distorted our political judgements and deranged our understanding of moral rightness. The memory of those days is branded so deeply in our souls that it still provokes us into irrational behaviour and careless thought. The real sorrow of partition was that it brought to an abrupt end a long and communally shared history [...]

The stories collected in these volumes [...] are [...] witnesses to a period in which we fell out of a human world of languages, customs, rituals and prayers into a bestial world of hatred, rage, self-interest and frenzy [...] How we [...] read these stories, based upon our own presuppositions, will determine the kind of politics we choose to practice in the future.

(xvi/xlixf.)

Literary Co-ordinates (Fiction in English):

- intermittent beginnings in the 19th century
- getting into stride in the 1930s and 1940s between realism (R.K. Narayan), naturalism and modernism (Mulk Raj Anand), and a re-negotiation of Indian narrative traditions (Raja Rao)
- fully-fledged modernist reflexivity introduced by G.V. Desani
- 'national allegories' vs. 'home fiction'
- 'genres of modernity'

1) The Opening Move

G.V. Desani (1909-2000)

*Nairobi

- childhood in Sind (now Pakistan)
1926-52 journalist and correspondent on Indian affairs in London
1952-66 Hindu and Buddhist monasteries in India, Burma and Japan
1969-79 Professor of Philosophy, University of Texas
- *All About H. Hatterr* (1948/72) has become a cult classic for anticipating postcolonialism/postmodernism and influencing Salman Rushdie and I. Alan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama* (1988)

Epigraph:

Indian middle-man (to author): Sir, if you do not identify your composition a novel, how then do we itemise it? Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.

Author (to Indian middle-man): Sir, I identify it a *gesture*. Sir, the rank and file is entitled to know.

Indian middle-man (to author): Sir, there is no immediate demand for *gestures*. There is immediate demand for novels. Sir, we are literary agents, not free agents.

Author (to Indian middle-man): Sir, I identify it a novel. Sir, itemise it accordingly.

[Desani:] There are *two* of us writing this book. A fellow called H. Hatterr and I. I said to this H. Hatterr, 'Furgoodnessakes, you tell 'em. I am shy!' And he tells. Though I warrantee, and underwrite, the book's *his*. I remain anonymous. (16f.)

[Hatterr:] The trump card of us Balaamite fellers is the mumbo-jumbo talk: the priestcraft obscurantisms and subtlety: (... *Wherefore, pious brethren, by confessing I lie, yoiks! I tell the truth*, sort of topholy trumpeting-it, by the Pharisee G.V. Desani: see the feller's tract *All About...*, publisher, the same publishing company): [...] (120)

MUTUAL INTRODUCTION (3)

The name is H. Hatterr, and I am continuing...

Biologically, I am fifty-fifty of the species.

One of my parents was a European, Christian-by-faith merchant merman (seaman). From which part of the Continent? Wish I could tell you. The other was an Oriental, a Malay Peninsula-resident lady, a steady non-voyaging, non-Christian human (no mermaid). From which part of the Peninsula? Couldn't tell you either.

Barely a year after my baptism (in white, pure and holy), I was taken from Penang (Malay P.) to India (East). It was there that my old man kicked the bucket in a hurry. The via media? Chronic malaria and pneumonia-plus.

Whereupon, a local litigation for my possession ensued.

The odds were all in favour of the India-resident Dundee-born Scot, who was trading in jute.

He believed himself a good European, and a pious Kirk o'Scotland parishioner, whose right-divine Scotch blud mission it was to rescue the baptised mite me from any illiterate non-pi heathen influence. She didn't have a chance, my poor old ma, and the court gave him the possession award.

I don't know what happened to her. Maybe, she lives. Who cares?

Rejoicing at the just conclusion of the dictate of his conscience, and armed with the legal interpretation of the testament left by my post-mortem seaman parent, willing I be brought up Christian, and the court custody award, the jute factor had me adopted by an English Missionary Society, as one of their many Oriental and mixed-Oriental orphan-wards. And, thus it was that I became a sahib by adoption, the Christian lingo (English) being my second vernacular from the orphan-adoption age onwards.

[...]

Knowing that the most deserving party needing help was self, I decided to chuck the school, get out into the open spaces of India, seek my lebensraum, and win my bread and curry all on my own.

[...]

From that day onwards, my education became free and my own business. I fought off the hard-clinging feelings of my motherlessness. I studied the daily press, picked up tips from the stray Indian street-dog as well as the finest Preceptor-Sage available in the land. I assumed the style-name H. Hatterr ('H' for the nom de plume '*Hindustaniwalla*', and '*Hatterr*', the nom de guerre inspired by Rev. the Head's too-large-for-him-hat), and, by and by (autobiographical *I*, which see), I went completely Indian to *an* extent few pure non-Indian blood sahib fellers have done.

I have learnt from the school of *Life*; all the lessons, the sweet, the bitter, and the middling messy. I am debtor both to the Greeks and the Barbarians. And, pardon, figuratively speaking, I have had higher education too. I have been the personal disciple of the illustrious grey-beards, the Sages of *Calcutta*, *Rangoon* (now resident in India), *Madras*, *Bombay*, and the right Honourable the Sage of *Delhi*, the wholly Worshipful of *Mogalsarai-Varanasi*, and his naked Holiness Number One, the Sage of *All India* himself!

(31-33)

Hell, what is *Truth*? as one P. Pilate once asked.

Posterity expects: and no dam' use funkung the issue.

But can words ever communicate *Truth* – whatever it is?

All words are pointers, indicators, symbols: and there isn't a single word in any lingo, dialect or doggerel, which is absolutely cast-true, suggesting in the exact infallible, *Truth*.

[...]

What do you expect of a damme *writer* of words, anyway? *Truth*? Hell, you will get *contrast*, and no mistake!

(274f.)

2) The Strange Case of Arun Joshi

Arun Joshi, *The Foreigner* [1968]. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2010.

--- *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* [1971]. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2008.

--- *The Apprentice* [1975]. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2011.

--- *The Last Labyrinth* [1981]. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2012.

--- *The City and the River* [1990]. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2005.

Is the greatest Indian English novelist all but out of print? This much is certain: Arun Joshi deserves better. The author of five novels, written mainly during the 1970s, who won the Sahitya Akademi award for his penultimate book, *The Last Labyrinth*, barely registers as a name today. At least two of his books are out of print, none is easily available. Yet his themes are the most vitally contemporary of all our early English novelists, his characters vividly like us — Englishspeaking, urban, wracked with confusion — and the quality of his art and thought are both first-rate and arguably far superior to (say) Rushdie (to whom Indian English writing is said to owe a great debt). But if all this is so, what explains his obscurity?

Part of the answer may be the man's personality. According to some accounts, Joshi was reclusive and publicity-shy. He certainly didn't climb the publishing ladder like his contemporaries did. Along with most other writers of the time who wrote in English but lived in India (Joshi headed the Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations in Delhi), he published locally — with Orient Paperbacks. But even through the 1980s and beyond, post-Rushdie, when Anita Desai, Khushwant Singh and others had moved to foreign or multinational brands, and Penguin India had set up shop, and publishing was starting to become the big-ticket affair it is today, Joshi was still with Orient. (He remained there till his death in 1993, and his books have stayed there ever since.) It is not the case that his merits were unknown in his lifetime. He had won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1982. Did he not push his wares hard enough?

This could be; we don't know. But we know a general truth, which I suggest applies squarely to Arun Joshi: that it is the man with his finger on the pulse who risks being dashed aside, not the glib talker at the safe distance. That a writer can be ignored, precisely for being too relevant. In exploring seriously and unapologetically the psyche of his very own 'set' — the privileged and the upwardly mobile, who read, wrote, talked and thought in English — Joshi was breaking ground that has never afterwards been mined; that has, in fact, been guiltily filled up again, in the years since he published. As a result, his themes, which leap from the page from sheer relevance, lie buried today in a kind of ashamed but aggressive silence. [...]

Joshi explores the muddle of our English-speaking elite, up and down through his first four novels. He knows that it is the wellspring of a great deal of violence, of "the blind blundering vengeance" that stalks Billy Biswas, and the sham and hypocrisy that creep over *The Apprentice*. That, Joshi's third and perhaps greatest novel, is a searing account of a young government servant's descent into careerism and corruption. Published almost four decades ago, no novel could be more acutely relevant to our times. There are lines like prophecy. "We are defeated and we celebrate victory! God exists and does not mind graft! We sink and think we are swimming. Strange... We are a very strange nation." But perhaps no bookshop stocks it.

This is both tragic and not surprising at all. When the general consensus among our critics is that privileged Indian English novelists cannot possibly have any great themes of their own to grapple with, that all the meaty material lies in 'other' Indias or in other languages, that non-fiction may as well take over from fiction — when such idiocies (the right word) abound — then the last thing one knows how to place is the absolute seriousness and unabashed introspection of an Arun Joshi. When I mention that it is the spiritual starvation of the elite, their unattended need for faith and God, that is his ultimate theme, you will see the gap between his thought and the prevailing thought. Nevertheless, it is worth considering, that even as we celebrate writers from the world over, we may have forgotten the best of our own.

(Sudarshan 2013)

3) Great Indian Novels

Salman Rushdie (*1947 Bombay)

Novels:

Grimus (1975)
Midnight's Children (1981)
Shame (1983)
The Satanic Verses (1988)
Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990)
The Moor's Last Sigh (1995)
The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999)
Fury (2001)
Shalimar the Clown (2005)
The Enchantress of Florence (2008)
Luka and the Fire of Life (2011)

Short Stories:

East, West (1994)

Essays:

Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991 (1991)
Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002 (2002)

Autobiography:

Josef Anton: A Memoir (2012)

***Midnight's Children* (1981)**

- Booker Prize 1981, Booker of Bookers 1993, Best of the Bookers 2008
- best-selling historiographic metafiction about post-independence Indian history, narrator-protagonist is "mysteriously handcuffed to history" (9) and the plot transgresses the boundary between fiction and reality
- successful combination of reader-friendliness and aesthetic ambition: fictional autobiography, parody of *Bildungsroman* + playful digressiveness of alternative tradition of Western fiction (*Don Quixote*, *Tristram Shandy*) and Indian traditions of oral narrative
- encyclopedic narrative technique combining
 - a) first-person and third-person narration
 - b) retrospective/magical omniscience and immediacy
 - c) narrative thrust and metafictional inquiry

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose-being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I'm everything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I' [...] contains a similar multitude [...] to understand me, you'll have to swallow the world. (383)

Shame (1983)

- historiographic metafiction about Pakistani history
- new narrative technique: 'postmodern' authorial narration

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! [...] Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?

(28, original emphasis)

I reply with more questions: is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commissions map out the territories? Can only the dead speak? I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands. [...] The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. [...] My story, my fictional country exist, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. [...] I [...] am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion [...] that something can also be gained.

(28f., original emphasis)

But suppose this were a realistic novel! [...] By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally [...] The book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer's heart. Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale [...] [N]obody need get upset, or say anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either. What a relief!

(69/70)

Shashi Tharoor (*1956 London)

**Reasons of State* (1982)

The Great Indian Novel (1989)

The Five-Dollar Smile and Other Stories (1990)

Show Business (1992)

**India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond* (1997/2006)

Riot: A Love Story (2001)

**Nehru: The Invention of India* (2003)

**Bookless in Baghdad and Other Writings about Reading* (2005)

**The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st Century Power* (2007)

**Pax Indica: India and the World of the 21st Century* (2012)

(*non-fiction)

The Great Indian Novel basically depends on one single move in which the classical mythological text of the *Mahabharata* is displaced and superimposed as a pretext upon a historical narrative that reaches from the inception of the Indian freedom struggle to the end of Indira Gandhi's emergency [...] Jonathan Culler observes that Tharoor's "retelling in modern form of the traditional narratives of the *Mahabharata* seems to re-establish their authority while suggesting that all Indian history is already contained in them, *as if events were determined by their signifying structures*." Culler, of course, is aware of the indeterminacy that such a signifying structure effects as it produces, in Tharoor's text, a narrative that hovers between satirisation and sacralisation of the historical-as-mythology.

What renders Culler's reflections slightly unsatisfactory is his acceptance of the *Mahabharata* as a given "story of origin" unproblematically available as a point of reference from which an allegorization like *The Great Indian Novel* might proceed as if there were only one *Mahabharata*. A notion like this overlooks the constructedness of the epic as a unified entity that as such has historically emerged from 19th-century orientalist interventions aimed [...] at articulating "Indian civilization [as] as a unified whole based on *shastrik*, authoritative tradition."

(Wiemann 2008, 85f.)

Eighteen Books:

1. The Twice-Born Tale
2. The Duel with the Crown
3. The Rains Came
4. A Raj Quartet
5. The Powers of Silence
6. Forbidden Fruit
7. The Son Also Rises
8. Midnight's Parents
9. Him – Or, the Far Power-Villain
10. Darkness at Dawn
11. Renunciation – Or, the Bed of Arrows
12. The Man Who Could Not Be King
13. Passages Through India
14. The Rigged Veda
15. The Act of Free Choice
16. The Bungle Book – Or, the Reign of Error
17. The Drop of Honey – A Parable
18. The Path to Salvation

Opening

They tell me India is an underdeveloped country. They attend seminars, appear on television, even come to see me, creasing their eight-hundred rupee suits and clutching their moulded brief-cases, to announce in tones of infinite understanding that India has yet to develop. Stuff and nonsense, of course. These are the kind of fellows who couldn't tell their *kundalini* from a decomposing earthworm, and I don't hesitate to tell them so. I tell them they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage. I tell them that if they would only read the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, study the Golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim chaps the Mughals, they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay. [...]

4) Literature in English and Indian Politics

Raj Kamal Jha (*1966 Bihar, raised in Kolkata)

The Blue Bedspread (2001)

If You Are Afraid of Heights (2003)

Fireproof (2006)

Opening

What's left about two months after an apartment complex is set on fire? After many of those who lived there have been killed?

And those who haven't, have flown away on wings of fear, never to return?

Not much.

[...]

And so it is, on an afternoon in the month of May in the year 2002 in Gulbarga Housing Society in the City of Ahmedabad. It's touching 40 degrees, there is fire in the sky.

It was here, on the last day of the February gone by, that a mob had stood and set the building on fire, burnt alive 38 residents – twelve are missing to this day. The Gulberga massacre, as it came to be called in newspapers and on TV, was one of a series across the state of Gujarat that killed over 1,000 men, women and children, 70 per cent of them Muslim, ostensibly as revenge for the death of 59 Hindu passengers in an attack on a train by a Muslim mob the previous morning.

This afternoon, in the scant puddle of a shadow in the yard, half-covered by shreds of charred cloth, scraps of burnt paper, there lies a child's book. It's called *Learning to Communicate* (published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi).

A brown patch in the top left-hand corner – possibly the work of fire and water, sun and shine – has seeped into each of its 124 pages. It's a junior-school English workbook, its leaves marked by what's clearly a child's handwriting and sketches.

All in pencil. The fly leaf where the child would have been most likely to write his or her name, address, maybe phone number, is gone. Torn off.

On page 43, there is a poem called 'The Town Child' that has been underlined. Line by line, paragraph by paragraph.

This is how the poem begins:

*I live in the town on the street,
It is crowded with traffic and feet.
The houses all wait in a row,
There is smoke everywhere I go.*

*There is only one thing that I love,
And that is the sky far above.
There is plenty of room in the blue,
For castles and clouds and me, too.*

The child's last entry in the book is on page 84.

How many children were killed in Gulbarga isn't known – police say the bodies were too badly burned to be identified.

All of the above is fact.

All of what follows is fiction.

(vii-ix)

PROLOGUE (THE OPENING STATEMENT)

PART ONE: THAT NIGHT

PART TWO: THE DAY AFTER

PART THREE: THE NIGHT AFTER

EPILOGUE (THE CLOSING STATEMENT)

THE END (Author's Notes on the events in Gujarat)

Bibliography Lecture 7:

- Dengel-Janic, Ellen, *Narrating Gendered Space: Anita Desai's and Shashi Deshpande's 'Home Fiction'* (Diss. Tübingen 2008)
- Fludernik, Monika, ed., *Hybridity and Postcolonialism: Twentieth-Century Indian Literature*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1998.
- Gopal, Priyamvada, *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration*. Oxford: Osford UP, 2009.
- Jussawalla, Feroza F., *Family Quarrels: Towards a Criticism of Indian Writing in English*. New York et al.: Lang, 1985.
- Malreddy, Pavan Kumar & Dieter Riemenschneider, eds., *Arun Joshi: Avantgarde, Existentialism and the West*. Special Issue of ZAA – Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik 62.1 (2014).
- Nanavati, U.M., Prafulla C. Kar, eds., *Rethinking Indian English Literature*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2000.
- Padikkal, Shivarama, "Inventing Modernity: The Emergence of the Novel in India." In: Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, Vivek Dhahreshwar, eds., *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*. Calcutta: Seagull, 1993: 220-241.
- Paranjape, Makarand, *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel*. Shimla: Indian Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000.
- Reinfandt, Christoph, "Grenzüberschreitungen: Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981)." In: C.R., *Der Sinn der fiktionalen Wirklichkeiten*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1997: 330-353.
- "The Place and Function of Literature in the Next Millenium: Implications of the 'Rushdie Affair'." *SPIEL* 16.1/2 (1997): 276-280.
- "'What's the Use of Stories that Aren't Even True?' Salman Rushdie as a Test Case for Literature and Literary Studies Today." *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 31.1 (1998): 75-92.
- "The Cultural Mutiny of 'Translated Man' and the Ground Beneath Our Feet: Salman Rushdie and the New Literatures in English." *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 36.4 (2003): 319-330.
- Riemenschneider, Dieter, *The Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934-2004*. Jaipur: Rawat, 2005.
- Stilz, Gerhard, "'Truth? Hell, you will get contrast, and no mistake!' Sanitizing the Intercultural Polylemma in G.V. Desani's *All About H. Hatterr* (1948/72)." In: Fludernik 1998, 79-101.
- Sudarshan, Aditya, "The Strange Case of Arun Joshi." *The Hindu*, March 2, 2013.
- Wiemann, Dirk, *Genres of Modernity: Contemporary Indian Novels in English*. Amsterdam/Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 2008.