

# Commodification of Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

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## Abstract

*Following the tenets of New Historicism, this paper discusses how consumerism, Neo-Colonialism and a subtle capitalism with an exploitative mindset have commodified contemporary Indian fiction. Many Indian authors, located both within and outside India, draw raw material from their homeland for their fiction, only to showcase selected facts to malign India and its religion. They exemplify what Macaulay described as natives who are Indians in blood and colour, but English in taste. In their hands, literature – instead of conveying the truth through literariness – has been rendered into a form of propaganda. The paper also contemplates why middle-class readers feel connected with such literary products.*

*Keywords: Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, capitalist, commodification, Diaspora, globalization, Kiran Desai, Mahatma Gandhi, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth*

In consumer markets, advertisements play an important role; “beautiful” people are needed to lure “ugly” people to become like them so that some strain can be put on their time and money. One can easily understand why the advent of new economic policies in India in the nineties was accompanied by a sudden spurt of activities in finding hidden beauty queens and labelling them as “Miss India”, “Miss Asia Pacific”, “Miss World”, “Miss Universe”, “Miss Galaxy”, etc. Even those feminists who advocate the use of the title “Ms” in place of “Miss/Mrs” enthusiastically participate in such events, legitimising the organisers and the participants; participation is justified as being the choice of the women concerned, while those who oppose them are branded as “reactionary forces”. Thus, the larger issue of maintaining human dignity by keeping (fe)male bodies away from the lustful (fe)male gaze is

sidelined in favour of engaging the (fe)male body to further capitalist intentions/profits by increasing “lust and greed” in society, thereby also promoting violence. This analogy has been advanced as a way of understanding the phenomenon of the rise of authors such as Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravinda Adiga. This list is not exhaustive; these authors are discussed here in order to understand the matrix of the authors and capitalism. Some readers of this article may not appreciate my analogy between authors and models. To the attention of such readers I would bring the following passage by Sandra Ponzanesi:

As the earlier transition from industrialization (focus on production) to advanced capitalism and globalization (focus on worldwide spreading of consumption based on the outsourcing of development countries [sic]), the literary industry now – with a different intensity and of course with different modalities – has shifted its focus from supplying potential audiences to planning them. Rather than merely reading submitted manuscripts and discovering new talent, they now proceed as if on a hunting campaign aiming to locate authors even before they have attempted to write, and commissioning subjects, topics, and areas to reach one major goal: to create a demand for the product, a real thirst for consumption prior to production. (116)

Besides the above-mentioned authors, many others have also abandoned their native land (remember Scott’s “My Native Land”) at some point of time, and have relocated themselves on their own in foreign lands, not in order to become global, but rather to seek greener pastures in a “better place” – not the third world but the first world, the capitalist world (mainly the USA, though in some cases also Canada, the UK or elsewhere). Their selection of a country also speaks a great deal about their commitment, priorities, perceptions and personal agenda. It is no wonder that their location and the location of multinational companies are one and the same – the capitalist world. Both of them know that there are new types of readers/audiences/buyers in these new-found wonderlands, in the form of the “intellectual/middle class Diaspora” (in contrast with the Giritia Diaspora) and the burgeoning middle class in a highly populated yet “resurgent India”. The Diaspora needs the image of India in the form of Indian fiction in English for three main reasons: a) to assert their identity in a foreign land; b) to familiarize their children with India and Indian traditions; and c) to assert and to vindicate their actions in migrating to a distant land. On the other hand, the neo-rich and aspirational Indian middle class have plenty of free time to indulge in gossip (= light reading) and to brag of their sophisticated tastes (= highbrow mannerisms). They have the purchasing capacity to buy costlier books in English (= the bourgeois wish to look more fashionable and modern) and to keep themselves more up-to-date about books (= not to gain knowledge). They detest buying books in regional languages<sup>1</sup> (= cheap, substandard and ghettoised writing in India); they like to drop names in order to appear more cultured (= remember Eliot’s “... the women come and go/ Talking of Michelangelo”) and they consider culture and religion a matter of ridicule under the influence of Marx/Modernism/Post-Modernism (= intellectualism). These members of this middle class in India, despite the great cost and often misery associated with the practice, like to send their children to English-medium schools where the English language and English mannerisms are taught in imitation of British/American models, making their children

more useful for a job market dominated mainly by multinational companies. Moreover, in India there is a tradition of giving more respect to people with higher education. Keeping all this in mind, plans are made to exploit this class, and commissioned books are churned out to cater to the tastes of this new class of reading public.

It has been pointed out earlier that a beauty queen/model is needed to market all kinds of products, and this work can only be carried out by a native model. One can also note that a desi model is needed to do the marketing of not only global products (e.g. “Loreal Hair Products” are marketed by Aishwarya Rai) but also glocalised products (e.g. “Kaun Banega Carorepati” is advertised by Amitabh Bachchan) or even local products (e.g. “Pataka Tea” is endorsed by Urmila Matondkar); a Naomi Campbell or a Caroline Winnberg or a Mayo Okawa or a Ngoli Onyeka Okafor is not needed for marketing in India. Similarly, an L.H. Myers or a John Masters or an E.M. Forster or a Rudyard Kipling or a M.M. Kaye or a Paul Scott will not be a proper choice to target the burgeoning Indian middle-class market; rather the product must be marketed by somebody who is “Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay); somebody who is “‘a learned native’ ... familiar with the poetry of Milton, the metaphysics of Locke, and the physics of Newton [read Einstein or Hawkins for a more contemporary version]” (Macaulay); somebody who believes that he is “to educate a people who cannot ... be educated by means of their mother-tongue” (Macaulay); somebody who believes “the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of ... India contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are moreover so poor and rude” (Macaulay); somebody who believes “[English] stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West. It abounds with works of imagination not inferior to the noblest ... with models of every species of eloquence, -- with historical composition, which, considered merely as narratives, have seldom been surpassed, and which, considered as vehicles of ethical and political instruction, have never been equalled – with just and lively representations of human life and human nature, -- with the most profound speculations on metaphysics, morals, government, jurisprudence, trade, -- with full and correct information respecting every experimental science which tends to preserve the health, to increase the comfort, or to expand the intellect of man” (Macaulay). Macaulay’s account of his language is characterized by pride verging on belligerence – not only because of the pride he has in his nativity, but also because he came from the class of colonial masters who were determined to denigrate those they ruled. This belligerence was also a part of the essential strategy of the East India Company, one of the most powerful global enterprises at the time. The products of English education gain this belligerence in inheritance. This is the reason why these postcolonial authors “elected as spokespersons for their nation are at times disliked in their home countries” (Ponzanesi 119).

Authors who, like Macaulay, believe in the superiority of the English language and the white, Anglo-Saxon and perhaps Christian race are very useful to publishers; together they form a good union and enter into a contract to fulfil each other’s aspirations. Large advance royalties are given to such authors, and are publicised in the form of news reports (Roy). A book churned out by such an author is a sort of made-to-order product prepared for a particular market; the book/product is given publicity through various types of advertisements to attract different target groups. The pre-publication and post-publication reviews of this book are arranged to target scholars and the general reading public; the book is released with great fanfare in the presence of “cultural connoisseurs”; meet-the-

author programmes are arranged to attract “academicians and other intellectuals”; media interviews with the author are held, which are unlike Karan Thapar’s hard-hitting ‘Devil’s Advocate’; book-reading sessions are organised in the same way that film trailers are released to rouse the curiosity of prospective viewers (the general public/ prospective buyers). This commissioned book may therefore be equated to propaganda material – another form of advertisement material aimed at a new target market in the form of the highly educated, professional, moneyed Indian middle class both at home and abroad (the Indian middle-class Diaspora which has recently come into existence, in contrast to the Diaspora originating from Girmitia labourers). To cater to the needs of such a market, an author needs to understand the socio-cultural psyche of the middle class and also the nuances of the culture of the Diaspora.

This author is useful to publishers; (s)he has already abandoned his/her land; (s)he has learnt the English language and culture, and (s)he thinks and feels like a white person, as well as being culturally sensitive to his/her former master. No one can understand the needs of the Indian middle class better than such an author. Citing Bourdieu, Ponzanesi states: “... our choices and tastes are determined by social affinities” (113). Therefore, the question ‘who writes for whom and why’ needs to be probed deeper before evaluating such literature. However, the gullible young men and women from various parts of the country, mainly from the lower middle class, looking for a career in English Literature (with the aspiration to make quick money, and perhaps sick of their helplessness), are made to think that Indian writing in English has come a long way and Indian talent is ultimately being recognised by the West (= the colonial aspiration of wishing for a few words of appreciation from their former masters = the servility syndrome). They not only buy these books, but also conduct research to identify “Indian sensibility” in such authors, and do not stop till they have found it. After all, they want their (Indian) affinity with these “fellow-native” authors to be proved/strengthened. Since the subtle point being made here requires some elaboration, an actual incident needs to be narrated in order to clarify the issue: person ‘B’ approached person ‘A’ and enquired of him if he knew Pranabda<sup>2</sup>. ‘A’ readily admitted that he knew him, and in order to prove his assertion, he gave out all the information that was expected from a well-read and up-to-date person with a good general knowledge. ‘B’ was quite impressed and said: “I am convinced that you are quite close to Pranabda; kindly help me; I want my lieutenant son to be transferred from J&K to Odisha; Pranabda, being the supreme commander of the forces, can easily do this; a recommendation from you will help me and my son.” ‘A’ politely replied: “I know Pranabda but he does not know me.” The point that is being made here is that it is not necessary for Pranabda to know either ‘A’ or ‘B’, but this is not the case for ‘A’ and ‘B’. Similarly, it is not necessary for an author to personally know a scholar back home, but the scholar must know the author. However, there is an additional dimension in the author/researcher relationship. ‘B’ is looking for greener pastures elsewhere, and therefore takes inspiration from this “successful Indian author-cum-cousin” and glorifies him/her for mutual gratification.

Some Indian scholars, mainly from the mufasil towns, try to contact some of these authors to seek personal interviews for academic purposes. When no reply is received by them, they seek some time for a written interview and propose to send a written questionnaire. When even that is not answered, they presume that either their letter has not reached “the great author”, or (s)he is on some international assignment, or (s)he is busy reading

and thinking for a new book. The author is imagined to be too busy even to acknowledge receipt of the communication. Little do these scholars realise that their efforts are being spurned, and they are being slighted by a person whom they revere as “great”. Not only are they snubbed, but the entire nation is affronted by them, considered a worthless country. That is why they abandoned their native land, i.e. India, and looked for greener pastures in more prosperous lands. In such a situation, the theme and purpose of the commissioned book, imagined to be a literary piece about India or the Indian Diaspora, can very easily be guessed. Thus, to consider the commissioned book may in fact be a grave mistake, as the book may be a part of the larger conspiracy to denigrate India, a former colony; to achieve the desired sales, a product should have all the necessary ingredients needed for its marketing. Such things are not new, as is evident from the following observation by Gandhi: “We have become used to understanding from pre-British days, that the art (perfected by the British) of government includes the harnessing of the secret services of men learned, and reported to be honest and honourable for shadowing suspects and for writing up the virtues of the government of the day as if the certificate had come from disinterested quarters” (Gandhi, “Drain”). In today’s context one may read “government” as “multinational companies”.

Again, a person with a middle-class aspiration and the colonial mindset wants to have some relationship with his/her countrypeople who are successful in the first world. This explains why a “success story” like that of Piyush Bobby Jindal being elected to the post of Governor of Louisiana in the USA made headline news in the Indian media. Bobby has Indian roots, but being an American, he is obliged to look and to be American to the core. He is trying his best to adapt to his (new-found) identity; he professes the Roman Catholic faith and not Hinduism in order to be more acceptable to the society he wants to be associated with. If there is a conflict between India and the USA, as an American, he is obliged to consider India – the country which his parents abandoned, perhaps with contempt – a hostile nation. Yet his success was glamorised by the Indian electronic media; for the entire day of his victory his relatives were faced with questions like: “How do you feel to know that one of your relatives has become a Governor? Did he telephone you? When did you last receive a call from him?”. The poor relatives had to admit: “There has been no contact with him for several years.” Our young researchers and their innocent supervisors unknowingly behave like an over-enthusiastic reporter who is trying to find love in a place where it does not exist.

No model/advertiser, however great (s)he may be, can afford to go against the diktats of the manufacturer of the product that is being advertised and sold. For example, can Amitabh Bachchan, generally described as the superhero of this millennium, having received his fee (his share in the market profits), dare to say that he has never used Navratan Tel (a brand of hair oil which he advertises)? Is he hoodwinking his fans, or is he advising them in all sincerity in the advertisement for this product? Like a model, an author has only a limited role to play in the glo(b/c)alized market economy. Only a novice will believe that an author who has taken a huge advance works for his own interests, presents his true feelings and remains oblivious of the publishers’ interests. Publishers are there in the market not for the service of literature, but to do business. “The thumping economic advance [was] conferred on Roy ... [for] a new star on the occasion of India’s fiftieth anniversary of independence ... had to be created ... [to stay in business] in terms of modalities of mul-

tinationalists” (Ponzanesi 116). Hector Tobar reports how Jonathan Cape, Doris Lessing’s own publisher, rejected one of her novels, saying it was “not commercially viable”, and how another publisher declined to publish a book by her, considering it “too depressing” to be successful – though these works became famous once they were published (Tobar). Therefore, the publisher is well within its rights to expect to get not a realistic book, but rather material to cater to market needs by having all the required ingredients that are necessary to sell a book. In such a situation, there is no question of the will of the author. No author can be given a huge advance if his/her book does not sell well. Thus, it is very clear that books by such authors become important “products” (artefacts) not because of their intrinsic value, but because of extraneous considerations – sometimes because of the advances paid out to the authors, and sometimes because of “suspect awards”. Let me quote the words of two Nobel laureates to prove my point: “The world of literature is very political. He once told me, ‘The key to winning a Nobel is to keep your lips in constant motion. There are a great many asses to kiss’” (Churcher); “The Nobel Prize is run by a self-perpetuated committee. They vote for themselves and get the world’s publishing industry to jump to their tune. I know several people who have won, and you don’t do anything else for a year but Nobel. They are always coming out with new torments for me. Downstairs there are 500 things I have to sign for them” (Ulin). Further, on receiving the news of the award of Nobel Prize, Doris Lessing is said to have remarked: “Who are these people? They’re a bunch of bloody Swedes” (Farandale).

Both India and the (present-day) USA were once British colonies; America won its independence in 1776, and India in 1947. Webster could dare to pronounce proudly that his language was not English but “the American Language”. Unfortunately, India is still looking for her Webster. None of the Indian authors (with the exception of Raja Rao) claim(s/ed) to use Indian English, though Braj B. Kachru has been making a case for this form of the language. Rather, among Indian authors there is a tendency to be an appendage of British literature and to gain approval from the former colonial masters. The Indian writer has come a long way since the frank and bold admittance of Raja Rao: “We cannot write like the English. We should not” (v). Salman Rushdie, in his Introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing*, crossed all limits when he bragged: “... the prose writing – both fiction and non-fiction – 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 16 ‘official 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” (Rushdie x). Times have changed, and the ethos has changed with them; historical reality has yielded to economic reality; gone are the days to shout “British, Quit India” (*angrezo bharaat chhodo*); we now send official delegations in hordes to invite foreign capital and companies.

Against this background, now let me focus my attention one by one on some of the “major Indian writers in English” mentioned above. Many of the “so-called Indian” authors feel more at home in foreign lands than in India; many of them stay in the first world; they visit India on short trips simply to collect their material for the books they are working on. India-baiting comes naturally to them because they neither try to understand India from an Indian perspective, nor are they worried about her problems. For them India is a saleable commodity, so they use it/its tag to achieve their goals. Therefore, it is no sur-

prise that their fiction has been branded the fiction of India-baiters. For example, Stephen Schiff writes about Naipaul, and his books such as *India: A Million Mutinies*, *An Area of Darkness* and *India: A Wounded Civilization*: "... Naipaul didn't mind baiting his enemies, sometimes outrageously. ... why a culture like mine or like the one in India, from which I come ancestrally ..." (Schiff). About Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Mujeebuddin Syed writes: "... after the India baiting of V. S. Naipaul and Nirad C. Chaudhuri, [*Midnight's Children*] seemed to present, despite a certain cynicism about its own method, a newer and fresher picture of India and Indianness" (Syed). "A newer and fresher picture of India and Indianness" in *Midnight's Children* enraged Mrs. Indira Gandhi so much that she sued Rushdie and his publisher and they had to tender an unconditional apology to her (Siddiqui). Mrs. Gandhi was not alone in being irked by Rushdie; he has also offended the Muslim community by misrepresenting Islam in his writings (Patel). He has perhaps been doing this in order to prove his secular credentials to the Western world and to become more acceptable to a largely Christian society.

Though Vikram Seth does not exactly fall into the category of India-baiters, his concerns are certainly not Indian. I would like to quote from my own review of *The Golden Gate*: "By giving its award for 1988 to *The Golden Gate*, the Sahitya Akademi has promoted a book which is totally alien to Indian culture in its theme and ethos, which has neither Indian characters nor Indian psyche nor even Indian locale. Can the experimentation or the mark of bestseller be the only criterions for the much coveted award? What kind of values does Sahitya Akademi want us to cherish by promoting such a book?" (Sharma).

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* "became a literary sensation even before it actually came out in print. It is said that it had been read by all of fifteen people when it was pronounced a bestseller" (Marwah 13). Geeta Doctor has raised doubts about the greatness of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: "Is it great literature? ... We do not ask for greatness of literature these days. We are quite relieved with entertainment or better still seduction" (4). In a similar vein, A.N. Dwivedi writes: "Arundhati Roy has written her novel with the Western readership in mind... [the book] does not promote the cause of Indian aesthetics ... it is a little painful and disquieting to see an Indian writer making the work of literature a mere saleable commodity. ... [she should have desisted] from ... unnecessary incestuous, immoral scenes ... in keeping with Indian spirit and culture" (2). Charges of obscenity against the book were raised, and a court case lasted for almost a decade. The book is an interesting portrayal of class segregation in Marxist Kerala – a theme combining two subjects that are dear to the capitalist class. It is not out of place to quote Arundhati Roy on India: "I don't even feel comfortable with this need to define our country. Because it's bigger than that! How can one define India? There is no one language, there is no one culture. There is no one religion, there is no one way of life. There is absolutely no way one could draw a line around it and say, 'This is India' or, 'This is what it means to be Indian'" (Jana). By implication, Roy suggests that India is not a nation because it does not profess one religion, one culture and one language. In questioning the idea of India, Arundhati is echoing the colonial debate about this nation – and also echoing the European idea of a nation. Arundhati Roy does not seem to accept either Gandhi's or Nehru's notion of India; rather she seems to accept the European notion of a nation.

Arundhati Roy readily accepted the Booker Prize, but she refused to accept a much-coveted national award from India's Academy of Letters (Sahitya Akademi) "in protest

against the Indian Government toeing the US line by ‘violently and ruthlessly pursuing policies of brutalisation of industrial workers, increasing militarisation and economic neo-liberalisation’” (Deccan). I do not know if Ms. Roy is familiar with Jeanette Winterson (the author of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*), who maintains: “This country [The UK] is so in thrall to America. We’re such lapdogs to them and that will skew things with the judges” (Silverman).

The Man Booker prize is run by a business house; only a novice believes that its economic/political interests are not kept in view when giving an award. It is something like a social welfare project of a multinational company, which uses the opportunity to create a market for its products. The question is if Roy has ever raised doubts about the credentials and business interests of the group that sponsors/backers the Man Booker Prize which she so proudly flaunts; it is also questionable if she is familiar with John Pilger, who dismisses the Booker as “only one award that represents the views of a clutch of mostly elite, London-centric, conservative-liberal judges” (Saxena). I would like to know her take on this prize or on Pilger. If Arundhati Roy’s intentions and acts are dubbed “anti-Indian”, then against the backdrop of the double standards she maintains, this should not come as a surprise.

Kiran Desai came to the limelight because of the Betty Trask Prize from the British Society of Authors 1998 for her first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. “[It] is an ironical novel satirizing Indian mentality. It openly makes fun of our sense of propriety and logic. The major satire of the novel is the Indian sense of religiosity” (Tiwari). When describing the book, the reviewers in *India Today* use all those ingredients that I have talked above to lure a prospective buyer: “... Hullabaloo could be a case of hype and hope rather than soul, but the phenomenal advances that Kiran has got (an estimated Rs. 50 lakh), an initial print run of 50,000 each in the US and UK, early excerpts in the *New Yorker* and in the Salman Rushdie-edited anthology, *Vintage Book of Indian Writing*, is a pointer that another little Indian girl is on the threshold of big things” (Binoo).

All these authors have been living in the USA/UK and have seen those societies from close quarters, but they generally do not write about it, unlike their British counterparts – though they can very well do that as well. Vikram Seth, for example, has written about American yuppies in a meticulous manner in *The Golden Gate*. The novel deals with Californian psychology and awareness, and “suggests intimate knowledge of Californian mores, from its bill boards and bumper stickers to personal ads and pet psychiatrists. *The Golden Gate* is filled with details about California that natives sometimes overlook because of excessive familiarity” (Sharma). The book was certainly successful. However, most Indian expatriates in fact save not only their energy but also their ink to deride the native culture(s). In these days of the “Clash of Civilizations”, who will be a better author-agent than Salman Rushdie or Khaled Hosseini to deride the Muslims and present an authentic picture of a Muslim society from a Western perspective? The result, in the form of *Satanic Verses* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, is clear for everyone to see. Both these authors present Muslims not only as intolerant villains, but also as uncultured people – because a large number of the prospective readers, at whom the book is aimed, want them to be portrayed in such a way.

Mahatma Gandhi described Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (Mayo) as a “Drain Inspector’s Report”. It will not be out of place to quote from Gandhi’s review of the book:

This book is cleverly and powerfully written. The carefully chosen quotations give it the false appearance of a truthful book. But the impression it leaves on my mind is that it is the report of a drain inspector sent out with the one purpose of opening and examining the drains of the country to be reported upon, or to give a graphic description of the stench exuded by the opened drains. If Miss Mayo had confessed that she had come to India merely to open out and examine the drains of India, there would perhaps be little to complain about her compilation. But she declared her abominable and patently wrong conclusion with a certain amount of triumph: 'the drains are India'. (Gandhi, "Drain")

What Gandhi said about Mayo's book is also applicable to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. This novel won the coveted Man Booker Prize "... perhaps [because] the most drastic and bitter facts ... have impressed the judges, who have got a revealing inside into India. ... the book, as a whole, presents the crude, dark and naked facts about India, and that has added all the merits for the award ..." (Khan 1). Similarly, Sudhir K. Arora charges Adiga with presenting an incomplete truth, and calls the awarded prize "A Freakish Booker". "Even the head of the jury, Michael Portillo, [calls] it a work that shows the 'dark side of India – a new territory' ... for many of us, our worst fears have come true – the West is once again using our poverty to humiliate us" (Saxena). No wonder such books become instant bestsellers (to recollect, Mayo's *Mother India* was reprinted twelve times between May and December in 1927, the year of its first publication, and thirty-three times between 1927 and 1931) and are also nominated for one prize or another.

The claim by the likes of Jug Suraiya that Indians are far too thin-skinned about accepting any form of criticism is not tenable (Suraiya). On the contrary, Indians are by and large not averse to the criticism of their beliefs, faiths, thinking and practices. Indians discuss their problems or realities freely, they take criticism sportingly, they wish to improve their situation, and they are not status quo-ists. As a matter of fact, authors in Indian languages have very severely criticised various Indian ways. Who could be a greater critic of Indian religious and social practices than Kabir? Swami Dayananda was a bitter critic of Sanatan Hindu practices. Gandhi did not agree with many practices of Hindus, and suggested reform. Can a more bitter picture of Indian reality be presented than that portrayed by Prem Chand? Does Phanishwar Nath Renu not present a very grim and harsh picture of poverty in the Indian countryside? Does Qurratulain Haider not describe the sufferings of Muslim women in a belligerently male-dominated and poverty-stricken society? Who could satirise autocratic tendencies in Indian politics and bureaucracy in more acerbic terms than Shrilal Shukl? What is Dalit Literature if not a stringent criticism of caste/social hierarchies? Because of my limitations, I have referred to the authors in Hindi only. The list of such authors from Indian literature in other languages is even longer. These authors have not been considered offensive, nor have they been accused of being guided by pecuniary considerations or working at the behest of some business house. This is so because of the different treatment and handling of the same subject matter at the hands of two different people: while one shows how to counter the reality of poverty, the other showcases poverty to make it a saleable item. It is their motives and mindset against which critics raise their protests. Poverty for Indians is not just an economic parameter; it is also a way of life.<sup>3</sup> "Willing acceptance of penury" and "penury in the midst of plenty" are piv-

otal issues in the Indian lifestyle and mindset; they are also the key concepts in Gandhian economics, which incorporates his ideas of Non-violence, Trusteeship, *Aparigraha* (Non-possession), *Swadeshi* (using locally made goods), and similar notions. Indians voluntarily accept multiple pluralities in every walk of life. So it is an issue of contentment on the basis of acceptance, not coercion. Rushdie does not seem to like the Indian delineation of the subject matter. It is partly because of this that he dismisses writings in languages other than English. To cast further light on the issue, let me turn to Gandhi again. Gandhi equates Western education to false education. He does not like education to be given just for the sake of literacy. Gandhi asks: “Will you add an inch to his happiness [by giving this type of education]? Do you wish to make him discontented with his cottage or his lot? ... [This education] does not make men of us. It does not enable us to do our duty. ... [On the contrary] [c]haracter-building has the first place in [the ancient Indian school system]. A building erected on that foundation [of the Indian system] will last” (*Hind Swaraj* 82-84) We can replace “education” in the Gandhian discourse above by “the writings of these authors”. None of the books by the authors mentioned above withstand a test on the Gandhian parameters.

To conclude, readers have to be on their guard while reading Anglophone Indian fiction, as many of the novels are churned out in order to cater to the needs of the market and showcase India in a poor light – a perspective that is highly favoured in the West due to several reasons. For those who see English as a necessity in the age of computerization and globalization, and who therefore would like to prescribe these authors for the sake of their English (their style), I would again like to quote Gandhi: “To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay laid of education has enslaved us. ... It is worth noting that, by receiving English education, we have enslaved the nation. Hypocrisy, tyranny, etc. have increased. English-knowing Indians have not hesitated to cheat and strike terror into the people” (*Hind Swaraj* 84-85). If the parameters laid down by Leo Tolstoy (who judged books on the basis of their purpose) are employed, most Anglophone Indian fiction does not fall into the category of the best literary works, and it may not withstand the test of time. All these authors should realise what they have been doing to India at the behest of the capitalist world; becoming their agents/stooges (knowingly or unknowingly) kills the authenticity of their work and impairs their work with temporality. The market may cater to the needs of certain expectations and may reward the producer with ample money, but the creation of the best literature – literature that people will not let willingly die – requires something else. The purpose of literature must be to promote the best values and good sense, so that feelings of brotherhood are spread. The true value of literature in reflecting Vasudhaiv Kutumbkam (the entire world is a family) will find cogitation in their writings only when they rise above the binary of I/Other. If they stop playing to the gallery of the globalised agenda, their work could be more authentic.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> India is a multi-lingual nation. The Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India (Scheduled Languages) mentions 22 languages. In the 2011 census people named 19,569 languages as their mother tongues. After thorough linguistic scrutiny, revision and rationalization, the census arrived at 1369 rationalized mother tongues and 1474 names which are treated as ‘unclassified’ and rel-

egated to the ‘other’ mother tongue category. (*Census of India 2011*, Paper 1 of 2018, Language: India, States And Union Territories (Table C-16), New Delhi: Office of the Registrar General, India, p. 4, PDF.)

<sup>2</sup>Mr Pranab Mukherjee was the 13<sup>th</sup> President of India from 2012 to 2017. In order to show familial ties in Bengali, “da” (meaning elder brother) is used as a suffix to the first name.

<sup>3</sup>One of the collections of Gandhi’s writings is titled *Willing Acceptance of Penury* (*Swechha se sweekar ki hui garibi*, Hindi; Ahmedabad: Navjivan, 1961, Print).

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