

FRANCESCA ORSINI

INDIA IN THE  
MIRROR OF WORLD FICTION

**W**HAT IS INDIAN LITERATURE? The question is sharply posed in this fine and, in many respects, polemical collection, whose explicit aim is to rebut prevailing Western expectations of what postcolonial Indian fiction ought to be.<sup>1</sup> Its editor Amit Chaudhuri argues that the critical and commercial reception accorded *Midnight's Children* has erected Rushdie's work as 'a gigantic edifice that all but obstructs the view of what lies behind'. This in turn has created a highly prescriptive set of assumptions. First: the new Indian novel must be written in English, the only language deemed capable of capturing modern subcontinental realities: Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Urdu and the rest need not apply. Secondly, while eschewing realism, its tone and structure must be relentlessly mimetic: since India was a 'huge baggy monster' its fiction, too, must be vast and all-inclusive. Its voice must be 'robustly extroverted', clamorously polyphonic, rejecting any nuance or delicacy. Its subject-matter must be fantastical, its narrative non-linear: 'Indian life is plural, garrulous, rambling, lacking a fixed centre, and the Indian novel must be the same'.

All this, as Chaudhuri points out, rides roughshod over ancient and modern traditions of miniaturism in the Subcontinent—the use of ellipsis, rather than inclusion, as an aesthetic strategy. It ignores the crucial role of the novella and short story in Indian fiction—a genre Tagore introduced from France in the late nineteenth century, before it became established in England. Claims that the capacious, magical, non-linear novel could be seen as natural heir to the imaginary of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*—'at once contemporaneously postcolonial and anciently, inescapably Indian'—overlooked the stark contrast between the amorality

of the Hindu epics and the impeccably liberal viewpoint of the postmodern best-seller: multicultural, anti-sexist, tolerant of difference and so forth; while to celebrate Indian writing as merely ‘overblown, fantastic, lush and non-linear’ was surely to endorse the old colonialist chestnut that rational thought and discrimination were alien to Indian tradition.<sup>2</sup>

These arguments, first developed in a TLS essay, ‘The Construction of the Indian Novel in English’, together with a companion piece, ‘Modernity and the Vernacular’, form the twin-pillared introduction to Chaudhuri’s anthology, which runs from the 1850s to the present day and includes translations from Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil and Oriya, as well as writing in English.<sup>3</sup> The collection proposes both a historical narrative and a cultural contextualization for Indian literature—a sort of counter-manifesto to the assumptions of much postcolonial literary theory. Against conceptions of English-language writing as the natural medium of modernity, replacing a Babel of ancient tongues, Chaudhuri argues that Indian vernacular literatures are themselves modernity’s offspring, directly linked to the emergence of a bourgeois-secular sensibility and the development of a new, educated Indian middle class. The nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance is taken as the paradigm here, with the work of Michael Madhusudan Dutt as first fruit of the social and intellectual ferment that would create an eclectic, precocious modernism in Calcutta at a time when the culture of Victorian England was still ‘provincial and inward-looking’.<sup>4</sup> A restless cosmopolitan, Dutt seized on the horizons opened by the Western education at the 1840s Hindu College and, later, at Gray’s Inn, before returning to re-engage with—and redefine—an indigenous cultural inheritance now fraught with interpretative tensions. ‘I hate Rama and all his rabble’, Dutt could write; like his epic 1861 poem *Meghnada Badha Kabya*, which reworks an episode from the *Ramayana*—inverting the status of the Hindu protagonists in much the same way that Milton’s troubled Satan dominates *Paradise Lost*—this is a statement less freely made, Chaudhuri suggests, in today’s BJP-ruled India. Similarly, the

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<sup>1</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, ed., *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, London 2001, 638pp, 0 330 34363 7; henceforth, PBMIL. I would like to thank Susan Daruvala for her perceptive comments and criticism on an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> PBMIL, pp. xxiv–xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> These essays were first published under the titles ‘Lure of the Hybrid’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 September 1999 and ‘Beyond the Language of the Raj’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 August 1997. <sup>4</sup> PBMIL, p. 5.

work of Rabindranath Tagore and his successors, hailed in the West as an expression of ancient Eastern wisdom, is read here as that of a modernist sensibility, working out its relation to a fast-changing world. In differing ways—conditioned by local levels of development, education, commerce—Chaudhuri traces the same moment at work within the other Indian vernaculars.

### *Culture and canon*

Nuance, ellipsis and the exploration of realist boundaries predominate within the selection of contemporary writing, as might be expected. Naiyer Masud's 1996 Urdu story, 'Sheesha Ghat' ('Wharf of Glass') assembles all the elements from which magical realism would fashion a raucous extravaganza—*bazaari* clown, *dacoit's* mistress—and creates instead a strange tableau of stillness and understanding, narrated with unfussed clarity by a boy who cannot speak. An extract from Krishna Sobti's Hindi novella of 1991 *Ai Lakti* (*Hey, girl*) is all dialogue, notes on action set as stage directions: the conversation—mostly one-sided—of an old lady on her deathbed, talking to her daughter. The quiet domestic scene is the setting for wild flights of the night, flashes of anger and terror mixed with gentle chafing, women's memories, sharp advice. Nirmal Verma's Hindi story 'Terminal' (1992), set within a strange symbolic landscape (almost Prague), displays a scrupulous sympathy for its lovers and the gulfs between them. Fine translations suggest a language of precision and sensitivity, without bluster or hullabaloo: writers silently stalking their prey.<sup>5</sup>

Their setting is enriched by an illuminating series of pieces—essays, memoirs and letters as well as fiction—that provide some sense of modern India's discussion of its own cultural process: Tagore's 1892 account of the Shahzadpur postmaster—his model—reading 'The Postmaster' in the Bengali press; the newly orphaned *literati* in Bose's contestatory vision of a 'Tagore-less' Calcutta; Pankaj Mishra's depiction of the sullen mood of the Indian universities on the eve of the neoliberal transformation, mired in hopeless caste violence; Ashok Banker's deregulated Bombay. There are interesting discussions of

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<sup>5</sup> As always, one wishes for more. Among Urdu writers, for example, Intizar Ahmad, Intizar Hussain and Khadija Mastur and, in Hindi, Nagarjun, Phanishwarnath Renu, Rahi Masoom Reza, Srilal Shukla and Vinodkumar Shukla are unrepresented here.

literary multilingualism—with poets proposed as its most creative Indian theorists—and of traditional forms. In a memorable reading of a Tamil love lyric—a sulky concubine's complaint about her lover and his wife—framed within its interior and exterior landscapes, A. K. Ramanujan explores the basis of Sanskrit aesthetics: 'what is contained mirrors the container'. Chaudhuri's argument here is that it is impossible to be interested in a canon without some idea of a community or a nation's history and, even more important, some conception of how it sees itself.<sup>6</sup>

There are omissions from this collection, of course, and some of them are important. This is an India innocent of the trauma of Partition or communal violence; one that has never known war with its neighbours, a communist movement or an industrial working class. Small-town and village life predominate over the teeming city. High-caste experience, though questioned, is preponderant. Nevertheless, this is a rich and stimulating collection, striking proof of the sheer literary excellence within what Chaudhuri calls the 'multiple traditions' of Indian writing.

### *Home and the world*

How then are we to make sense of Rushdie's famous remark that he could find scarcely a single vernacular text worthy of inclusion in his own compendium of Indian literature?<sup>7</sup> How are we to account for such startling disparities in Indian writers' fortunes, if not on the basis of apparent literary worth? What is the relationship between regional, vernacular literatures such as these and 'world literature', if one can speak of such a thing? What governs the access of writers—or, as here, entire traditions—to the world stage? Two recent accounts, by Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova,<sup>8</sup> have remapped the realm of world

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<sup>6</sup> Here again he takes issue with a postcolonial literary theory whose emphasis on ontological difference and disregard for class is just as guilty of 'consigning India to a historical vacuum' as the classic colonial notion that history only happens in the West: PBMIL, p. xviii.

<sup>7</sup> *Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947–97*, Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, eds, London 1997, p. x. Rushdie declared that 'Indo-Anglian' work was quite simply 'stronger and more important'. For reactions, see 'Modernity and the Vernacular'; Pankaj Mishra, 'Midnight's Grandchildren', *Prospect*, April 1997; Radhakrishnan Nayar, 'Tryst with Westerny', *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 27 June 1997.

<sup>8</sup> See Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', NLR 1, Jan–Feb 2000; Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres*, Paris 1999; see also Christopher Prendergast's review, 'Negotiating World Literature', NLR 8, March–April 2001.

literature, proposing radically new—and divergent—approaches. Both tip their hats to Goethe; but for both—in stark contrast to his egalitarian *Weltliteratur* ideal—the inequalities of global literary practice over the past 200 years are almost as glaring as those of the economic sphere. For Moretti, taking an analogy from world-systems theory, world literature is ‘one, and unequal’, structured by periphery and core. For Casanova, drawing on Paul Valéry and, above all, Bourdieu, it is governed by national accumulations of cultural capital, the most powerful cities then governing access to literary recognition on a world scale. For both it is a zone of conflict, a ‘struggle for symbolic hegemony’ (Moretti) or a ‘perpetual contest for legitimacy’ (Casanova). Both employ market metaphors: debt, importation, direct and indirect loans, in Moretti; capital accumulation and literary ‘value’ in Casanova. For both, initially, the dominant centres are England and France.<sup>9</sup>

Moretti’s conjectures are structured around the evolution of forms: under what conditions was the novel, for example, first imported to Brazil, Japan, Russia, Italy, Africa, China—India? Hypothesized here is an inherently unstable compromise between West European patterns, local realities and—the unpredictable element—local narrator; with the surprising twist that it is this later, peripheral version of the novel that will turn out to be the rule in world literature, while the Anglo-French original is really the exception. One objection to this ‘law of evolution’ would be the absence in the scheme of a ‘local audience’, the readers—a crucial factor for Benedict Anderson, on whose work Moretti (as Casanova) partly draws, and for vernacular writers (think of Tagore and the postmaster).

A further problem is that, at first sight, Moretti’s novel-based theses would seem to have little application to the Subcontinent, where the major nineteenth and twentieth-century forms have been poetry, drama and the short story, whose evolution may show quite different patterns of change.<sup>10</sup> Yet Moretti’s ‘compromise’ takes various forms: ‘At times’—alluding to Meenakshi Mukherjee, in *Realism and Reality*, on the

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Conjectures’, pp. 56, 64; *République mondiale des lettres*, pp. 24, 28.

<sup>10</sup> Although poetry haunts the Picador collection, it is scarcely represented in its contents. For a companion volume see *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Indian Poetry*, Vinay Dharwadker and A. K. Ramanujan, eds, New Delhi 1994. Another good anthology, although without the valuable prefaces to each writer that Chaudhuri provides, is *The Penguin New Writing in India*, Aditya Behl and David Nicholls, eds, New Delhi 1992.

problems of the encounter between Western form and Indian social reality—‘especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, and in Asia, it tended to be very unstable’. Local reality ‘was different in the various places, just as Western influence was also very uneven’.<sup>11</sup> Rubbed against Indian literary practice, Moretti’s conjectures may yield interesting negative results: could it be that English influence on the nineteenth-century Indian middle classes was much weaker than the colonialists supposed? Chaudhuri certainly seems to suggest as much when he points to the peripherality—indeed, near invisibility—of the white occupiers in Bengal Renaissance literature; the colonial experience is represented rather in tangible local signs: the post office; street names.<sup>12</sup>

### *Gatekeepers of Parnassus*

Casanova’s model of competing literatures and unequal national languages, in which the literary guardians of the dominant Western cities determine access, recognition and diffusion at a world level, would seem to have more immediate affinities with Indian writers’ plight. In her account, the foundational moment for the development of a national literature lies in the ‘valorization’ of its vernacular, in the face of cultural domination by another language. Skipping over sixteenth-century Bible translations, Casanova takes Joachim du Bellay’s 1549 *Deffence et Illustration de la langue françoise* against the ‘empire of Latin’ as the starting point—the beginning of the ‘literarization’ of the French language, and its accumulation of literary capital.<sup>13</sup> In the 1790s, Herder’s bid for an emergent German literature against the universal language of French, and then—a revolutionary gesture—his extension of the same principle to all other peoples of Europe, whose genius could find expression only in their native tongue, supplied the charter for national literatures in any dominated language. The Indian experience is largely absent from Casanova’s exploration of the vernacular literatures that followed—Irish, Czech, Tunisian, Brazilian, Cuban, Nigerian, Québécois and Kikuyu, among others—but the resonance of such an account with the Bengal Renaissance, for example, needs to be qualified. While there was certainly a new Herderian feeling towards the language—‘What a vast field does our country now present for literary enterprise!’ wrote

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Conjectures’, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> PBMIL, p. xix.

<sup>13</sup> *Republique mondiale des lettres*, p. 70.

Dutt in 1860—there was also a highly complex relationship to centuries of earlier literature.<sup>14</sup>

The hierarchy of Casanova's world republic of letters is dictated by the chronology of national literatures' first emergence. Those of Paris or London, with a long tradition of vernacular valorization and a large stock of inherited literary capital, supported by substantial publishing industries and large national, and international, readerships—buttressed, in turn, by histories of colonial power—predominate over more recent arrivals. For the past two centuries, it is argued, only publication in French or English could bestow international recognition—consecration is Casanova's term—on writers from peripheral cultures, with mediators such as Valéry Larbaud or Paul Valéry having the power to usher writers through the gates of translation into the realm of literary universality, and to set the 'Greenwich Mean Time' of world taste. (In the case of India, recent gatekeepers have often been Indian writers in English: Rushdie, Chaudhuri, and so on.) The act of consecration is an ambiguous one, with both positive and negative consequences:

The great consecrators reduce foreign literary works to their own categories of perception, constituted as universal norms, and overlook the entire context—historical, cultural, political and above all literary—that would allow a non-reductive understanding of them. Thus do the literary powers exact an *octroi* tax on the right to universal circulation.<sup>15</sup>

Casanova makes plain her own critical stance towards existing literary power relations, hoping that her book will become a 'weapon of use to all marginal (peripheral, unendowed, dominated) writers' and 'an instrument of struggle against the self-assurance and arrogance, the impositions and dictates of a metropolitan criticism oblivious to the realities of unequal access to the universe of literature'. Nevertheless, if individual writers can break through these barriers, her model seems to permanently preclude whole literatures from doing the same. Where does this leave the immensely rich and sophisticated traditions of China and Japan? Casanova's insistence on the stark inequalities between 'great' and 'small' languages may blind her to some of the subjective subtleties available to multilingual writers. Implicit in her view—explicit in Moretti's—is the traditional assumption of a 'source' language, or cul-

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<sup>14</sup> Letter to Raj Narain, 15 May 1860: PBML, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Republique mondiale des lettres*, pp. 127, 214, 479.

ture—invariably carrying an aura of authenticity—and a ‘target’ one, seen as in some way imitative. In place of this, Lydia Liu much more usefully proposed the concept of ‘guest’ and ‘host’ languages, to focus attention on the translingual practice through which the hosts may appropriate concepts and forms.<sup>16</sup> The question then becomes not whether ‘individualism’, for example, means something different in modern Indian (or, here, Chinese) culture, but how Chinese or Indian writers might translate and deploy the concept to make locally significant points. In this way, what is untraditional is not necessarily seen as Western, or as un-Indian or un-Chinese. Cultural influence becomes a study of appropriation, rather than of centres and peripheries—an approach which finds clear echoes in Chaudhuri’s volume. Thus A. K. Mehrotra suggests that, for multilingual writers, the other language will always act as a ‘torsional force’: ‘Nabokov’s position is analogous to ours’.

### *Internal fractures*

The world-literary force-field Casanova depicts is a dynamic one, subject to alteration by its practitioners’ choice of strategy—assimilation, rebellion or a revolutionary storming of the metropolis. Nevertheless, competing national literatures remain the key units. Christopher Prendergast has already suggested that there may be ‘variables other than nation and relations other than competition’: Wordsworth is only one example of a writer whose main preoccupations—class, gender, region—seem more expressive of conflicts internal to, or unbounded by, the nation state.<sup>17</sup> Modern Indian writing poses a further challenge to the unitary agon through the exceptional complexity of its national field. Language is the most apparent faultline; but linguistic differentiation also delineates a series of competing, sometimes overlapping distinctions of region, culture and class, each with its own sphere of literary production, and with multiple sets of artistic mediators—at least three in any given location—who may assign different meanings and values to works. Table A is a representation of production, transmission and recognition within this fractured and multilayered field.

Literary production in English is triply privileged within this field, drawing on the language’s American-based global ascendancy, on the

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<sup>16</sup> *Translingual Practices*, Berkeley 1995.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Negotiating World Literature’, p. 109.



TABLE A: *Institutions of regional, national and world literature in India*

	International	English language within India	Regional/Vernacular languages
<i>Publishers</i>	Multinational publishers (Harper Collins, Picador, Penguin): publish a small number of English-language Indian writers; virtually no vernacular authors	Indian branches of international publishers (Penguin India, Heinemann, Longman): publish English-language Indian writers; some translations of Indian writers. Indian English-language publishers (Katha, Seagull, Kali, Stree): publish good translations from Indian languages	Publish Indian writers in Indian languages; some cross-translations from other Indian languages; some translations of world writers
<i>Education: schools and universities</i>	English-language South Asian writers now part of the multi-cultural curriculum; Indian writers in English taught in Eng. Lit. departments as 'Commonwealth' or post-colonial literature; recently also some Indian literature in translation	English-medium: all teaching is done in English; token presence of regional language and literature. Eng. Lit. departments at the vanguard of introducing Anglo-Indian and, recently, Indian literature in translation	Two-tier system with English/Indian language; regional-language schools teach Indian literature, but hardly any English language or literature
<i>Journals</i>	NYRB, TLS, etc.: discuss only English-language Indian writers and books published by international publishers; bestow international recognition and seal of 'world literature'	<i>India Today</i> , <i>Outlook</i> , <i>Frontline</i> , <i>Biblio</i> and <i>Indian Review of Books</i> . Discuss global culture, world literature and Indian writers in English; rarely discuss literary books in Indian languages ( <i>The Hindu</i> is an exception); bestow national recognition	Hindi journals discuss Hindi books and translations into Hindi, and cultural and political affairs (regional public sphere); rarely if ever discuss English-language Indian writing; bestow local, regional and supra-regional recognition
<i>Literary associations/ Prizes</i>	PEN International: 130 national and diasporic conventions, awards national and international prizes. English-language prizes: Booker, Pulitzer, Commonwealth. French-language: Goncourt, Medicus. Nobel: gives genuinely international recognition	Sahitya Akademi: organizes pan-Indian seminars; privileges Hindi as national language (e.g. sponsors translations), but has both a Hindi and an English journal; English is accepted as one of India's languages. Gives prizes for every Indian language, bestowing national recognition	Regional members of Sahitya Akademi: Hindi associations defend Hindi as the national language and are reluctant to accept English as an 'Indian language'. English-language Indian writers largely excluded from this sphere. Prizes give regional recognition

subcontinental legacy of British colonialism and, relatedly, on Indian class divisions: this is the preferred language of the urban middle classes—in the case of the elite, sometimes the only language. Despite official emphasis on Sanskritized Hindi, in practice the ruling BJP has shown no signs of abandoning English as status symbol and lingua franca of the global market. Within the literary sphere—confirming Casanova’s configuration—English is the language in which most Indians would read Dostoevsky, Maupassant or Mann. English alone commands international access to Western publishing houses, journals and prizes.

But if—to use Casanova’s terms—the flow of literary exchange, as of economic capital, is heavily weighted in favour of English, the case of cultural and symbolic capital is slightly different. Within state institutions, indigenous languages are preferred and Hindi in particular—spoken by only about three-fifths of the population; its literature read by far fewer—plays a special role as official language of the Indian Union. State institutions—especially the national academy of letters, Sahitya Akademi, crucial in channelling and distributing cultural capital—pursue a vision of a ‘federal republic of letters’ in which all Indian languages receive equal representation, with Hindi *primus inter pares*. The global role of English is ignored in this view: it is just another Indian language. Hindi literary institutions are possibly the most vociferous in their hostility to the hegemony of English: the federal republic resents forms of recognition that supersede its own.<sup>18</sup>

Hindi literary publishing is heavily subsidized, with government-sponsored seminars, library funding, state prizes and national translation programmes—by far the greatest being from regional languages into Hindi. State libraries and university curricula ensure sufficient turnover, despite low levels of literacy and readership: a novel will break even if it sells 500 copies a year; at 5,000 it is a best seller. It is not to denigrate the best of Hindi writing to point out that, as the official language, its literature has been systematically privileged over other, longer traditions: Bengali, Tamil, Urdu, to name but three. We should also register a contemporary degeneration in inter-lingual practice: whereas writers

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<sup>18</sup> Chaudhuri wryly registers the antagonism when he comments that, while Rushdie’s remark on the clear superiority of English-language writing was ‘interesting, if somewhat mystifying’, the sanctimonious outrage of the Indian middle-class response was a great deal less so: rarely had they been heard to extol the virtues of regional writing at such length. *PBMIL*, p.xxxiii.

like Tagore, Bankimchandra and Saratchandra were widely read in other Indian languages, including Urdu, translations nowadays are unlikely to go beyond Hindi and English. Chaudhuri's argument that it was the widespread teaching of good English, even in remote country districts, during the colonial period which—far from rendering the regional vernaculars obsolete—helped Indian-language literatures to flourish, may be of relevance here. He points out that many of the most interesting and creative vernacular writers have been students or teachers of English literature as well. In his view, the postcolonial restriction of the best English education to a tiny, urban elite has often brought about 'the depletion of the power of the vernacular in whose name the teaching of English has been abolished'.<sup>19</sup>

There are other signs of a lack of linguistic awareness and cultural sensitivity between Indian traditions, mirroring that of the West towards India as a whole. Thus reviewers of translated books may not have read the original, and can make no comment on the translation. The Sahitya Akademi's official English-language journal tends to accept *prima facie* the value assigned by original regional critics, in line with its policy of pan-Indian federalism: the transition between language fields is presented as unproblematic. This is the reverse of Rushdie's refusal to venture beyond the limits of English-language fiction; instead, the equivalence of other systems of taste and meaning is taken for granted. There is little mutual recognition or dialogue between cultural agents in English and in other Indian languages: the audiences are separate, messages are targeted and distinct. In sum: if the laws of cultural capital governing Casanova's literary world may be stretched to cover the case of Indian writing in English, it is hard to see how the complex social and political relations between vernacular traditions can be reduced to purely competitive terms.

### *Literary globalization*

In one brief chapter, 'From Literary Internationalism to Commercial Globalization?' Casanova admits the possibility that the long reign

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<sup>19</sup> PBMIL, p. xxii. While there has been a strong expansion of the Indian vernacular press over the last two decades, based on the greater penetration of newspapers in the rural and small-town hinterland and rising working-class purchasing, the results in literary terms remain to be seen. See Robin Jeffrey, *India's Newspaper Revolution*, London 2000.

of world literature's capital cities may be under threat. While Paris retains its consecrational powers—and can claim to have bestowed the crucial first rites of recognition-through-translation on 2000's Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian—we may be entering a transition phase towards a more polycentric sphere with new capitals in Barcelona, Frankfurt and New York. Within this space, she discerns the emergence of an increasingly powerful commercial pole, imposing itself as the new guardian of world-literary legitimation and threatening not just the marketing and distributional strategies of publishing houses but also the choice of books. Casanova devotes no more than a couple of pages to current transformations: concentration of ownership and production, homogenization, elimination of small, innovative houses; mergers and acquisitions with the 'communications industry', and the resulting expectation of profit rates to match those of press, film and cable TV—12 to 15 per cent, rather than publishers' traditional 4 per cent; the systematic privileging of short-term profitability driving the hunt for world-fiction best-sellers.

This is the limit of Casanova's horizon and, untypically, she mentions only a few, rather weak examples of authors—Umberto Eco, David Lodge—and genres: travel writing, or 'neo-colonial novels with all the tried and tested recipes of exoticism, like Vikram Seth'.<sup>20</sup> But this, in a sense, is Chaudhuri's starting point. The filters that determine what a world-fiction best-seller will be effectively exclude Indian vernacular literatures: like Rushdie and West, publishing conglomerates chasing the next 'big' Indian novel will select only English-language works. The phrase 'translated from' has started to acquire negative connotations: difficult, obsolete, non-global. Nor is it sufficient simply to be a gifted Indian English-language writer with a notable body of work: only a first novel will attract serious media attention and pre-publication deals from publishers searching for the next *God of Small Things*.<sup>21</sup> Besides, mature practitioners may be writing for the wrong audience—a subcontinental one—rather than, as in *A Suitable Boy*, painstakingly explaining to the foreigners what Indian trains and mud-thatched huts look like. In this sense, a conception of global culture such as Arjun Appadurai's, that sees local, national and regional spaces as dissolved within planetary flows of media and migration, is inadequate to describe the transforma-

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<sup>20</sup> *Republique mondiale des lettres*, pp. 234–6.

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, August 2000.

tion of the literary sphere. The global does not incorporate the regional literatures of India. It cold-shoulders them.<sup>22</sup>

This is not to say that best-selling Indian novels in English are devoid of literary interest. The global cultural market now subverts Bourdieu's description of the field as an 'economic world reversed', in which commercial success is a bar to symbolic recognition: the new equation, prizes + sales = international success, breaks down his neat division between the sub-fields of 'restricted production'—high art—and 'large-scale production'—low-brow.<sup>23</sup> But as Chaudhuri argues, the West's 'discovery' of Indian fiction since *Midnight's Children* has served to obscure rather than to illuminate some of the most interesting aspects of Subcontinental literature. He traces one theme in particular, which he links to the fundamentally ambivalent attitude of the middle classes towards their rural, feudal antecedents: a consistent tension, from Dutt onwards, between the impulse of rejection and that of recovery—disowning the constituting, indigenous world and then rehabilitating it, through the secular act of creative expression, which understands the indigenous as being in some way essential.<sup>24</sup> There are a multitude of different approaches to this contradiction here, from the psychological crisis of the educated Marxist narrator confronted with the disastrous life of his unevolved schoolfriend (in U. R. Anantha Murthy's Kannada-language short story), or the halting and dislocated assertions of Raja Rao's protagonist, as his marriage to a French woman crumbles—

I was born a Brahmin—that is, devoted to Truth and all that.  
'Brahmin is he who knows Brahman', etc. etc. . . .<sup>25</sup>

—to Mishra's recognition, through Flaubert, of the 'grimy underside' of middle-class society, 'the same shoddiness and lack of principle' in Benares as in Paris. The interesting exception is Rushdie's work. Excerpted here is the well-known passage from *Midnight's Children* in which the narrator Saleem Sinai, hiding in the dirty-laundry chest to eavesdrop on his mother's phone call to her lover, accidentally sniffs a pyjama cord up his enormous and permanently runny nose, upon which

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<sup>22</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, Cambridge 1993.

<sup>24</sup> PBMIL, p. 485.

<sup>25</sup> *The Serpent and the Rope*; from PBMIL, p. 398.

all the voices of midnight's children are switched on in his head. 'Oddly', Chaudhuri notes, there is no impulse towards disowning here, or of that 'deep-rooted conflict, or tension, or ambivalence': Rushdie's fiction 'promiscuously, embraces everything'.<sup>26</sup>

I would say that it is their settings and sensibilities that most clearly differentiate the best Hindi and Urdu writing, at least, from the sensuous exoticism of world-fiction blockbusters. Works such as Phanishwarnath Renu's *The Soiled Border* or Srilal Shukla's *Raag Darbari* explore the fiercely competitive world of rural corruption, where it is vital to know the rules to survive, and words are more likely to dissemble meaning than convey it.<sup>27</sup> The opening scene of *Raag Darbari*—mosquitoes, trucks and dusty tea-stalls on a state highway—comes like a slap in the face. As in classic nineteenth-century French fiction, the themes here are of lower-middle-class life: small-town tedium, frustrated youth, couples incapable of communicating with each other, the impossible gulfs between aspiration and reality. But this is an India that the West does not like to think about for too long: disturbingly competitive, immediate, challenging; a modern mass society with laws of its own. By contrast, as Chaudhuri suggests, in the florid, sensuous, inclusive, multicultural world of the post-Rushdie, postcolonial novel, the West can settle down to contemplate, not India, but its latest reinterpretation of itself.

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<sup>26</sup> Included in the extract is Rushdie's reference to 'Valmiki, the author of the *Ramayana*' dictating his masterpiece to elephant-headed Ganesh, to which Chaudhuri adds the deadpan footnote: 'One of the many deliberate errors strewn through the novel': it was the *Mahabharata* that was dictated to Ganesh, by Vyasa. PBML, p. 485–6.

<sup>27</sup> Renu, *Soiled Border* (1954), English trans. New Delhi 1991; Shukla, *Raag Darbari* (1968), English trans. New Delhi 1992.