Introduction

Rossella Ciocca

Despite its relatively recent origin in late colonial time, Anglophone Indian Literature is able to claim an outstanding canon and a tradition already marked by conspicuous historical shifts. The *nationalist-modernist* moment, contributing to the general climate which led to Independence and, soon after, permeated the public sphere of the young Nerhuvian Republic, saw the birth and the spread of the novel as a concerned form of cultural activism imbued with the political ethos of social reform. Fighting and resisting against the obscurantism of caste society and the regime of colonial occupation, it inclined towards forms of social realism and promulgated manifestos in which the ethics of narration resonated within the aesthetical effort of formal/stylistic innovation. It was the time of the noble fathers, and mothers, of the Subcontinental Anglophone novel. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Kushwant Singh, Attia Hosaini, Manohar Malgonkar, G.V. Desani, Anita Desai were just a few among the most prominent exponents.

With the post-colonial breakthrough, following the trauma of the Emergency in the Seventies, the Indian novel in English saw the spreading of its international reach, in particular after the literary exploit of Salman Rushdie at the beginning of the Eighties. It was the moment, famously tagged by critics as that of the *baggy nationalist allegories* (Fredric Jameson 1986; Amit Chaudhuri 2008), when the largeness of the books was considered complementary to the largeness and the complexities of India's national aspirations and problems.

If the "national allegory" label was soon a controversial and indeed contested concept, since not all Indian novelists writing in English between the 1980s and 1990s aspired to huge (possibly mock

epic and fabulist) rewritings of national history, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* set nonetheless the model for many ensuing emulators while dozens of other innovators, such as Amitav Ghosh or Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Seth or Kiran Desai, concentrated their attention on the destinies of the newborn State with other formal experiments in storytelling. In any case, altogether the postcolonial novel saw what Sunder Rajan (2019: 19) conceives of as the new terms of a relationship, that between the writers in English, traditionally constituted as a ruling class, and the political authority. It was the end of the romance between the 'idea of India' (Khilnani 2003), born from the nationalist movement, and narrators, whose disillusionment with the un-kept promises of the post-colony fostered an oppositional attitude towards the power of the state and deep skepticism about the accomplished results of the nation's project (Ashcroft 2013).

Getting to the postmillennial scene, literature seems to have taken yet another turn, and this, with some of its tendencies, is what this issue of Textus tries to detect and showcase. Wishing to contribute to a reflection on the expressive possibilities of narrative prose in English in the 21st century, the editors invited contributors to explore new literary beginnings, foreground subjects, styles and genres, examine the devices preferred by the *children of the new Millennium*, those heirs of Rushdie's 1981 novel required to adapt to a particularly challenging contemporary scene. One specific goal was indeed to try to delineate new literary strategies in dealing with a socio-cultural landscape particularly complicated by globalisation. The contributions deal quite obviously with a variety of different issues but have offered also the possibility to infer some lines of possible convergence and organising notions. Thus the articles have been grouped under three headed sections conceived as pertinent to themes roughly regarding: 1) the emerging of a South Asian geo-literary dimension; 2) the updating of diaspora literature; 3) the specific renovation and expansion of the Indian contemporary literary scene.

South-Asian perspectives

The whole South-Asian literary landscape, not only its Indian regional component, is now in its complex entirety a space of

extremely lively and variegated narrative production. In the third millennium, a vast train of authors from all over the countries (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal) contribute to *World literature* adopting English, and its varieties, from a peculiarly South Asian perspective. In these narratives, very often, we still find, from the earlier postcolonial period, the deeply felt necessity to rewrite the history of the nation from a local, subaltern, or border perspective, making sense of collective traumas through very personal, or familial, experiences. The contributors to this section have each addressed pointedly localised viewpoints on important historical events offered by exponents of the more recent Anglophone canons developed in South Asian countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. With an eye on the specific strategies of narration chosen by authors less known to the general public like Sorayya Khan or Neamat Imam, or as famous as Michael Ondaatje.

In inaugurating this section, the article by Daniela Vitolo "Home, City, Nation: Re-shaping Spaces in Sorayya Khan's *Five Queen's Road*", for example, offers a Pakistani perspective on the historically foundational experience of Partition and its highly distressing impact on peoples and persons. Initially constructed as literary *topos* through the eyes of Indian writers, Partition is increasingly chosen as a framework for focusing on the experiences from other borders, both Western and Eastern, of the South Asian subcontinent. The novel is positioned within the context of Pakistani Anglophone literature and its expansion since the beginning of the new millennium. Vitolo argues that this literature is increasingly developing a platform for narrations that investigate the complex and multi-layered nature of the nation, thus opposing more frequent homogenising renditions of Pakistani society. More specifically, the study concentrates on the novel's redefinition of Muslim-Hindu relationships after Partition and the author's representation of the characters' role in re-configuring the places they inhabit, resisting imposed definitions of spaces in post-Partition Pakistan. In Vitolo's reading, Sorayya Khan's specific contribution to Partition Literature consists of her interrogation of the initial territorialisation of Pakistan and India and its consequent reshaping of public as well as private spaces from August 1947 onwards.

The second paper, "The Persistence of Nationalism in Bangladeshi Postmillennial Fiction: Realism and Dystopia in Neamat

Imam's *The Black Coat*", by Angelo Monaco, analyses Imam's novel, as an exemplificative case study of the Bangladeshi postmillennial literary scene. As Monaco makes clear, notwithstanding a long exposure to English culture, Bangladesh is a monolingual country, with Bengali as its official language, and Bangladeshi literature has accordingly received limited critical attention, dwelling on the fringes of the other South-Asian countries. Bengali works started to be translated into English in the aftermath of Independence (1971), while only recently has a handful of new writers started to regularly write fiction in English. Published in 2013, *The Black Coat* tackles what is known as the second tragic South-Asian Partition, the one between East Pakistan and West Pakistan, through the war which generated the Bangladeshi nation and caused an estimated death toll of about three million civilian casualties, besides huge flows of displaced people. In particular, the novel portrays the aftermath of Bangladeshi Independence, specifically the years 1972-1974, when the country was stricken by a devastating famine, while both the Prologue and the Epilogue are set in the third millennium. The story juxtaposes two temporal axes, one foreshadowing the present and the other, which covers the largest part of the story, exploring the past. Narrated as a series of testimonial accounts, the novel exhibits a peculiar stylistic blend made of a combination of political satire, dystopian aesthetic, and historical realism which are critically and very fruitfully focused upon by Monaco and interpreted as strategical formal coordinates through which the altogether disastrous effects of nationalism are adeptly portrayed.

In the last article of the group, "Writing with the Ghost: Spectres of Narration in *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje" by Giuseppe De Riso, the inquiry shifts to another South Asian area. De Riso places the famous author against the backdrop of Sri Lankan Anglophone literary production and its still minor status in terms of production and publishing networks on the one hand and specific local readership on the other. Also in this case, at the centre of the narrated story there is a civil war. *Anil's Ghost* deals with the Sri Lankan conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils that plagued the country from 1983 to 2009 and cost somewhere between eighty thousand and one hundred thousand lives. The protagonist's quest is shown as a new generation's attempt to give voice to the voiceless victims of fratricide ferocity and deal with the scar left by

the war on Sri Lankan national consciousness. While the country was completing its transition from the old millennium into the new, Ondaatje's novel appears not only concerned but almost literally haunted by the 'ghosts' produced by the civil fighting. De Riso sets out to demonstrate how the novel works as a moment of temporal negotiation, highlighting the necessity of the recuperation of history in the clash between historical happenings, subjective experience, and the distortions of memory. The article specifically aims to depict the quality of a narrative syntax made of voids, gaps, and blind spots. In his words, "attention to such narrative breaks provides space for truths that prove essential to make visible those unaccountable processes through which social authorities and symbolic formations interacted during those warring years."

Updating Diaspora

The articles collected under this heading all deal with the phenomenon of migration, in its mass dimension, and its individual form. While lines of continuity emerge to indicate that this topic is still to be considered crucial, as it was in the postcolonial canon, there are also new features both in the quality of the described experience and in the formal ways of its interrogation. What apparently emerges is that diaspora, which had marked in an indelible way the development of the Indian Anglophone novel, is now going beyond the dominant *chronotopes* of departure and relocation to pursue also other possible trajectories both through new space-time coordinates and new genre-style connotations. As we will see, postmillennial diaspora novels tend to give a more nuanced and circumscribed account of migration, adopting more specific standpoints, such as temporary dislocation or travel-back-home experiences, and in the meantime, at a particular literary level, carrying out tentative intersections between genre and subgenre.

The first in this second section is the article by Giuliana Regnoli "'Fo-laat? You want fo-laat?' Ethnolinguistic Appropriation and Authenticity in Bengali English Diasporic Literature". In it, the author aims to reconstruct the evolution of the concept of 'diaspora consciousness' concentrating on new, peculiar configurations of dynamic communities, in which people from diverse socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds come together for a short

time around specific shared activities. Regnoli concentrates on the distinctive genre of the Indian student diaspora, which the works of Amit Chaudhuri along with the late twentieth century New Delhi author Anurag Mathur have contributed to represent. Student mobility, she clarifies, bears on the diasporic experience itself, but is hardly lived as an irreparable sense of dislocation, it rather clings to its temporary effects. Studying abroad for a short period, getting acquainted with the customs and traditions of the host country makes everything transient: from expatriation to the sense of rootlessness and nostalgia. Specifically, the article deals with the renegotiation of the problem of ethnicity as dealt with in Amit Chaudhuri's *Odysseus Abroad*. The novel, published in 2015, is analysed from the standpoint of the relational affiliations occurring at the level of language authenticity and appropriation. In doing so, the paper addresses the different ways in which the protagonist portrays a delicate yet strong 'Bengaliness' in his recalling moods and past experiences while struggling with temporary rootlessness and homesickness.

In the second contribution, by Sabita Manian and Brad Bullock, "*Exit West*: Novel Narratives of Migration and Identity", the authors contend that Mohsin Hamid's apparent experimentation with 'speculative fiction' is, in turn, another way to update the investigation of diaspora. In their opinion, the novel illustrates newer postmillennial efforts to update "the migrant story for those who must navigate both real and virtual borders". While the spread of mass and social media requires refugees to face their own reduction to typecasts, Manian and Bullock argue that Hamid's story of Muslim fugitives complicates the current discourse on diasporic subjects triggering reflections on other important aspects of the migrant's experience. *In primis*, the novel subverts stereotypes connected with gendered relations, deploying contradictory models of masculinity and women's camouflaged forms of agency. The role of techno-digital devices in bridging national divides is the other very interesting aspect of this novel. Technological supports, the authors reflect, mitigate the pain of migration, representing a sort of mobile, portable culture, allowing for at least computer-generated ties to a never completely left behind home; even though these virtual ties only very partially manage to substitute the real ones. Finally, the migrant survivor discourse in the context of cataclysmic violence is

framed by Hamid within a literary field of crossing genres, where the rhetoric and realities of geopolitics translate as globalisation's magic doors. These portals, allowing instant exits to any possible other country and domestic exotic interiors, configure border-crossing in terms of a 'speculative fiction' trick, through which Hamid asks the readers to see the bitter irony of an earth apparently without borders, where refugees are all potentially cosmopolitan citizens of the world and at the same time are not citizens at all, since the actual societies where they happen to emerge are indeed never ready to accept them as legal residents.

The last essay grouped under this section is Mara Matta's "Diasporic Narratives and Migrant Memories in *The Teak Almirah* by Indian Jewish Author Jael Silliman". Here Matta captures the diasporic experience from a very distinctive slant, that of an exponent of an immigrant community coming back to India as its re-chosen homeland. Silliman's 2016 novel is set amongst the Baghdadi Jewish community and explores, in Matta's reading, their specific contribution to making colonial Calcutta into a cosmopolitan city. Baghdadi Jews had arrived in India at the end of the eighteenth century and become one of the most successful colonial élites of the British Raj. At the time of India's independence, feeling insecure in the newly formed Indian nation, some went to England, Canada, America and Australia, and, since 1948, to Israel. A few others decided to stay; some, amongst those who had left, eventually decided to return to Calcutta. Today the Kolkata Jews are just a tiny and marginal group, that, nonetheless, with the publishing of essays, books, memoirs, blogs, and novels, are recasting their position in Indian history and opening up new venues of engagement with India's present. Jewishness and Indianness, Parsiness and Jewishness, Englishness and Indianness are just a few of the binaries embodied in *The Teak Almirah*'s characters, whose multiple belongings, and the fear of not belonging at all, represent constant elements of the novel along with its investigation of the role of English in constructing historically complex communities in a transnational and transcultural perspective.

Engaging the Indian present

The third and last group of papers focuses on the specific Indian context, where the Anglophone novel was allegedly born, trying

to spot at least some of its current tendencies. Engaging the Indian present means first and foremost to address a knot of almost insoluble inconsistencies. Modernity's fast-changing pace in megalopolises and global cities; the centrality of the world of communication and entertainment, the expansion and specialisation of the publishing industry in response to new reading practices; the social phenomenon of festivals and book fairs; the transformation of the writer into a public icon and the creation alongside the Bollywood firmament of a new novelistic stardom, are indeed some of the more evident features of Indian teeming and vivid cultural scene. In the meantime "the devil's pact between nation and capitalism" (Ashcroft 2013: 14) in India has characterized the coeval neoliberal turn, producing the paradox of an expanding middle class, whose aspirational global citizenship goes hand in hand with the most virulent resurgence of religious bigotry, sexual intolerance, ethnic factionalism. New spaces and opportunities for new protagonists, alongside new, as well as old, excruciating problems of social injustice and exclusion, characterise then the literary scenario of contemporary India.

Recently, speaking about the novel of New India, many scholars have for example investigated the explosion of popular and genre fiction (Varughese 2013, Gupta 2015, Tickell 2016, Chattopadhyay, Mandhwani and Maity 2019). Many see this production as characterised by substantial compliance with the requests of the market, a logic complicit with consumerism, and a penchant towards escapism. Others tend to consider this new flow of stories in a more pragmatic rather than idealist viewpoint, and value their capacity to e.g. represent desire, to read the every day, to construct new imaginaries for the future, and to realize an "investment in new political subjects beyond those based in caste and religion" (Anjaria 2019: 5).

The following essays address these questions, focusing on some of the new protagonists of the Indian literary scene, understood both as new authors and new characters.

The first contribution by Alessia Polatti, "Literary Engagement and Social Corruption: Chetan Bhagat's Snapshots from Contemporary India", introduces a very popular author whose fiction has been usually branded as low literature because of the simple structures of its plots and the somewhat poor

characterisation of the protagonists. Focusing on his readership and career, Polatti is nonetheless keen to highlight how, even though Bhagat's bestsellers have never been enthusiastically reviewed by literary critics, he has nonetheless contributed to substantially widening the Indian literary audience, helping to create first-time readers: hundreds of thousands of readers drawn by his simple but captivating stories of self-help and romance have entered the world of books for the first time. In analysing his social role as media and commercial celebrity, Polatti is indeed also inclined to detect in the author a sincere, constant engagement with some socio-political issues. His first bestsellers, *One Night @ the Call Centre* (2005), *Revolution 2020* (2009), and the essay *What young India wants* (2012), are thus read in the light of their interesting, very contemporary, mix of social mobility, young entrepreneurialism, and a sort of new provincialism fostered by the needs and the dreams of young workers and students, determined to carve their destiny at home. Bhagat's social agenda ranges in fact from his condemnation of corruption (which somehow can be considered an anticipation of the anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare), to the inadequate interest the Indian establishment takes in the future of the young, to the denunciation of the unfavourable global conditions that prevent India from acquiring its proper socio-economic status. Regarding these issues, Bhagat's particular form of social commitment is thus also projected against the backdrop of Narendra Modi's *New India* project with its appealing, however controversial and indeed alarming, capacity to entice and seduce the popular strata of Indian society.

Alessandro Vescovi in his "Poetics of the Teenager in Indian Millennial Fiction: Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*, Anjali Joseph's *Saraswati Park*, and Aravind Adiga's *Selection Day*", in turn, concentrates on the emergence of the adolescent as a new literary protagonist. This very interesting feature of Indian millennial fiction is tentatively explained by Vescovi either as a realistic reflection of a new subculture that is rapidly developing in Millennial India or as "a metaphor for a society that has moved beyond the legacy of colonialism but is uncertain as to what path it should take next". Adolescents' quandaries have obviously been already treated in Indian fiction but were considered as a passing phase. Only recently, Vescovi maintains, teenagers and young adults have started to

constitute a sort of a social category, almost a 'class'. None of the young protagonists of the novels analysed is able to pro-actively move into adulthood, often seeming more willing to resort to "timepassing", a widespread social habit to while away the time in apathy, against the excessive pressures of neo-liberal economic competition and the anxieties induced by precariousness. To complicate things, sexuality and gender are thrown into the identity agenda of these young male protagonists, caught in the process of coming to terms with their homosexuality. Altogether, the three novels examined by Vescovi depict adolescents as the weak link in a rampant, globalised Indian nation, at extreme difficulty with adulthood and homologation and on the verge of succumbing to an over-demanding society.

The last essay, "Mothering Community. Surviving the Post-nation in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*" by Rossella Ciocca closes this section and the issue as well. Roy's second novel is set in a vein of the Indian postmillennial novel which confirms its vocation as "social diagnosis and critique" (Sunder Rajan 2019, 4), depicting protagonists from the Indian underclass. Continuing in fictional terms Roy's life-long commitment against neo-liberal economic globalisation and the threats the rise of Hindu nationalism poses to democracy, this novel, published in 2017, weaves together the stories of a whole universe of people and follows their efforts in creating and defending their community against communalism in a country which is increasingly suffering from internal factionalism. In particular, the narration intersects the characters' destinies with some of the gloomiest and murkiest episodes of contemporary Indian history and illustrates new, other than national, feelings of *belonging* based on different typologies of relational bonds and practices of sharing between people. Far from addressing de-territorialised forms of globalism, the novel seems interested in creating and pursuing, instead, an alternative poetics of location and community often conceived as subversive, queer, and heterotopic. Meanwhile, the aim of this paper is also to confirm Roy's talent for storytelling and artistic devotion to style. In an expressive vein which is genuinely, and almost daringly, literary, this novel is seen as an example of the genre's capacity to tackle thorny political issues while engaging literature at the formal level of language, rhetoric and style.

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