

# Book Review: Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English

by blog admin

May 2, 2013

*The book describes how Indian fiction has moved beyond notions of 'postcolonial' writing to reflect an increasingly confident and diverse cultures by exploring the work of such writers as Aravind Adiga (author of the Man-Booker Prize winning *White Tiger*), Usha K.R. and Taseer. **Emily Coolidge Toker** finds the the splendor and the misery of *Reading New India* is that it whets the appetite for the fiction it introduces but necessarily fails to satiate the appetite thus awakened.*



**Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English. E. Dawson Varughese. Bloomsbury. February 2013.**

## Find this book



[Emma Dawson Varughese](#)'s *Reading New India* is the latest instalment in an unusually cohesive body of work that began in 2007 with a 'rough' guide to World Englishes Literature and an effort to refashion the UK's national literatures curriculum to reflect the reality of a changing English. She is currently engaged in an on-going project to solicit and publish anthologies of new short stories written in English from countries in what Dawson (using [Braj Kachru](#)'s organisational scheme) terms the "Outer" and "Expanding" circles. According to this schema, the "inner circle" is comprised of those countries in which English is considered to be the native language, although there may be any number of other languages spoken in diasporic communities, and these languages may interact with the predominant English in any number of ways.

The "outer circle" consists of those countries which once may have been called 'jewels' in some crown or other, or have otherwise felt the icy hand of colonialism tightening around their local economies (etcetera) and therefore have long used (a locally-colored) English as a second language, either official or unofficial, allowing communication between different linguistic communities. Into this 'circle' falls countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and that features in the title of the book currently under review. The final sphere, "the expanding circle" covers those countries in which English is widely taught and used, but which lacks the sticky remnants of a colonial relationship with one of the "inner circle" Anglophone countries. Think for instance, Israel.

With this global linguistic organisation firmly in mind, Ms. Dawson's more recent on-going project (of which *Reading New India* is a peripheral part) seeks to both introduce new authors from the "outer" and "expanding" circles to a global audience, and to use a combination of ethnographic and literary analysis to offer a critical introduction to the major trends and tropes of the writing. *Reading New India* stands out from the other books published under the awning of the World Englishes anthologies project in that the focus is more that of an energetically parsed academic introduction to what in the anthologies are allowed to speak for themselves.

This split focus between academic analysis, introducing the reader to the fiction and to the relevant socio-cultural context unfortunately leaves the material in many places stretched quite thin. The only remedy I can suggest for the time being is to read it in tandem with Varughese's *Beyond the Postcolonial: World Englishes Literature*, a strong, interdisciplinary critique of the now-wavering orthodoxy of postcolonial literary theory which supplies all of the broader theory necessary to analyse the case-study that is *Reading New India* in its larger theoretical context. For readers who are more interested in the fiction itself, Dawson Varughese provides short biographies of all featured authors, as well as all the information necessary to hunt down the original publication.

Other features of the book include a glossary of terms and a chronology of of India's political development and other major events from 1947-2011. It is this reader's opinion that the glossary would be unnecessary for those familiar with Indian culture and is rather too laconic and insufficient for the uninitiated (acronyms listed in the glossary, for instance, only provided their unabbreviated form but no additional information to provide adequate insight into the term's importance or cultural meaning), and the chronology is equally concise to the point of requiring a substantial amount of additional research on the part of an interested reader. I mention these two short-comings because the book is offered as an introduction to recent Indian literature in the English language, but readers coming to it either with a background in older Indian literature or just as an interested book store browser, should expect some difficulty navigating the new terrain.

Having said that, the two strongest chapters warrant some applause. Chapter 4, "Young India", explores the use of call centres as scene-setting backdrop and the increasing presence of ('Western'-influenced) tropes of gay sexuality. Call centres are of course one of the stereotypes most associated with India, but for most non-Indian readers I expect this will be the first time that they're presented as a lifestyle or a rung on someone's career ladder, rather than the butt of jokes about off-shoring and globalisation. All the young professionals who find themselves working in call centres do, of course, have Anglicised names used at work. One of the most interesting avenues for further exploration is the influence of this 'call centre name' on the individual, shown in the chosen fiction to have something of a bifurcating effect, amplified by the individual having to extract himself from the local flow in order to live in synch with the time-zone of another country for which he provides IT support.

For instance, in "Call Me Dan" (Trivedi, 2010), the main character lives according to UK and US time-zones and at work is 'Dan', while at home (should he even run into his family – one suspects this is rare) he is 'Gautam'. The cover art (as described by E.D.V) is almost painfully telling: "One half is 'Dan' with eyes sparkling, snappy shirt collar, spiky, well-gelled hair, and slightly more light-skinned than the other half of the face which is 'Gautam' with darker skin, flat, 'parted' hair-line and a less fashioned shirt" (73). Explored here are the difficulties (and opportunities, not to put too much of an *Economist*-spin on the economic situation) of negotiating the generational divide between parents who had 'normal, steady' jobs and their children who work in these crazy call centres; of young people, especially women, moving from smaller rural areas to the major metropolises negotiating room for themselves in the middle class, alongside their disapproving neighbors. Disapproving, of course, because these young people are either insufficiently religious, not married, or working *and* not married – or, in a short story featured in the chapter on crime writing, married but showing no signs of wanting to procreate.

Gay characters (the book doesn't cover other letters in the LGBTQ rainbow) are discussed in terms of the influence of Western media – prevalent since the mass availability of satellite TV — and how their sexual identity interacts with (or negates) their caste- or religious-based identity. For someone very familiar with the issues and politics bound up with non-heterosexual identities in America, it was particularly interesting to see these play out in a very different cultural landscape.

Chapter 6, "Fantasy and Epic Narrative", looks at the relationship between the new fiction and the ancient epics of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and other sources of traditional lore. The most substantive point made here is that it could be argued that some of what we might call 'fantasy' or even 'science fiction' might be considered 'historical fiction' in certain (I suspect traditional, and religiously Hindu) Indian contexts, due to the inclusion of characters, themes, or motifs from traditional Hindu scripture. While unsubstantiated, it is certainly a very interesting thought and one worth exploring further.

And that's unfortunately characteristic: the splendor and the misery of *Reading New India* is that it whets the appetite for the fiction it introduces but necessarily fails to satiate the appetite thus awakened.

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