
Emma Dawson Varughese’s *Reading New India* is an introduction to the post-2000 Indian fiction in English published within India and an attempt to read contemporary India in and through this literature. As declared in the preface, Varughese’s aim is ‘to consider this fiction against the earlier notions of Indian literature in English’ as postcolonial and ‘against the contemporary socio-cultural landscape of New India’ that has undergone immense changes in the 65 years since independence to become a major presence in the global economy. *Reading New India* ‘engages with the idea of sociology of literature’ (18) where literature is a reflection of and on the socio-cultural changes in the society from which it is produced. The language in which the literature is written is at once a part of these changes through its changing relationship with that society and a means to explore and express the changes.

From Varughese’s website¹ it is obvious that *Reading New India* is part of a wider, ongoing project on literatures in English from countries where English is either a colonial legacy now gone native or a language adopted for its power to allow participation in the global exchanges. The foundation of Varughese’s project is Bruj Kachru’s model of World Englishes that organises the Anglophone world in three circles: the Inner circle of countries where English is a native language, the Outer circle of countries where English is a native language, the Outer circle of countries where English is a former colonial legacy which has since become official or unofficial second language connecting different (vernacular) linguistic communities, and the Expanding circle of countries where English is a widely used foreign language.

In *New Departures, New Worlds: World Englishes Literature*, explaining the term ‘World Englishes Literature’, Varughese states that World Englishes writers are less and less interested in their putative subalternity to a former colonial power and more and more interested in what constitutes (often positively) the identity of the culture from within which they write. Similarly, they are less and less likely to worry as to the relation of the English they use to the notionally ‘original’ English of the Inner circle. I might therefore best encapsulate my definition as follows: Most (but not all) World Englishes literature explores the culture(s) of the country and people from which it is written (these countries belong to Kachru’s Outer and Expanding circles); usually the literature employs the English of that place (to a lesser or greater degree); and, moreover, the writer chooses to write in that English over other languages in which she could alternatively write.²

Varughese wishes to go beyond the confines of the label ‘postcolonial’ to make the global audience aware of the diversity of the growing body of literatures in English from various parts of the former British Empire and of the larger Anglophone world. Her earlier work *Beyond the Postcolonial: World Englishes Literature* provides a fuller explanation of the project and the theoretical framework applied to it. *Beyond the Postcolonial* looks at literatures from four African and three Asian countries, directing attention towards the fact

¹ [http://www.beyondthepostcolonial.com/](http://www.beyondthepostcolonial.com/)

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that Postcolonial texts form only a part, even if a significant part, of this diverse whole. It asserts that these literatures and cultures have moved away from their post/colonial past towards new identities and new experiences. The plural Englishes signifies the individuality of the English of each of these literatures gained through its interaction with the culture and the other (vernacular) languages of each literature’s locale. Reading New India is one of the case studies in Varughese’s project with a more detailed focus on India and is probably better read alongside Beyond the Postcolonial.

Indian English Literature has been a global phenomenon for a long time. Many of its star writers have won literary awards and critical recognition. The provenance of this literature has always been diverse, with writers writing from within India and Indian diasporas around the world, and so have been its concerns; yet the images of the Indian English literature as postcolonial and Indian English writer as migrant remain predominant. The individuality of Reading New India is in its desire to go beyond the postcolonial label and its refusal to include diasporic writers and texts in its scope as it brings to notice the increasing number and diversity (of genres and forms) of Indian fiction in English produced, published and read mainly within India, and which remains mostly unavailable and unknown to the outside world.

The introductory chapter of Reading New India explains the focus of the book and gives an overview of the changes in the post-independence India and in the concept of being Indian and an overview of the earlier, ‘postcolonial’ Indian English literature and its major writers. The next six chapters try to contextualise and trace various trends in the postmillennial literature such as Chicklit, Cricklit, Crime fiction, Urban fiction, Gay narratives, Graphic novels, fantasy and epic narratives. These chapters also include close readings of selected texts of each type. In the concluding chapter, Varughese acknowledges that the ‘newness’ of the body of fiction presented in the book, its proximity and variety make it difficult to predict ‘exactly how the genre themes and forms outlined ... in this book play out and develop over time’ (150), and ponders the future of the Indian English literature in view of India’s increasing contact with the world and the fact that global economies are increasingly affecting India.

Although the aim and the focus of the book are laudatory, the book is quite repetitive and thinly spread in many places. The glossary of cultural terms and abbreviations and the chronological timeline are unnecessary for the Indian audience, as Varughese acknowledges in the preface, and in their brevity inadequate for those unfamiliar with India. The overview of the ‘postcolonial’ Indian English literature has gaping holes as it leaves out prominent writers such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. Varughese’s selection is quite biased towards texts representing the Urban India; leaving one with the impression that none of this ‘new fiction’ deals with non-urban India or the newness of the New India is only to be found in its big cities. The bias is also evident in the inclusion of certain writers such as Chetan Bhagat, neither unavailable nor unknown outside India, and exclusion of certain major postmillennial writers such as Tarun Tejpal who writes from within India and is simultaneously published in India and elsewhere.

The book also suffers at the level of editing. There is a significant factual error in the introduction. In the explanation of the cultural and religious backdrop to Sarojini Naidu’s poem Song of Radha, The Milkmaid Varughese places the Mathura shrine of Govinda (Lord Krishna) aside the sacred river Ganges (7) instead of river Yamuna or Jamuna. The book has a number of confused expressions and poorly constructed sentences such as ‘Sophie’s...
identity and connection with Bangalore is also caught up with her identity with India’ (31). ‘Sophie is raised Hindi and English speaking in Khasi-speaking Shillong’ (31). ‘Misha and Anushka do not follow this protocol, breaking their fast with alcohol, rich "European foods” and a gay couple’ (49).

Notwithstanding the abovementioned shortcomings, Reading New India provides a much needed and timely introduction to postmillennial India and Indian English literature within India as they move beyond the postcolonial past and forward into ‘Newness’.

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