

Under Terrorising Eyes: The Indian Novel in English

Meenakshi Bharat, *Troubled Testimonies: Terrorism and the English Novel in India* (Routledge, 2016; First South Asia Edition 2016)

What kind of world do we live in? The question you've just confronted used to be, once upon a time, an elite question. It used to be so because only a handful of our ancestors (mostly male) bothered about such inconsequential questions. But the world we've inherited from our forefathers has changed much over the years. And the question has now become a popular one. A whole host of reasons can be pointed out. If you happen to be a citizen of a postcolonial nation and also happen to be aware of the things happening in cultural studies, you'll most probably point your finger to one of the man-made monsters of modern times called imperialism. And if you grew up in the angry 1960s, the criminal in your eyes would perhaps be capitalism itself. But the factor that outshines others in pulling the question down to a mundane plane is the increasing visibility of terror across the globe, a trend set in motion by that most spectacular act of terrorism, remembered by the date of its occurrence – 9/11. One of the aftermaths of that event has been (and still is) a radical defamiliarisation of our much-loved world. And we could not help asking: what kind of world do we live in? The questioning continues.

In her book *Troubled Testimonies: Terrorism and the English Novel in India*, Meenakshi Bharat attempts to show how that increasingly pressing question has opened up possibilities for one of the most thriving cultural industries in India, the Indian novel in English, and imposed at the same time formal, ideological-moral and representational constraints on its practitioners (8). With terror having become an integral part of life the world over, Indian English novelists can't but deal with the issue both on the local and international front. The first three chapters (of Part I: The geographical ambit of the postterrorist novel) engage with the many faces of terror within India, while the fourth one focuses on its global connections. Bharat delineates the 'formal and thematic ambit' of what she calls 'the postterrorist novel' in Part II, containing an equal number of chapters. *Troubled Testimonies*, however, opens with an introduction in which Bharat defines 'the postterrorist novel' and for which she rightly deserves special thanks. For it's not only well-written but also almost totally free from critical jargon, a quality so rare these days in academic writing and which, I think, will go a long way towards warming readers to the book.

As far as India is concerned, the state that has been the most conspicuous theatre of terror and violence in recent times is the State of Jammu and Kashmir. Accordingly, novels focused on Kashmir form the focus of critical analysis in the first two chapters of Part I of *Troubled Testimonies*. These works, as Bharat puts it in her choice of titles for the chapters, represent Kashmir as a 'sad paradise' and its ultimate 'collapse' (vii). The first chapter titled 'Sad Paradise: Kashmir I' analyses three early texts on 'the Kashmir front in the context of terror' (28), including Vikram Chandra's *The Srinagar Conspiracy* (2000), *Bunker 13* (2003) by Aniruddha Bahal, and Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Both Chandra and

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Rushdie, according to Bharat, identify the ‘crumbling’ of ‘the common Kashmiri tradition, *Kashmiriyat*, which cuts across differences of religion’, as the most unfortunate consequence of the unrest in Kashmir (34, 29), while Bahal exposes ‘the corruption in the [Indian] army that misuses its power to milk the volatile situation for its own selfish ends’ (33).

Over the years the postterrorist English novel on Kashmir has become more nuanced, reading the crisis in the Valley from a wide range of perspectives, a point amply borne out by the novels Bharat studies in the second chapter with the title ‘The collapse of paradise itself: Kashmir II.’ Jaspreet Singh’s *Chef* (2010), for example, explores how the on-going conflict in Kashmir has contributed to the ‘crude supposition’ that ‘the Indian, in subjecting himself to the discomfort of being in Kashmir’ is ‘patriotic and commendable,’ while ‘the Kashmiri, responsible for the stink, is a Muslim, a terrorist, and hence, not to be trusted, certainly not to be loved’ (44). Unlike the other novelists mentioned so far, Singh, however, doesn’t hesitate to offer ‘a solution’ to the prevailing ‘confrontational politics’ in Kashmir (45). The problem is best addressed ‘through cultural rapprochement and not through military intervention’ (45). Bharat discusses four more texts in this second chapter: Basharat Peer’s journalistic personal account *Curfewed Night* (2010), *The Collaborator* (2010) by Mirza Waheed, Shafi Ahmad’s *The Half Widow* (2012), and *The Garden of Solitude* (2010) by Siddhartha Gigoo. Kashmiris themselves, the authors of these works took to writing Kashmir because they had grown up ‘in the 1990s on Kashmiri soil’ under the shadow of the ‘nerve-wracking terror’ and whose lives ‘had been touched by the daily violence’ (48). As such, these texts ‘have the deeply personal element of the ‘memoir’ embedded in them’ (42). It is, however, *The Garden of Solitude* which, as Bharat sees it, is an important intervention as far as the genre of the postterrorist novel is concerned. For the novel brings to light the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits who are ‘hounded out of the only homeland that they had ever known for generations’ (56).

Kashmir is, however, not the only backdrop against which Indian terror unfolds itself. In fact, terror in India is ubiquitous, especially including such high-profile targets as New Delhi and Mumbai. In the next two chapters Bharat sheds light first on violence in parts of India other than Kashmir and then on its global geometry. With the expansion of the scope of terrorism, motivations for violence also become diverse. Upamanyu Chatterjee in *English, August* (1988), Rohinton Mistry in *A Fine Balance* (1995), Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger* (2008), for example, touch upon the Naxalite movement that ‘has arisen because of a general dissatisfaction and malaise resulting from an increasing sense of marginalization by the centre’ (64). But it’s ‘the canker of communalism’ that stands out as a key factor triggering terrorist violence in India (66). In *Jimmy the Terrorist* (2010), Omair Ahmad presents the portrait of a terrorist called Jamaal who comes to be called Jimmy. Jimmy becomes a terrorist because of the ‘hurt and injustice’ that he and his minority community face on a daily basis in India (69). Much in the same vein, Juggi Bhasin, in his 2012 novel *The Terrorist*, tells the story of his Muslim protagonist Murad who gradually veers towards terrorism as a consequence of terrorist attacks that turn all Indian Muslims suspects in

the eyes of other Indians. Misunderstood and distrusted by other Indians, Muslims like Murad fall an easy prey to ‘the overtures of terrorism’ (77).

Bharat works on three texts to substantiate her conclusion that terrorist violence is ‘a worldwide phenomenon’ (82). Through a detailed analysis of such texts as Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* (also discussed among novels on the theme of violence in Kashmir), *God’s Little Soldier* (2006) by Kiran Nagarkar, and Tabish Khair’s *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012), Bharat is able to show how these works situate the issue of terrorism in a global context and thus highlight the interconnectedness of terrorist attacks the world over (85).

If Bharat offers a broad survey of terror-focused Indian English novels in Part I, in the chapters constituting Part II she investigates terror in relation to graphic fiction (and its e-version), gender and trauma. By virtue of being a new cultural phenomenon and also because it has an added advantage in that it can use multiple colours, frames, images and shades to create a composite text, the graphic novel can represent terror in a ‘subversive’ way (105). As far as gender is concerned, the postterrorist English novel from India is no different from its siblings. Not many women novelists (in English) are to be found who deal with the issue of terrorist violence.¹ Also, barring a few exceptions (Sana, for example, in *The Terrorist*), in most cases women are represented as passive rather than active characters, and Kashmir itself as ‘the beautiful feminine’ (140). Whether on a small or large scale, the most obvious psychological fallout of terrorist violence is trauma. As such, all the texts Bharat works on in her study are to a greater or lesser extent trauma narratives. Not only do they bear witness to acts of violence but also help the victims regain a sense of self.

The postterrorist Indian novel in English, as Bharat reads it, is possibly more subversive on a different front: it problematises the ideology as well as the teleology of officially endorsed Indian nationalist discourse as a consequence of which the famous Nehruvian vision of ‘unity in diversity’ comes to be regarded as suspect. Caught between forces of terrorism and counter-terrorism, an Indian can’t help re-examining the grand narratives of national identity, progress, and autonomous self (170).

Troubled Testimonies is a well-written study of the Indian postterrorist novel in English. Students and scholars interested in South Asian cultural studies will definitely benefit from its original and perceptive insights. For non-academic readers the book articulates an informed answer to the question with which I began: what kind of world do we live in? Apart from a few typos, however, it’s worth pondering whether sweeping observations regarding the ‘global’ reach of postterrorist Indian English fiction (7), exclusive use of Urdu by Indian Muslims (107),

¹ There are a few in Indian languages such as Hindi. Bharat specifically mentions the name of the award-winning Kashmiri author Meera Kant (134). With the publication of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy, however, that gap has been amply filled.

and ‘sensational’ coverage of terror attacks by the media (172) don’t work to diminish the intellectual sophistication of an otherwise meticulously researched work.

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