

E. Dawson Varughese, *Genre Fiction of New India: Post-Millennial Receptions of 'Weird' Narratives* (Routledge, 2017)

In her latest book E. Dawson Varughese takes on the difficult task of categorising and schematising a new genre of Indian fiction. Varughese's analysis is deeply couched in generic approaches to understanding the value and position of literary texts socially and culturally. Her rhetoric relies on an implicit 'Indianness' of the texts that she analyses and the ways in which this 'Indianness' is communicated to the reader. As a nationalised study, the book would be of use to researchers interested in exploring literary expressions of Indian values and the ways in which India's rich mythological history has formed and continues to form part of its culture. However, *Genre Fiction of New India* may also be valuable to researchers who are investigating ways in which speculative fiction is affected by the society and culture in which it is produced and what this contributes to meaning making.

Varughese's first port of call is to set her study within a specific temporal space, that being post-millennial India. There are two primary movers which happen in this period in India that create space for Varughese's study: the proliferation of Anglicised readerships and the growth of the publishing industry. This sparked a rise in Anglicisation that, coupled with the success of some Indian texts in the 'wider Anglo-American market' (9), led to the cross-pollination of Indian tradition and culture with that of Westernised genre fiction. Varughese briefly addresses the transnationalisation of texts and literatures and the universalism of Indian traditionhood, but after this brief digression she seems to leave this by the wayside. This undermines some of the surety with which Varughese later speaks on the 'universal' values communicated by quasi-mythological Indian texts like the *Rig Veda* and *The Mahabharata*. Rather, Varughese supplements the lack of this depth of transnationalism with a commitment to the conflict between the Westernised weird fiction genre and its conflict with the Indian concept of *itihasa*. The backbone of Varughese's rhetoric relies on this conflict because it is the determining point which necessitates her justification of the new genre fiction, which she terms Bharati Fantasy.

Varughese's Bharati Fantasy pivots on the role of *itihasa* within the post-millennial Indian consciousness. She constructs its opposition to Western mythologising as such; where in the West 'myth uses "narrative" to convey certain truths' (original emphasis), in India, mythology is 'that which was believed to have happened in the past' (30). In this approximation, *itihasa* is belief that the mythos upon which Indian culture has been built is, to varying degrees, factual. Using this argument, Varughese extends this to argue that her concept of Bharati Fantasy, in the vein of weird genre fiction, 'narrates both a shared history and a set of attitudes for living' (35). For all her talk of transnationalism and the universalism of these texts Varughese explicitly suggests that Bharati Fantasy is written for Indians by Indians, indeed the title of her book alludes to as much. In this way, Varughese promotes her argument that Bharati Fantasy offers a portal for authors to palimpsestically transcribe ancient Indian values and traditions onto modern

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and present-day society. An interesting outcome of this is what Varughese describes as the ‘movement between ancient ideas of science and technology and contemporary ideas of the same [which] is both fluid and complementary’ (48). While this is quite often a theme of magical realism, which is part and parcel of Varughese’s analyses, it is the temporal shift between these ideas that is the most valuable to meaning making in Bharati Fantasy. It is the concept of *itihasa* which makes defines the value of Indian mythology, tradition and values to the present-day, and Varughese’s analysis of the genre fiction that portrays this expounds upon the value that the genre contributes to ‘the interface of science and belief’ (99). It is clear, in Varughese’s construction of this genre, that she truly believes that literature is a portent for social and cultural change.

Varughese’s argument is most convincing when she is interrogating the formation of the weird in Indian literature and the ways in which the ancient mythology inform current texts and society. However, she suffers a rhetorical slippage in her inclusion of extended expositions which consider the authorial intent, biographical history and explicit meaning making of the authors themselves. The last quarter of the book are mostly dedicated to interviews conducted between Varughese and three of the authors whose texts she had chosen to analyse. While the intention behind including authors in a discussion around genre is perhaps understandable, these interviews contribute little to Varughese’s argument for the existence of Bharati Fantasy.

Varughese’s book would prove significantly valuable to researchers who are looking to analyse forms of speculative fiction particularly with relevance to socio-political and cultural significance. Indeed, some academics whose interests lie in magic realism may find Varughese’s exploration of the conflict between genre fiction and the Indian idea of *itihasa* fascinating in terms of perceptive dissonance. Varughese’s book, summarily, provides an insight the emergence of sub-genres of fiction in India and the impact of India’s specific time-space, culture and tradition upon the emergence of new literatures.

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