

## Preface

WHEN THE IDEA CROSSED MY MIND to put together a selection of my essays on Indian literature written in English, I was not really aware of questions that might arise during the process of sifting these texts and deciding which ones to choose and include. How should I proceed? Would it be worthwhile to return to the 1960s and my very first responses to novels, poems and stories I had read while teaching German to Indian students at



Punjab University in Chandigarh and later at Delhi University? Should I go back to the 1970s and early 1980s when I considered setting up a course on Commonwealth Literature at Frankfurt's Goethe-University? I also asked myself whether these early essays wouldn't merely reflect a sense of time long past, a period when I had paid attention mainly to novels and stories about colonized people written between the mid-1930s and the mid-1950s. And what about my comments on poems composed in the 1960s and 1970s by a generation of poets who felt that they had to break away from their older colleagues' allegedly outdated poetic practices, revered public figures like Manmohan Ghose, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore or Sarojini Naidu?<sup>1</sup> An almost forgotten episode after national and international publishers had brought out comprehensive poetry anthologies as well as the collected work of single poets like Nissim Ezekiel. Finally, wouldn't my remarks on women short stories of the 1970s and 1980s, texts that had challenged Hindu and Muslim ideas and practices of social roles forced upon them, be totally outdated now with the Women's Movement and its campaign for women's emancipation and liberation?

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1 Cf. V.K. Gokak, ed. & sel., *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry*, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 14<sup>th</sup> ed. 2005

By contrast: which criteria could I cite in favour of my idea of republishing essays written during the last two decades? Wouldn't they — at least some of them — have found their way into libraries, an academic's study or her and his computer? And after all, hadn't the international publishing industry, the media and academia 'discovered' Postcolonial Literatures, including their Indo-English variant, and promoted their study during the last two to three decades? And weren't students and researchers already paying a lot of attention to both its texts and its critical scene?

In spite of my reluctance I have selected a small number of publications which I feel could be read (again) for a number of reasons. A sequence of chronologically arranged essays written over a period of half a century reflects my outside observer's growing familiarity with Indian English writing. It permits insight into its thematic, formal and stylistic shifts and changes as much as into its growth in scope and quality. Besides, it also throws light on the course of a critical literary debate that has focused — and continues to do so — on the pros and cons of Indians writing their novels and poems in English as well as it does on the controversial issue of their 'Indianness'. Finally, the chronology of my essays points out the difficulties critics have faced with a corpus of texts that resisted easy categorization, particularly from a Eurocentric perspective with its claims on the universal validity of critical formulas: a critical reception that has moved towards analytical methods which encompass cultural-historical, multi-, inter- and transcultural approaches as much as post-structural, post-modern, eco-critical, or evolutionary-psychological ones.

A final remark to round off these considerations. Till the end of the 1980s readers of Indian writing in English experienced not a few difficulties that would often affect the quality of early scholarship, among them the lack of a critical tradition and the inaccessibility of an author's work and critical commentaries. For example, by the time my first essay appeared in 1967<sup>2</sup> you would not find more than three dozen entries each on the Indian English novel or on R.K. Narayan's works, just about twenty on Mulk Raj Anand and merely a dozen on Raja Rao<sup>3</sup>: all novelists whose first books had appeared in the 1930s. The place of comments, perhaps even essays, could have been located in a bibliography — if these had been compiled.<sup>4</sup>

2 "An Ideal of Man in Mulk Raj Anand's Novels", *Indian Literature* X, 1 (1967), 29–51

3 See Dieter Riemenschneider, *The Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934–2004*, Jaipur: Rawat Publications 2005, 50–52; 128–131; 230–236; 346–347

4 K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House 1962), the most comprehensive study available at the time, does not deal with the novel genre and contains no notes on or references to critical studies of the three leading novelists, Anand, Narayan and Rao

Nor was it easy to get hold of novels, short story or poetry collections in book stores even in Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta or Madras, let alone in London. More often than not I was dependent on information obtained from authors<sup>5</sup> who would assist me in contacting their publishers, or from Indian academics like M.K. Naik in Dharwar, C.D. Narasimhaiah and Anniah Gowda in Mysore or P. Lal in Calcutta who had taken an interest in a body of texts totally shunned outside their own university departments.

I was told, the most promising place to find critical material on English writing in India was the National Library in Calcutta, which I visited in 1966. But though I came across a number of entries in several journals, and these mainly on Indian English novels, I could have saved the tedious train journey from Delhi and back and experiencing the little advice I received from the library staff. To my great fortune I met P. Lal at his home, learned a lot from him about his *writers workshop*, acquired a number of poetry collections of hitherto unknown authors he had published, picked up issues of the *miscellany*, a very informative and lively two-monthly — and was introduced to David McCutcheon, an English scholar teaching at Jadavpur University, who had taken an interest in the Indian-English novel, and especially in Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope*. I still cherish the lively and encouraging talks I had with both of them and Lal's generosity and hospitality. Nonetheless, even in India such contacts were few and far between and could only be kept alive by postal correspondence after I had returned to Germany in the autumn of 1966: a place not only geographically but also intellectually far removed from the concerns of Indian novelists and their controversies with a public that was little inclined to take them seriously — which I had experienced first-hand after a lecture on Anand's novels the Max Mueller Bhavan, or the Goethe-Institut, had arranged for me in New Delhi in late 1965.

Why then did I continue my research in this field? My answer is simply, intellectual curiosity. I just wanted to learn more about the culture of a country I had chosen as my temporary abode as a Lecturer in German, and once I had discovered that Indian writers had composed stories, novels and poems in English. Besides, English translations of literary works from Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali or Malayalam as well as historical, social-political and philosophical background studies had bolstered my decision not to

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5 Mulk Raj Anand connected me with Kutub Popular, his Bombay publisher, and G.V. Desani advised me to contact a friend in Bombay from whom I bought a copy of *All About H Hatter* that he had stored in his flat

discard my fascination with Indian culture simply because I had left the country. India's long-lasting colonial dependence on Great Britain and the role English had played — and continues to play — had opened my eyes to a very different and exciting dimension of 'English' Studies from the one I had been aware of as a past student of English literature at Frankfurt University.

Over the next few years my PhD thesis, book reviews and essays as well as papers read at conferences kept me busy, as did my plan of introducing a syllabus of Indian English literature at Frankfurt University. Eventually, I was even more successful by setting up *Neue Englischsprachige Literaturen und Kulturen* — NELK for short, or New English Literatures and Cultures: a syllabus and a study centre — in the Department of English and American Studies at my university, with Indian English literature being part of it. But let me now turn to the present collection.

From amongst my nearly 200 publications, which include my thesis, monographs, edited works, book reviews, lexical entries, short notes, reports and articles, I have selected fifteen essays published between 1974 and 2015. They range from my almost slap-dash remarks on early Indian critical studies of the novel to the question of the genre's most recent engagement with critical cosmopolitanism. As regards one of my main interests, the development of the novel since Anand's work of the 1930s right up to Sinha's *Animal's People* (2006), I could not miss noticing that many authors critique the social inequalities in their society, a most significant thematic characteristic that has bearing on a critic's approach. As a student of English who had been profoundly influenced by the school of New Criticism and close reading, I realized from the beginning that it would be unforgivable not to contextualize these works historically and culturally the better to understand them. With hindsight, 'Gentle round the curves', a warning boldly written on an overhanging rock I had seen while travelling along the winding roads in the Himalayas, seems to have been the appropriate advise for me to follow while studying the Indian novel. Wasn't it dangerous, allegorically speaking, to just move ahead and not imagine that unknown obstacles would hinder my progress?

And what about my students and readers outside India? Wouldn't it be my task to combine textual analysis with information on content? Not to shirk from talking about plots and to include poems or passages from short stories in my essays that would not just substantiate my arguments but simply inform students and readers about unknown texts? And hopefully encourage them to acquire their own copies. Methodological

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considerations such as these that informed my writing between the 1970s and the 1990s do not any longer carry the same weight since the globalization of the publishing and electronic industry has eased access to creative and critical texts worldwide. It is a development from which my engagement with the history of the critical discourse on Indian English literature, the reception of the novel and the debate on 'Indianness', has benefitted as well.

The diversification of the New English Language Literatures since the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has not stopped short of the writing from the Indian homeland and its diasporas. One of its most recent contributions hails from Aotearoa New Zealand. As yet it may not have rooted itself firmly in the country's literary scene but it offers a unique feature in that among its authors we come across Indian immigrants and their descendants from different parts of India, from Malaysia and Fiji whose mother tongues differ widely, but all of who write in English. What an exciting prospect for indigenous critics on their search for 'Indianness'! As also for readers of Indian English literature.

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