The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium

Also by Prabhat K. Singh

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ω *Mahabharat: Ek Naveen Rupantar*
(Shiv K. Kumar's *The Mahabharata*)

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Prabhat K. Singh

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For
the lovers of the Indian English novel

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PREFACE

I feel privileged to offer this edited volume, *The Indian English Novel of the New Millennium,* containing pieces of academic criticism that explore the various currents and bearings of literary studies in the Indian English novel. These critical responses of the contributors to the emerging trends in novel writing, with reference to individual authors and their works published after the year 2000, are designed to help the readers in formulating a precise impression about the possibilities and limitations of a variety of Indian English novel. Currently, we have women's writing, crime fiction, terror novels, science fiction, campus novels, graphic novels, disability texts, LGBT voices, dalit writing, slumdog narratives, eco-narratives, narratives of myth and fantasy, philosophical novels, historical novels, postcolonial and multicultural narratives, and Diaspora novels. The purpose has been to display the intellectual and emotional texture of this genre by providing an accessible account of the diverse creative tastes and practices of our novelists with a view to both motivating and enabling the readers to draw perspectives and assess their vitality.

Although it is not easy to radically distinguish literary trends and paradigms in a short span of twelve years and some months (2001- April 2013) of the new century, for they are inter-animating in effect, it is quite pertinent to identify the changing face of the contemporary Indian English novel and subject it to critical evaluation. It is with this earnestness that I wish through this book to share views, encourage counter-arguments and visualize the future of our novels in English along with scrutinizing literature, litterateurs and ourselves together. I wish the young minds a robust critical sense for studying a text with discrimination and with judicious adherence to Western or Indian poetics or literary/aesthetic traditions.

The sixteen essays in this critical anthology examine the brisk fecundity and brash buoyancy of the contemporary Indian English novel from disparate points of view. Within the limited space of a modest offering of this kind, it is not possible to explicate and analyze the entire repertoire of its forms, motifs and preoccupations. Nevertheless, the salience of the major trends and generic momentum has been located with the hope that the discussions of views investigated in the texts as well as

the critical perspectives informing them will mark out fruitful paths for future studies. The editorial job has been carried out with this objectivity that the views expressed are those of the individual contributors and with this conviction that literature does not begin or end with us, and a writer or his reader or critic is just a link in the long chain.

I am thankful to Dr Banibrata Mahanta for his sustained interest in this project, and to Dr Rajendra Kumar for his unfailing assistance in organizing the manuscript and preparing a select bibliography useful for those who wish to explore the field further.

Lastly, I owe a great deal to someone, very special, who has been buttressing up all my endeavours.

Varanasi, India **Prabhat K. Singh**

CHAPTER ONE

THE NARRATIVE STRANDS IN THE INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL: NEEDS, DESIRES AND DIRECTIONS

PRABHAT K. SINGH

I

Indian writing in English, in all probability, originated with the publication of *The Travels of Dean Mahomet, a Native of Patna in Bengal, through Several Parts of India* (1794) decades before Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous *Minute* (1835) on law and education introduced the English language to the subcontinent as a liberal and enlightened system of instruction to serve colonial interests. The author, Sake Dean Mahomet (1759-1851) who moved first to Ireland, settled in England and then brought out his autobiographical narrative, the account of an eighteenth century journey through India, may be considered the first Indian writer in English. Such tentative attempts at exploiting English for creative purposes may well be taken as broken starts in that the author of the first Indian novel in English, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, decided to write his later fiction in his mother tongue. However, the steady flowering of the English-language novel in India in the 1930s, further enriched in form and range since the 1980s, has made it a distinguished genre. More positively, some recent novels like Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Love Story* (2001), Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003), Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Shiv K. Kumar's *Two Mirrors at the Ashram* (2006), Shashi Deshpande's *In the Country of Deceit* (2008), Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* (2008), Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Khushwant Singh's *The Sunset Club* (2009), Amit Chaudhuri's *The Immortals* (2009), Tabish Khair's *The Thing about Thugs* (2009) and *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the*

Missionary Position (2012), Manu Joseph's *Serious Men* (2010), Upamanyu Chatterjee's *Way to Go* (2010), Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011), Tarun Tejpal's *The Valley of Masks* (2011), Rahul Bhattacharya's *The Sly Company of People Who Care* (2011), Kunal Basu's *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* (2011), Hari Kunzru's *Gods without Men* (2011), Cyrus Mistry's *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* (2012), to mention a few, confirm the outstanding growth of the Indian English novel as an art form disencumbered of the Western freight.

The Indian novelists inspired by the rich legacy of their culture and history and confronted by the varied realities of life, both gentle and harsh, have been enjoying the liberty of creative exuberance while painting the literary landscapes with remarkable aesthetic prowess and linguistic ingenuity. However, this trajectory is not without streaks of scepticism. To Uma Parameswaran, the Indian English novel seemed 'destined to die'. Way back in 1974, she pronounced in her book, *A Study of Representative Indo-Anglian Novelists*, "I set AD 2000 as the dirge-date for Indo-Anglian literature" (Iyengar 706). Equally prognostic was V. S. Naipaul when he declared [while announcing in October 2004 that *Magic Seeds* (2004), which was a sequel to *Half a Life* (2001), might be his last novel] that he had no faith in the survival of the novel; the novel was dead. But with the passage of time, the constant pursuit of our writers has proved all such postulations or premature obituary notices wrong for the Indian English novel is still pulsating with a rich variety of life and creative fecundity demonstrating the novelists' undimmed faith in the art form. On the other hand, we have also been discoursing upon 'the death of the author', Roland Barthes' post-structuralist stance, but the intricate relationship between the book and the author has been an undeniable truth about creativity. To my mind, it is a matter of shift in critical focus. The writer's voice may be momentarily taken over by the reader's response to the text, but his/her productive muse remains active.

However, the latest threat is a little different for it targets not the author or his art but the form and medium of the art. It is not a theoretical targeting but a material recasting. E-books are invading the territory of their printed brethren. This new generation digital form enriched by internet and graphics no doubt gives widest access to the readers as it flashes at a time on numerous screens of desktops, laptops, palmtops with a mere touch at the keyboard, but it also demands quicker response than the printed text providing lesser opportunity to discover the surplus of meaning. Besides, innumerable readers feel incompatible and uncomfortable with the frequently changing methodology of online reading. To Anita Nair who values the tenth anniversary print version of her book, *Ladies*

Coupe, first published in 2000, more than its e-version, e-reading is a "one dimensional experience" (Nair 5). Certainly, e-books cannot match the reader's feel of a book in hand, a feel that helps the reader enjoy both physical attraction and intimacy. No wonder, John Gilkey, the famous thief of rare books, got away with books worth lakhs of dollars, or Daniel Spiegelman stole rare Medieval and Renaissance English manuscripts and Arabic and Persian manuscripts of the tenth century from Columbia University library that prompted Travis McDate to write *The Book Thief: the True Crimes of Daniel Spiegelman* (2006). A. R. Venkatachalapathy's recent chronicle, *The Province of Books: Scholars, Scribes and Scribblers in Colonial Tamilnadu* (2012), though centred on the publications in Tamil language only, gives a fair impression of the long cherished print culture in India. In US and Europe, the bookshops are reported to be under enormous pressure. But in India the scenario is not that bleak, for millions of booklovers of this huge potential market throng the counters because they prefer to relate themselves with printed books even though they are expensive. World Book Fairs in New Delhi and Kolkata, and various National Book Fairs in state capitals, which are but a mix of commerce, culture and socio-political and literary aspirations of our country, are annually attended by a large number of people of all age groups, and more books are being sold (also through online shopping) than ever before. Thousands of publishers are producing nearly one-lakh titles a year in various languages. No doubt, the fall in the reading habit of people who remain glued to the TV, which Shashi Tharoor aptly calls 'the weapon of mass distraction', is a matter of concern, but the spirit of the book scholars and bibliophiles seems to be indomitable.

II

Simultaneously, there has been a wave of fiction writing in our country. Going even by a conservative estimate, there are millions of stories at work in Indian languages, and the contribution of writers writing in English to this huge corpus is sizeable. The monetary aspect of this love for writing is both good and bad – good because it improves the financial status of the hitherto ill-paid writer, and bad because the writer's imagination becomes market-driven subjugating the power of the mind to the power of money. However, it is quite encouraging to find that the Indian English novelists, particularly after the resounding successes of Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga and others, are relatively free from the anxiety of being writers writing in an originally foreign language. This has been possible because this acquired language

has been cultivated in India with industry and care, and, thus, it has become almost a natural medium of our communication and creativity. The nuances of the transition in the socio-cultural realities are being captured quite well by the new intelligentsia. At times, the unimpressed literary editors comment adversely on the mushrooming breed of pulp fiction writers or Page 3 celebrities dabbling in fiction saying that they do have their stories to tell but they lack skilful delineation of experience. But it is an undeniable fact that the Indian English writers are coming out with well deliberated sentences in their works showing awareness of the intricacies of both art and craft. After all, craft is a growing proposition, and the novelist, as Orhan Pamuk rightly believes, cannot imagine all the leaves of the tree of his novel. He has to progress to the trunk and then to the branches for developing a closer and clearer perception of the leaves. Our creative writers' clarity of thought and correctness and conciseness of expression, qualities necessary for full communication of experience and truth, have unified to a commendable extent their language with their literature – language being the dress of the thoughts and literature the thought of the thinking souls. Casualness of tone and randomness of organization, if any, have given way to cohesion of form and content. This, however, does not deny the reader either critical scrutiny of the work or the favourite discourse in classrooms and creative writing workshops on author choosing the word or word adopting the author.

It is not imperative, I think, for the Indian writers writing in English to imitate the finesse of the Western elites. It is, indeed, a weakness rooted partly in the hidden desire to get quick acknowledgement or recognition from the West and partly in the fear that Indian experience may get marginalized if it is not written in English, a global link language, and if it is not written in a manner that appeals to the West. Both Raja Rao and Kamala Das have already emphasized the self-sufficiency and efficacy of our English that has been naturalized in our creative consciousness through centuries of use. It has reinvented itself so competently as to become the language of our dreams and love, a distinction P. Lal underlined all through his life. In addition, this colonial language of global domination has been a language of our anti-colonial resistance. Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Sri Rajagopalachari and many others employed it with felicity to fight back the Empire. So our English today is undoubtedly one of the Indian languages with perceptible resonances of the spirit of Indianness, and its history in India may be called a history of shift from linguistic imperialism to linguistic globalization.

Since literature is primarily self-expression, writing in any language that comes natural, and one feels comfortable in, is respectable. "If that language happens to be English, the creative choice must be respected and one should judge by results rather than by dismal prophecies of what the result must fail to be" (Rajan 109). Turkish writer Elif Shafak, the author of *The Bastard of Istanbul* (2007), writes in English. Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk writes in Turkish, and he never thought of a situation of not writing in his native language. To him, a second language seems artificial. Caribbean Indian Nobel Prize winner Sir V. S. Naipaul, though he writes in English, has been showing in his novels his concern about the inappropriateness of 'English' education in India. In South African Nobel Prize winner J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace* (1999), even the white man, the chief protagonist whose mother tongue is English, finds it difficult to achieve true and full communication in South Africa through the English language. Therefore, it is obvious that the challenge of communicating an experience successfully – feelingly and with understanding – is common to all writers of all languages, native or non-native. What is important is the linguistic competence of the writer in articulating the experience and its quality.

For the Indian writers, English is as legitimate and relevant as any other Indian language and its literature. They render in English their individual vision without compromise and without disregard to their native languages. In fact, our indigenous languages with their evocative idioms are a great asset to our writers in English. The West may go on pejoratively calling our indigenous languages, our *Bhashas*, 'vernaculars', suggesting inferiority, but they are potential enough to ensure and convey our dignity and cultural identity. Our regional and tribal languages are a vast cultural resource. The only caution needed for the Indian English writers is to avoid indulgence in counter-cultural ways of looking at things so that their vision remains rooted in the soil and they do not suffer from ignorance of the past, particularly while handling the vital issue of cultural conflict or cultural synthesis. And if our English expression in this effort acquires regional tonality, which Rushdie calls 'Chutnified English', it should not be taken as a liability for we are a multilingual nation with 109 'mother tongues', as per the 1971 Census, and our English texts may legitimately have cultural sub-texts. And isn't British English enriched by Irish, Scottish, Scandinavian and other European dialects? Its "cosmopolitan character", as says C. D. Narasimhaiah, consists of "its Celtic imaginativeness, the Scottish vigour, the Saxon concreteness, the Welsh music, and the American brazenness" (Narasimhaiah 8).

So why feel shy if R. K. Narayan's texts have Tamil overtones, Raja Rao's and A. K. Ramanujan's reflect Kannada culture, Bhabani Bhattacharya's have Bengali echoes, V. S. Naipaul's contain West Indies Indian dialect, Jayant Mahapatra's poetry has Oriya music, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) has Malayalam flavour and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) has Bhojpuri sonority (in the folksongs) that echoes louder in the "dham-dhamak-dhamakaoing thunder" in his *River of Smoke* (2011)? These are part of the growing confidence of the Indian writers offering *Bhasha* determiners for authentic rendering of an Indian experience, without Western/English lexical equivalents, without furnishing a glossary. To me, these are parallel to Edward Said's identification of political subtext, Michel Foucault's discovery of power game at the root of every text, and Antonio Gramsci's noticing of hegemony behind all literary texts. This remarkable feature of code switching or code mixing, as we call it, is nothing but English sharing the linguistic diversity of India. I look at it as a promising note, as a mode of resistance against the marginalization of our *Bhasha* literatures – Maithili, Bhojpuri, Dogri, Punjabi, Oriya, Marathi, Assamese, Kashmiri, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and the like. Elitism making room for the voice of the masses is a way of joining the purpose of communication with the objective and opportunity of both gaining and imparting a vast resource of knowledge. Our writers are enhancing this communication without losing the grains of our culture, our history, our continuity and our dignity even in the mad rush towards modernity or post-modernity. This helps in promoting a global understanding of Indian realities, and in propagating our indigenous traditions in English language showing our writers' ability to identify with 'others', as Chinua Achebe did in his Nigerian context with success. Orhan Pamuk rightly believes that writing a novel is also managing the emotions of the readers, the others.

Consequently, our readers' choice is not limited today for we have a variety of engaging narratives, canonical and counter canonical, traditional and innovative, literary and commercial. We have women's writing, crime fiction, terror novels, science fiction, campus novels, animal novels, graphic novels, disability texts, LGBT voices, dalit writing, slumdog narratives, eco-narratives, children's writing, narratives of myth and fantasy, philosophical novels, historical novels, postcolonial and multicultural narratives, and Diaspora novels – all presenting new structures of feeling, at times disturbing, in their portrayal of human predicament. This categorization is chiefly for identifying the central burden of the texts and their literary aura, and not for compartmentalizing literature for there cannot be sharp dividing lines between science fiction

and historical fiction, women's writing and eco-narratives. Fictional writings cannot be pigeonholed with fixities in critical readings, nor can trends in writing be shackled in time and space. The first decade of the twenty-first century has come to a close and we have entered the second. It is time to look into the substance, texture and structure of this art form for articulating the defining features of our contemporary novel so rich and diverse in interest and so well set in varying locales by our suitably gifted writers.

III

The novels that contextualize gender related issues and articulate the power of the gender draw our attention quite magnetically. Women writers are fearlessly giving full and candid expression to female consciousness and experiences exploring the secret spaces of women and the difficult terrains of their lives, their love and betrayal, melancholy and anger (at times bursting defiantly into 'slut walks' for social protest). They are also interrogating and refuting the notion of woman as a possession or as a mere instrument of procreation. Since they have identified the oppression of woman as a naturalized condition in the narratives of the past, their contemporary narratives are aimed at redefining the state of the woman in the new contexts of Arthshastra and Kamasutra.

Shashi Deshpande has been untiringly progressing with her brand India emphasis on the golden mean of feminism in her novels. In *Moving On* (2004), the discovery of the past from father's diary leads the female protagonist to a harmonious companionship in the present. Nostalgia reconciled with reality gives momentum to life. In *In the Country of Deceit* (2008), life stumbles between love and betrayal, between adultery producing guilt and inability to secure happiness in marriage recounting mother's suffering and death after father's suicide. Deshpande shows how women become victims of deceit and self-deceit. In addition, her novella, *Ships That Pass* (2012), is her latest 'meditation on the nature of love and marriage'. Deshpande's concern with the representation of women in the society and their condition has led her to explore female consciousness in such a manner as to show women's evolution towards an awakened conscience eventually leading to their enrichment. Self-introspection and self-discovery help Deshpande's female characters in realizing their veiled inner strength.

Manju Kapur looks into the matrix of pains and passions of the housewives of middle class Indian families with her awareness of the women's existential concerns in *A Married Woman* (2002), of the tension

between tradition and modernity in *Home* (2006) and of the difficulties faced by the women in the alien world in *The Immigrant* (2008). Jaishree Misra weaves in her emotive prose an Osbornean tale of a wife-husband relationship with a daughter as its third determiner in *A Scandalous Secret* (2011). This reminds us of Shilpi Somaya Gowda's novel, *Secret Daughter* (2010). Mridula Koshy's debut novel, *Not Only the Things that Happened* (2012), internationally titled as *Lost Boy*, is a grim narrative of abandonment and despair. Meher Pestonji portrays in her novel, *Parvez* (2003), the interpersonal relationships and dilemmas of a Parsi woman who liberates herself from her past. Githa Hariharan writes in a delightful prose with precision, subtlety and touches of humour, and her novels are invariably taken as works of power-politics in some or the other way. In her recent novel, *In Times of Siege* (2003), she has shown through her probing into the trials and tribulations of a working class life how the political perception of her academic protagonist takes shape under the spell of a younger woman. Sensual passions in this novel negotiate with socio-political exigencies. Between the contesting currents of history and mythology, the novel also questions as to who owns the past and how one can make it one's present.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni re-tells *The Mahabharata* from a woman's point of view in *The Palace of Illusions* (2008). Sunetra Gupta, essentially cosmopolitan and deeply concerned about the moral and emotional dislocations across time and space, depicts in her resonating prose the condition of women, their dreams and deaths, in a typical postcolonial style in her novels. Her *So Good in Black* (2009), a character-driven literary fiction exploring 'the market of ethical imperialism', is a little wider in concern. Through her protagonist, a fashionable industrialist who donates chalk-mixed milk to the starving children, she points to the moral turpitude of the institutionalized power that drives the present-day market. Namita Devidayal's *Aftertaste* (2010) reflects on the ethics and morality of business-minded people to whom only money, not love, matters. Manjul Bajaj fictionalizes the burning social issue of honour killing of the young lovers and the ostracization of their families in her novel, *Come, Before Evening Falls* (2009). Namita Gokhale's *Priya in Incredible Indyaa* (2011) is a satiric comedy parodying the lifestyle of the metropolitan elites. After her intense engagement with the problem of female foeticide in her Costa Book Award-winning first novel, *Witness the Night* (2010), Kishwar Desai has sharpened her character, Simran Singh's investigative gaze further in *Origins of Love* (2012) which exposes the whole nexus of surrogacy, now a global proxy industry equipped with stem cells. Mamang Dai gives forceful expression to the realities of the

Northeast mixed with its myths, oral histories and traditions in her *The Legends of Pensam* (2006) and *Stupid Cupid* (2009). Pensam, meaning 'in-between', symbolizes the hidden spaces in the Adi tribe's heart where a secret garden grows in spite of the violence lurking behind the serene hills of Arunanchal Pradesh. The Cardiff (Wales)-based novelist of Meghalaya, Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* (2010), though it is a postcolonial Diaspora novel, tries to locate meaning and identity in the ethnic and political unrest in Shillong. And Jahnavi Barua's *Rebirth* (2011) is a psychological novel with the Assamese traditions and the river Brahmaputra as resilient cultural icons in the face of politics and globalization. These quality productions invalidate all denigrating comments on the women writers and their writing. They are in no way casual scribblers or impoverished talents scribbling what V. S. Naipaul calls 'feminine tosh' on domestic themes. On the contrary, they are conscious artists mapping life, with maturity, on the scales of instinct, emotion and intellect in the contemporary world.

Of the young generation chick-lit giving a titillating tinge to the new age writing, Madhuri Banerjee's *Losing My Virginity and Other Dumb Ideas* (2011), Ismita Tandon Dhankher's *Love on the Rocks* (2011), Rajoshree Chakraborti's *Baloonists* (2010) and Swati Kaushal's *A Piece of Cake* (2011) are brutally honest and bold romantic narratives of love, sensuality and corporate intrigue. K. R. Indira's forthcoming book, *Women's Kamasutra*, originally written in Malayalam and published as *Straina Kamasutra*, though it is not a novel, deserves a mention in this context for it assertively talks of the desirability of males for a female based on a survey on women with 50 questions. It, thus, counterbalances the male-dominated view of sex as found in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* (expatiated in English by Yashodhara Acharya and published by Richard Burton in 1833), or in the Pawan K. Verma and Sandhya Mirchandani-written *Kamasutra: The Art of Making Love to a Woman* (2007).

The Indian crime fiction, detective novel and science fiction, though they are not so developed as other genres, are also making room for themselves on the bookshelves. We may not have a home-grown Agatha Christie or Fredrick Forsythe, Arthur Conan Doyle or Isaac Asimov so far, but we certainly have some highly promising signatures. Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2007) is a novel of epical dimension about the organized crime world of the modern-day Mumbai, whose female face may be seen in S. Hussain Zaidi and Jane Borges' non-fiction, *Mafia Queens of Mumbai* (2011). K. Srilata's *Table of Four* (2009), Vish Puri's debut novel, *The Case of the Missing Servant* (2010), Ashok Banker's *Blood Red Sari* (2010), the first book of *The Kali Quartet*, a feminist series

full of wild imagery, romance and passionate adventure, Aruna Gill's *The Indus Intercept* (2012), and Kalpana Swaminathan's *The Secret Gardener* (2013) are acknowledged detective and psychological thrillers. Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key* (2012) is an anthropological thriller. Swati Kaushal's *Drop Dead: A Niki Marwah Mystery* (2012) and Madhumita Bhattacharya's *The Masala Murder* (2012) introduce women's point of view of violence and crime mixed with food and romance. Anu Kumar's *It Takes a Murder* (2012) is another dark narrative of love, loss and fury framed around the political happenings in the 1980s. Arvind Nayar's debut novel, *Operation Karakoram* (2005), is perhaps the first authentic replication of espionage and political conspiracy in the backdrop of 1995 India-Pakistan diplomatic relations. Exploring the gaps in the colonial narratives about Indian thugs, Tabish Khair has created a glamourous crime story, partly Victorian in setting, in his *The Thing about Thugs* (2009). Jeet Thayil's DSC Prize-winning debut novel, *Narcopolis* (2011), which has Baudelairean shades of *Artificial Paradises: Opium and Hashish* (1860), pans along the bloodstream of the drug addicts in the opium dens and brothels of Mumbai of the late 1970s and traces the nineteenth century history of this poisonous trade. Githa Hariharan's *Fugitive Histories* (2009) gives sordid glimpses of Gujarat riots with odours of hate and betrayal emanating from shared living. Peggy Mohan's *The Youngest Suspect* (2012) is also a grim tale about the Godhara massacre.

I think, the necessity now is to study the compromise of the crime fiction with the technologies and its impact on the crime graph of society because crime fiction has now grown from the grotesque to the menacingly dangerous. It has now graduated into terror novel having merciless mass killing and war against nation-state as its favourite stuff, like Shashi Warrier's *The Homecoming* (2008) that shows the impact of insurgency in Kashmir, or Omair Ahmad's *Jimmy the Terrorist* (2010) that gives a look into a terrorist's psyche. Journalist Abhisar Sharma's *The Edge of the Machete* (2012) has been written in the backdrop of Taliban's terrorist activities in Khyber (Pakistan), and former Army Officer Mukul Deva's *The Dust Will Never Settle* (2012) is about terror-strikes in Jerusalem. Concurrently, the fight against fundamentalism or totalitarianism has also been portrayed in a symbolic manner. Neel Kamal Puri's *Remember to Forget* (2012) is an attempt to recover from the sad memory of the separatist Khalistan movement, and Mainak Dhar's *Zombiestan* (2012) shows how the Taliban terrorists turned biting zombies (by inhaling toxic chemicals) can be countered or escaped. Tabish Khair's *How to Fight Islamist Terror from the Missionary Position* (2012) shows

how the immigrants pattern and push their love and life amid fears of Islamist intolerance following the Prophet's cartoon controversy in Denmark. Mixed with irreverent humour, the novel is an acerbic but healthy satire on orthodoxy and fanaticism. In Timeri N. Murari's recent novel, *The Taliban Cricket Club* (2012), the game of cricket has been used as a metaphor for orderliness, moral principles and healthy fellow feeling – all contrasting the brutal image of the Taliban. With an Indian counterpart in its cross-border love story, the objective of securing emancipation from the coercive authority of forces apathetic to democratic liberalism has been made clear. The novel hints at the possibility of change in attitude and culture. Maybe, the Alex Strick van Linschoten *et al*-edited forthcoming book, *The Poetry of the Taliban*, which contains English translations of Pashto love poems by the terrorists, will voice, if not banned, the repressed lyricism of the ultras and strengthen Timeri N. Murari's hope of transformation.

Payal Dhar's science fiction trilogy – *A Shadow on Eternity* (2006), *The Key to Chaos* (2007) and *The Timeless Land* (2009) – takes the reader on an adventurous expedition to 'a surrealistic or hyper-realistic land' where the protagonist, enthused by her sense of duty and sacrifice, faces stiff resistance in her attempt to gain control over the 'sands' of 'time'. Suchitra Mathur discovers the politics of gender in science fiction with reference to three works – a short story, 'Sultana's Dream' (1905), by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a play, *Harvest* (1996), by Manjula Padmanabhan, and a novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996), by Amitav Ghosh.

IV

A rapidly flourishing sub-genre of fictional writing is the 'campus novel' that may trace its literary ancestry in R. K. Narayan's *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937) and Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English August: An Indian Story* (1988). The life and activities in educational institutions form the content of this type of novel which has so far been chiefly urban and written by students rather than teachers. Interspersed with irony and humour, intellectual flare and emotional overbearing, these tales of dreams and disappointments, intrigues and manipulations, love and longing, friendship and rivalry, curiosity and casualness, career concerns and job worries have rocked the new generation readers who identify themselves with the narratives quite temperamentally. The strength of this new age pop fiction lies in its directness of the experience recorded and the lightheartedness of its reading, even if the plot or the sub-plot is a little

complex. Chetan Bhagat may be called the present leader of this school of fiction writers for it was his *five point someone* (2004) which set the tone of this sub-genre high, and also made possible a grand box-office hit, 'Three Idiots'. Other subsequent publications are Abhijit Bhaduri's *Mediocre but Arrogant* (2005), an expanded image of MBA set in a management institute of Jamshedpur, and its sequel, *Married but Available* (2008), a search for inspiration within the corporate world to achieve self-actualization. Tushar Raheja's *Anything for You, Ma'am* (2006) is a love story of an IITian, and Srividya Natarajan's *No Onions, Nor Garlic* (2006) is a hilarious Wodehousean satire on the academic life of an English department. Amitabha Bagchi's *Above Average* (2007), an IITian's sensitive account of the difficulties in chasing a goal, and Harshdeep Jolly's *Everything You Desire: A Journey through IIM* (2007) are also notable works. Soma Das's *Sumthing of a Mocktale* (2007), a sketch of JNU's jeans-jhola-kurta culture, Kausik Sircar's *Three Makes a Crowd* (2007), an account of hostel life and escapades of the students of a military college, and Ritesh Sharma and Neeraj Pahlajani's *Joker in the Pack* (2007), an irreverent view of life at IIMs, are further additions. Karan Bajaj's *Keep Off the Grass* (2008) is about a banker, and Mainak Dhar's *Funda of Mixology* (2008) shows how life gives lessons that IIM curriculums cannot. Sachin Garg's *A Sunny Shady Life* (2010) is an icy love story of a student of Delhi College of Engineering. Siddharth Chowdhury's *Day Scholar* (2010) is a coming-of-age tale set in a Delhi boys' hostel, and Chetan Bhagat's *Revolution 2020* (2011) is a story of love, ambition and corruption partially set in BHU, Varanasi. Satyajit Sarna's *The Angel's Share* (2012) runs through the dark zones of the campus life in the National Law School of India University (NLSIU), Bangalore. It has love, sex, drug, dance, betrayal and death as its components. The campus novel, I think, will acquire a different dignity altogether the day it prefers to be a serious narrative, instead of being an easy-breezy read, the day it chooses to portray, for example, a dreamy ideal protagonist shattered and silenced by the society he dreams for. The case of Satyendra Dubey, the brilliant IITian whistleblower against corruption whose cruel dismissal from the world left all well-meaning people in everlasting pain, for instance, may be a respectable choice.

There are also novels about adolescent school students. Sandeep Chakravarti's *Tin Fish* (2005) delves into the psyche of a teenager in Mayo College boarding school, and Anirban Bose's *Bombay Rains Bombay Girls* (2008) reveals the protagonist's mind in the making in the milieu of a medical school. Swati Kaushal's young adult novel, *A Girl Like Me* (2008), and Revathi Suresh's debut novel, *Jobless, Clueless,*

Reckless (2013), are non-didactic narratives dealing with teenage exuberance and angst amid complexities of relationships. Subham Basu's *Glian, the Son of Nature* (2007) is more an animal novel than a campus novel for it overwhelmingly reflects the writer's love of wild life. Nilanjana Roy's debut novel, *The Wildings* (2012), portrays quite imaginatively an urban animal world hanging around a clan of cats in the Nizamuddin area of Delhi.

The emergence of graphic novel, which is a kind of parallel narrative with complimentary text and illustration, is also a heartening feature. Ashok Banker's *Prince of Ayodhya* (2003), Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* (2004), *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers* (2007) and *The Harappa Files* (2011), Amruta Patil's *Kari* (2008), which has a gay/lesbian theme, and Gautam Bhatiya's *Lie: A Traditional Tale of Modern India* (2010) are highly evocative path-breaking graphic novels that demand a change in the reader's response. They are thrilling and subtle at the same time as they handle both comic and serious issues using the communicative techniques of cartoon and painting. This new generation novel recreates ancient classics, biographies and mythologies in such a fashion as to give contemporary realities a formidable backdrop and cultural heritage. Ashok Banker with his Anglo-Indian Christian upbringing and orientation of mind has tried to transport his readers back to the ancient times and places through a series of graphic narratives underlining the indispensable love and humanitarianism in the tales from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the Indian chronicles. Srividya Natarajan's *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* (2012) is a novel with graphic illustrations by Aparajita Ninan. In future, we may have digital graphic novels.

Incapacitated humanity with painful and limited freedom is the chief metaphor for disability. And to explore this metaphor in literature, 'disability studies' has emerged as a nascent branch of critical enquiry for now we have narratives addressing the issues of the disabled ones, whom we prefer to call differently able ones. A variety of autism or learning disabilities of individuals is progressively occupying the creative imagination of our writers (also film/TV-serial makers: 'Black', 'Tare Zamin Par', and 'Antara' are unforgettable productions in the visual media). Prominent among them are Dyslexia (difficulty in reading words), Dysgraphia (difficulty in writing), Dyscalculia (difficulty with Mathematics), Dysphasia/Aphasia (difficulty with language), Dyspraxia (disorder in sensory integration or difficulty with fine motor skills), Auditory Processing Disorder (difficulty in recognizing and interpreting sounds) and Visual Processing Disorder (difficulty in interpreting images

of visual information). New writers are extending the disability concerns of their predecessors such as Firdaus Kanga, who portrayed wheelchair-confined tiny Brit with his bones as brittle as glass in *Trying to Grow* (1991), and Vikram Seth who handled the stone deafness of Julia, the pianist, in *An Equal Music* (1999). Susmita Bagchi, for example, has written *Children of a Better God* (2010) which is a touching tale of agony and courage of the disabled teenagers. In Hari Kunzru's novel, *Gods without Men* (2011), too, an autistic child is central to all searches. Muscular dystrophy has been a big bane in a child's growth and education. Palsy-stricken Malini Chib's *One Little Finger* (2011), though it is an autobiography, gives an authentic account of a spastic's battle for control over voluntary muscles. Very recently, a visually challenged teenager, Viswanath Venkat Dasari, has fictionalized Indian and Egyptian myths in his *Pharaoh and the King* (2011). In this context, it is heartening to hear now that core courses in this area of concern are being formulated (perhaps IGNOU is taking the lead) to be introduced in the university curricula.

Mental disorder is another area of human concern that poses a challenge in narratology. Pramila Balasundaram has handled this challenge quite successfully. Writing with considerable emotional sensitivity, she has given us a novel, *Sunny's Story* (2005), exclusively addressed to mental disorder. Jerry Pinto's debut novel, *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012), is another notable success. It is a family drama of a mentally sick mother, an understanding father and a mystified but intrigued son in between whose cognitive brilliance as narrator makes the tale a discerning psychological masterpiece.

V

The lesbian and gay novels as narratives of social change resisting their subaltern status have rocked the traditional mindset. Being narcissistic and controversial, having trans-disciplinary perspectives – legal, social, cultural, moral and psychological, they offer alternative structures of feeling about sexuality or trans-sexuality. In their nurturing of human impulses of a different kind, which is but a way of retrieving the unacknowledged self by breaking the taboos and mastering the trepidations, they leave their readers discoursing upon the question – Is it virility gone astray or is it as natural as bisexuality? Queer as they are, they deal with the notion of sexual non-conformity and probe into the grey areas of human relationship. Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conservations of Cow* (1985), which expounds diasporic lesbianism or feminist socialism with a

misogynistic lesbian character in the centre, and the Khushwant Singh and Shobha De-edited *Uncertain Liaisons: Sex, Strife and Togetherness in Urban India* (1993) are significant past studies in sexuality and companionship. They show the attitudinal change in men and women and the resultant change in the narrative logic of realistic novel. Of the recent writings, Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* (2005) is a lesbian novel about a 16-year-young Brahmin girl's sexual adventures with a classmate and two older women. It revives to our memory both Ishmat Chugtai's *The Quilt and Other Stories* (1944), the English translation of Urdu *Lihaaf* (1942) in which the sexually starved protagonist shares bed with the maidservant, and Shobha De's *Strange Obsession* (1992) where the gorgeous supermodel, Amrita, meets disastrous consequences in her relationship with Minx. In Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman,* too, lesbianism is an alternative mode of sexual relationship.

Narratives exploring the veiled domains of gay-sexuality have also come up with force. Himself a gay, R. Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* (2003), one of the pioneer gay novels in India, and *Hostel Room 131* (2010) show his continued drive for alternative literature. Mayur Patel's *Vivek and I* (2010) unravels a school teacher's infatuation for his student, and Mahesh Natrajan's *Pink Sheep* (2010) deals with a series of confrontations between instinctual radicalism and rational conservatism. The latest addition to this type is Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's *The Exiles* (2011) which is about a homosexual man's extramarital affairs and his wife's resultant confusion, shame and suffering. All the three characters live their individual exiles.

In other literary genres also, there are works that have established a parallel trend of addressing the sexual longings and dilemmas of individuals authentically. For instance, the Hoshang Merchant-edited *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia* (1999) is a book of poems and stories of same sex love, which in India he finds different from that in the West. Rahul Mehta's authentic gay fiction, *Quarantine* (2010), which has other concerns also (besides seeking answer to the fundamental questions about identity and dislocation – Who am I? Why am I here?), and which reminds us of Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944), is a collection of finely crafted stories. Parvati Sharma's *The Dead Camel and Other Stories of Love* (2010) is a highly sensuous lesbian text. The Minal Hijratwala-edited *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* (2012) is a notable queer text. A. Revathi's *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010) where the feelings of a girl are embodied in a boy, whose life makes an anthropological study, is the English translation (by V. Geetha) of a eunuch's autobiography originally written in Tamil. In yet another art form, painting, gay painters like Balbir Krishan and others painting nude

males, despite social excommunication and volatile public reaction, are holding their brush rather firmly. Besides, the LGBT community gives expression to its struggle for identity, equality and dignity through various gatherings. At Koovagam in Tamil Nadu, the transgender people re-enact in May-June every year the marriage of Mohini, Lord Krishna's transformed self, with Aravan, the son of Prince Arjuna, and her subsequent widowhood in the *Mahabharata.* In the US, the community annually holds its Pride March in June in which the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association, New York City (SALGA-NYC) is a major participant.

Thus, the writings, paintings and protest marches echoing the LGBT voices show how the lesbian, the gay, the bi-sexual and the transgender people standing between private choice and public bewilderment are agitated in their private life and tormented by public questions sounding gender apartheid. Being segregated from the mainstream, they face severe derision and ridicule of the society declaring them as perverts. Nevertheless, the LGBT text writers are pushing this genre ahead with a great thrust to show that what matters is not the gender or sex but the state of mind, the happiness and sharing in togetherness. And the repealing of the Article 377 of the IPC on July 12, 2009 decriminalizing same gender consensual sex has proved to be a shot in their arm, which may be further boosted by the 'Draft National Youth Policy 2012' of the Ministry of Youth Affairs intended to make suitable policy intervention in the matter. The struggle of the members of the LGBT community for recognition of their self-sufficiency, though it is not free from the question of procreativity and the danger of STDs, has increased the cultural and aesthetic activism of the creative writers and other artists. The HIV/AIDS narratives, a literary genre of Afro-American origin in the 1980s, have added bio-political and techno-scientific dimensions to the lesbian and gay novels in the current wake of globalization. Dr Sunil Vaid's *Mortal Cure: A Novel* (2007), like Siddharth Dube's non-fiction, *Sex, Lies and AIDS* (2001), or Mahesh Dattani's play, *A Different Season* (2005), or the Negar Akhavi-edited collection of ethnographic reportage and fiction, *AIDS Sutra: Untold Stories from India* (2008), is a search for the remedy for this physical and emotional stigma. It is time to examine and assess, both carefully and comprehensively, the legitimacy of providing space to such alternative literatures in the academic domain.

VI

The dalit writing of protest against the subalternity of the dalit is another literary movement in spate from the 1980s. It emphasizes the necessity of a change in the popular perception about this sociological issue through the portrayal of the psychodynamics of a dalit's life. From Mulk Raj Anand's classic novel, *Untouchable* (1935), to Cyrus Mistry's *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* (2012) [Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003) and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2010) in between], one may find the dalit perspectives of life in eventful narrations. The Mahars, whose age-old social responsibility in Shankarrao Kharat's story, 'A Corpse in the Well' (1994), is to dispose of the carcasses, and the Khandhias, who bear corpses to the Parsi Tower of Silence in Mistry's *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer,* are fated to receive similar inhuman treatment. Call them Harijan or Antyaja or Panchama or Paravan or Pariah, they are all untouchable outcastes sharing the fate of the marginalized. Noticeably, the manifestations of social disparity and the ramifications of man's cruelty to man also form the content of Mistry's first novel, *The Radiance of Ashes* (2006 in India). Luxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* (1998), the English translation (by P. A. Kolharkar) of his Marathi autobiographical novel, *Uchalya* (1987), which won him the Sahitya Akademi Award, is a notable work of this brand of the past. Tamil dalit novelist, Bama Faustina's works that tell of indignities suffered by the social outcastes, whose younger generation occasionally indulges in acts of defiance, are now available in English translation. She shares the pains of the downtrodden creatively and thus tries to give a shape to their history and fate. Lakshmi Holmstrom has translated her *Karukku* (2000), which inspired Revathi to write her autobiography. The first dalit woman writer, P. Sivakami's portrayal of tribal women as concubines in her novel, *The Grip of Change* (2006), originally written in Tamil, is a protest against the dalitization of female body through sexual subjugation by the men, both upper caste and dalit. *The Araya Woman* (2010) is the English translation by Catherine Thankamma of the first South Indian tribal novelist, Narayan's anthropological debut novel, *Kocharethi*. Srividya Natarajan's *A Gardener in the Wasteland: Jotiba Phule's Fight for Liberty* (2012) is another notable novel that tells the story of the famous social reformer of Maharashtra who worked for women's education and the rights of the shudras.

The dalit literature has also gained energy from the socio-political stand of the Ambedkar-Phule-ideology-inspired neo-Buddhists as reflected

in the different dalit narratives, other than novels, looking for the answer to several questions implied in the struggle of the dalit community. Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003), translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, is a highly significant dalit narrative. Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), translated from Marathi by Alok Mukherjee, is a key to the understanding of the dalit consciousness in the perspectives of Ambedkarism, Marxism and African American literature. The K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu-edited *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India, Dossier 1: Tamil and Malayalam* (2011), which covers 21 Tamil and 23 Malayalam writers, is 'an archival work' presenting almost an alternative history of our *Bhasha* literatures. The Ravi Kumar and R. Azhagarsan-edited *The Oxford Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (2012) presents a historical and political landscape of dalit writing through a mutually reinforcing mix of literary genres – poems, short stories, plays, excerpts from novels, biographies, autobiographies, speeches and articles. In addition, D. R. Nagaraj's contribution to dalit literature and criticism is unforgettable.

In brief, the dalit literature in India, somewhat like the black literature in America, deals with the location of the dalit in our caste-ridden society and their fight for self-respect and dignity, politico-cultural equality and socio-economic justice. It is, basically, a reaction against the Brahminical view of life, the Vedic foundations of social structure. But two negative features of this fight are noticeable. Firstly, the allegations are so common in nature and substance that they sound mandatory promoting a culture of controversy and sentimentality for gaining political capital. The ritualistic accusations look melting in the co-sharing of power politics. And, secondly, the response to the given situation is so ambivalent that it becomes self-defeating. Initially, they differentiated between the dalit writing by a dalit and that by a non-dalit. They labelled the works of even Premchand, Phanishwar Nath Renu, Mulk Raj Anand and Mahasweta Devi as 'discourse(s) of pity'. But of late, a parallel structure within the community of dalit writers has evolved. Now the writing of US-based Narendra Jadhav, for instance, is not accepted as a representative document for the simple reason that the writer has become an elite settled in his dreamland. His English language proficiency and Western experience have become a hindrance, a disqualification. This, by implication, both vindicates and interrogates Alok Mukherjee's stand that "English education for the Dalits in India … alone can empower and emancipate the historically disenfranchised Dalits" (*'The Gift of English': English Education and the Formation of Alternative Hegemonies in India*) because emancipation also involves elitism. Then does it not suggest that

every dalit who receives English education ceases to be a dalit, because English is a mantra of elitism? In addition, is the egalitarian system of our higher education that advocates for equal right and opportunity responsible for this, because it overlooks the fact that not everybody is equally eligible for this equal opportunity? There may be dissenting responses to these questions, but at least this much is clearly perceptible that a kind of *varna vyavastha* is working out its pattern within the frame of the dalit community. Bama has addressed (with apparent discomfiture because she does not relish others' handling of the dalit's fate, a non-pluralistic hegemonic posture) this problem of inequality and hatred, rivalry and vengeance among different dalit communities in her novel, *Vanmam* (*Vendetta* 2008), translated by Malini Sheshadri. This sad reality, I believe, has emerged because the identity of a dalit has moved from the centre to the periphery of its own orbit. It has acquired associational meaning in the contemporary sociological frame making concerned ones think as to who is a dalit, anyway, and what are the positive aspects and frontiers of dalit literature. After all, there is no denying the fact that a corrupt elite or a corrupt dalit both are equally condemnable and dangerous for a civil society. Ostracization of the dalit by the dalit is also not uncommon. And one may not be a dalit necessarily by birth, like Phiroze Elchidana, son of the Head Priest of a Zoroastrian Fire Temple but a Khandhia by choice in *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*. He is capable of drafting in English the 'ultimatum' and the 'charter of demands' of the Union of Corpse Bearers. Phiroze's love for Sepideh, a Khandhia's daughter who he marries, helps him transcend all barriers of the living and the dead. In Vaidehi's *Vasudeva's Family* (2013), the English version of her Kannada novel, *Asprushyaru* (1980), also the evils of caste hierarchy have been exposed through the inter-caste marriage between a Brahmin and a woman of the lowly Korago community.

Not all narratives of the poor and the underprivileged can be straitjacketed in 'dalit literature'. Some of them may be better called 'slumdog narrative', which is a broader nomenclature inclusive of all underdogs, dalit or non-dalit. Delhi slum project, 'Hole in the Wall'-inspired Vikas Swarup's novel, *Q & A* (2005), later published as *Slumdog Millionaire*, which turned into the Oscar winning film, 'Slumdog Millionaire' (2008), is chiefly about the possibilities and limitations of a street orphan's intellectual evolution. The protagonist's name, Ram Mohammad Thomas, projects a synthesized identity of the destitute children of three religious sections of Indian society. Kavery Nambisan's *The Story That Must Not Be Told* (2008) is a truly slumdog novel from a surgeon's pen. It is a journey into the interiors of a Chennai slum,

ironically named 'Sitara', where the dwellers' aspirations are betrayed by life. The novel shows how Bharat, the indigenous self, and India, the postcolonial product, deny each other's identity as 'the affluent elites in their comfort zones' make themselves immune from the stark realities of life and society around.

VII

The anthropological realities are also intertwined with ecological concerns. The Biblical origin of eco-narratives may be located in the Garden of Eden. However, their later literary identity makes them offshoots of the American Transcendentalism of Emerson [*Nature* (1836)], Thoreau [*Walden* (1845)] and Fuller [*Summer on the Lakes During 1843* (1994)] and the British Romanticism of Gray [*Elegy* (1751)], Wordsworth [*The Prelude* (1850), though started in 1798] and his school. Eco-narratives reveal the innate relationship between literature and physical environment. Nature here is an anthropomorphic construct, a term that validates, in a way, the human with reference to the non-human. Unfortunately, nature today is being gobbled up by culture. Perhaps, it is this suffering that engages eco-writers and eco-feminists to identify human experiences with nature in their art. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2007) is a remarkably insightful anthropological eco-narrative showing a wider vision of humanity. Life and living are encapsulated here in the rhythms of the river. Situating man, animal and nature in a shared environment, Ghosh combines their fate together and gives a new treatment to the idea of conservation. He draws the reader's attention to both the flora and fauna of Sundarbans (which is constantly devastated by deforestation as well as other forms of ecocide) and the condition of the marginalized section of society living in that ecosphere. Their life is no better than that of the animals, though they are armed with theological beliefs. They struggle to survive in the wilderness. Man, animal and nature thus reinforce each other's predicament. This co-existential sharing lends a new dimension to the concept of multiculturalism and intertwines anthropocentrism with ecocentrism as "human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 7). Sree Vatsan's *Countryside Album* (2007) offers exotic sights of the picturesque Malabar and the traditions of the region that lend authenticity to the narration. Sarita Mandanna's *Tiger Hills* (2010) unfolds a classic story of love, longing and desperation in the misty landscapes of Coorg. And in *Gods without Men* (2011), Hari Kunzru discovers the affiliation of the landscape of California desert, the birthplace of both spiritual traditions and military experimentations, with