The Making of Global Success: Roy and Lahiri's Authentic Indian Fictions

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[**Abstract**: In this paper I critique the commodification of women's fictions in the era of India's economic liberalization. The unprecedented success of *The God of Small Things* was bought at a high cost as the marketing offensive served to contain Roy's feminist subversions and reconfigure Brand India novel in neo-Orientalist terms. This phenomenon—recognized as Indo-chic[1]—was replicated in a minor key three years later with the celebration of glamour, essential Indianness, and intimate representations of Bengaliness attributed to Jhumpa Lahiri. The great contemporary success of these women writers is, thus, an ambiguous triumph if political value were computed.]

The publication of *The God of Small Things* (hereafter *TGST*) in 1997 was, in some ways, the second coming of the Indian Novel in English on the world stage. The children of *Midnight's Children* (1981)—as the celebrated writers who followed in Rushdie's wake have been called—were predominantly male and, very often, academics writing the big national allegory. The few women writing domestic and relational fiction, who could make a mark during the Rushdiesque first act, occupied a distinctly marginal space. Mee remarks upon the mammoth size of the works produced by male writers like Alan Sealy, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Mukul Kesavan and Vikram Seth to "reimagine" the nation and contrasts them with the much slimmer and numerically fewer works of women novelists who deploy less assertive ways of negotiating the nation (35). Sunder Rajan also points out that not many women writers could successfully avail

themselves of the creative and commercial opportunity created by Rushdie (173-92). Discussing women writers of the 1980s and 1990s Rege opines, "Women writers had been caught in a coercive relationship with nation too long to find a further exploration of that relationship liberating. Rather they used the crises of nation as an opportunity to move away from its confining discourse. The new problem, however, was where they were to go" (129). The uncertainty and marginality attributed to women writers in this period disappeared with the astounding success of *TGST*.

In this paper I indicate the direction in which the globally visible and literary (as opposed to indigenous and commercial)[2] segment of Indian women's fictions began to move after Arundhati Roy's dazzling debut as a novelist. There is an underlying assumption in many popular articles and academic criticism that with *TGST*, a liberative negotiation with nation was set in motion for the Indian novel in English. However, a strong case can be made that due to the marketing blitz that attended its publication, the political value of experiential India represented in Roy's novel and valorized by some feminists as the delineation of "women's nation" was completely subsumed by regressive discourses of essential Indian femininity. In fact, Roy's decision of not writing and publishing fiction after *TGST* might have provided further opportunity for conservative marketers to distance women's literature from political purpose. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the consecration, both at home and abroad, of the Indian-American Jhumpa Lahiri—who is an occasional visitor to the country and quite uninterested in its political concerns—as the next big "Indian" fiction-writer after Roy.

The Contemporary Market and Brand India Authors

In some important academic criticism, Indian women are seen to have found a literature of their own via *TGST*. Reviewing the novel, feminist critic Vanita writes, "When I read the first sentence, 'May in Ayemenem is a hot, brooding month,' I thought this was going to be yet another exotic post-colonial novel about the land of heat and dust, incense and spices. But *TGST* rapidly reveals its disinterest in trying to encapsulate India, and its complete immersion in one community's, one family's universe" (32). By distancing Roy's novel from Rushdie's legacy, Vanita in her review suggests not only intimate engagement with regional India and actualization of the feminist slogan "personal is political" in the fictional text, but also resistance to the global market.

As another instance of feminist valorization, Boehmer credits Roy with keeping "the possibility of a liberative or women's nation alive" in spite of the flows of "transnational commerce" ("Beside the West" 186). In an earlier article of Boehmer's, "East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy," she had

problematized the exoticism of Roy's lush imagery and vocabulary with great perspicacity (62-70). Several other critics celebrate *TGST* as a liberative text for Indian women without qualifying their assessments with the role of the market in the making of its success.[3]

Rushdie, the first "explicit brand author for Indian literature" (Ponzanesi 115) was powerfully criticized, notably by Timothy Brennan, Aijaz Ahmad, and Harish Trivedi, besides several others for his complicity with market forces (Huggan 69-72). Some earlier criticism had, similarly, put *TGST* with Indo-chic. But Roy's subsequent political essays seem to have retrospectively loaned the political legitimacy of challenging commerce to the novel. The dominant critical opinion now is that *TGST*, written by a woman and appropriately imaging an intimate India, provides release from the limitations of Rushdiesque writing.[4]

The marketing of *TGST* quite outdid that which had established Rushdie fifteen years ago and it certainly was not without the author's consent and active participation. Besides, as Ponzanesi points out, Rushdie managed to reach star allure due to his flamboyant personality and cross-cultural elite upbringing by playing the game of the culture industry; but he did so only *after* winning the Booker. In Roy's case, due to the conglomeration and multi-national takeovers that had taken place in the publishing industry in the intervening period, the marketing offensive started much earlier; even before the book could come out (107).

The market ensured the collapsing of the Indian woman writer's body and her biography into the book to reconfigure the Brand India novel in 1997. *TGST* was sold as the life-story of a phenomenal Indian woman in contrast with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* that had allegedly promised instant or encapsulated history of the nation. An opportunity to replicate the 1997 configuration presented itself in 2000 when another young and personable Indian-origin woman, Lahiri, won the Pulitzer award for her first fictional endeavor. At thirty-six, Roy was the youngest woman (and also the first Indian woman) to win the Man Booker Award. Lahiri, at thirty-two, became the youngest writer and the first with an Indian or even Asian background to win the Pulitzer Prize. Femaleness and youth, combined with regional and autobiographical intimacy of narration, were emphasized as tropes signifying authenticity and became essential ingredients of the new literature by Indian women.

The Issue of Regional Authenticity

Rushdie's fiction was challenged for being inauthentic primarily because he presumed to represent the entire nation. For instance,

Cronin brilliantly images Rushdie's impudent pan-Indian sensibility in his denouncement:

> The paradox of the Indian English novel is that it is the only kind of Indian novel there is, and that is scarcely Indian at all: it is rather like the swimming pool of the Breach Candy club in Bombay that Saleem Sinai's house overlooks. It was for many years the only swimming pool in the city, patriotically shaped like a map of India, and yet a pool from which all Indians were excluded. (135)

Like many other critics of the 1980s, Cronin is suggesting the impossibility of representing India authentically via fiction in English and valorizing regional writers as "insiders." Due to the history of India's colonization, English is seen as the language of the oppressor or "outsiders" in such nativist views.

Fifteen years later, Roy's novel, preoccupying itself with one particular region, does succeed in representing Kerala in a way that makes the landscape come alive, but the putatively regional *TGST* may not necessarily constitute an insider's vision. Roy shows off the colonial baggage of the English language in Rushdie's fashion through her word-play and borrowings from the regional language—in her case, Malayalam. Besides, the author's gaze lights up with what is ordinary and unremarkable for the region, sometimes to an alienating extent. For instance, Morrison remarks in *The Independent*, "The landscape is so lush, so teeming with insect and reptile life, that it's likely the novel will do for Kerala's already burgeoning tourist industry what John Brendt's *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* has done for the Savannahs" ("The Country Where Worse Things Happen"). The exoticized region is a perfect backdrop for the highly charged native events that unfold in the book. Tickell remarks on the "far-far away" ambience or features of melodrama and romance in the novel: "In some of its European language translations, *TGST* has appeared with a subtitle defining it as a 'romance,' and while this is clearly a marketing decision by Roy's publishers it also highlights another generic feature of her fiction" (5). Toor remarks on the "transgressive sexuality" that haunts the book and traces its colonial antecedents, "Also, in terms of content, the book makes use of the metonymic slide between India and a certain forbidden sexuality, which has its precedents in such canonical English novels as E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), and 'Raj' bestsellers such as M.M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions* (1978)" (18). Thus, in contrast with the allegedly elitist intellectualism of *Midnight's Children, TGST* deals with subjectivity that has been seen to constitute a woman's subversion of the national allegory (by Vanita, Boehmer etc). However, as the extracts quoted in this section suggest, the India it confines the reader to is as easily, if not more easily, co-

opted with Orientalist representations of the country as the constructed nation of *Midnight's Children.*

Emerging at the time it did in 1997—the highpoint of India's economic liberalization—with its "complete immersion in one community and one family's universe" (Vanita 32) and with emotional high pitch, *TGST* effected the transformation of the opportunity to re-interpret the nation into transnational transactions wherein the nation-state was rendered superfluous and Indianness fetishized. The best-selling novel facilitated the regression from India as a complex political entity to India metonymically represented by a tourist destination where the natives play out primordial caste conflict. The old India, newly available in small packages, proved more delectable in the present over-mediatized time.[5]

The binary between the small and the grandiose operates in the same way in reviews and popular articles about Lahiri—literally located continents away from Roy—to co-opt her as an "authentic" Indian writer. In a mainstream Indian newspaper *The Hindustan Times*, the journalist-critic Bhattacharya imputes Indianness to Lahiri's fictions by invoking the legacy of *TGST* and unfair marginalization in the annals of Indian writing, by contrasting them with Rushdie's:

> Lahiri's ancestry can be traced to a certain kind of Indian writing, the sort in which god is in the details: of Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay in Bengali; of U.R. Anantha Murthy [sic] in Kannada; and of R.K. Narayan and Arun Kolatkar in English. It is a lineage to be proud of, and Lahiri is an outstanding keeper of the flame. We tend to not think too much about this sort of writing when we think of Indian writing (especially in English) largely because Salman Rushdie—and his magnificent Midnight's Children [sic]—created, from the early 1980s, a sort of template for the Big Indian Novel. It was assumed that fiction should aspire to capture the multilingual, chaotic, teeming, larger-than-life reality of India. ("The Bookest of Them All")

It is ironic that the Indian-American Lahiri, who has never displayed any interest in or familiarity with the language politics of the subcontinent, should be put in the same category with writers like Ananthamurthy who envisage writing in Kannada as a political act signifying Indianness (127-46). Her detailing of the life of the Bengali community in Boston seems to be enough to qualify her for this distinction.

As another instance, in a survey article titled "Oh Calcutta! The New Bengal Movement in Diasporic Indian English Fiction," Mandal, emphasizing the commonality that brings writers as diversely situated as Amit Chaudhuri, Nalinaksha Bhattacharya, and Jhumpa Lahiri under the rubric "Bengal Movement" in her article, observes, "In most of

their writings, the macro-level Indianness has been replaced by micro-level Bengaliness; their jargon is not tailored to the elite pseudo-culture in India, so much so that Ruchir Joshi even calls their work to be filled up with 'Calcuttese'" (21). She points out that almost all of Lahiri's Indian characters are Bengalis and that "her prose is scattered with details of traditional Bengali names, food, cooking, and wardrobe, giving character and flavour to her stories" (18). Conceding that the "Calcutta" that she describes is "imaginary" or "a city of the mind," (21) Mandal goes on to defend the authenticity of Lahiri's portrayal:

> But we have to admit that the most startling thing about Lahiri's characters was the fact that to all appearances her Das–es and Sens are the happy, contented Bengalis one meets at social functions. They are instantly recognizable, even likeable—the friendly polite people who have long leisurely meals and dip biscuits in their teas. (21)

Mandal seems to be arguing that Bengali-origin writers dispersed all over the world may be grouped together as they portray the language, people, food and ambience associated with the city in discernibly similar ways. Bengaliness is thus identified purely as a state of the mind rather than as a geographical or social attribute in her article.

Indeed, globalization enthusiasts contend that the local has flowed away from the nation in recent times. Appadurai, in his ground-breaking work on migration and media, persuasively argues that national primordia (whether of language, skin color or kinship) have become globalized; the nation-state is actually "on its last legs" and thereby irrelevant to the formation of cultural identity that he designates "dynamic and improvisational" in the globalized times (26). It may be argued Appadurai is overly optimistic about the cultural possibilities opened up by globalization and in haste to declare the demise of the nation.

At least in Lahiri's case, the regional or local, dispersed though it is beyond national boundaries, seems to offer little scope for liberation from the discourse of nation. In fact, it appears to fetishize the nation and recall regressive nationalistic tropes. In celebrating Diasporic Bengaliness, Mandal hones in on the familiarity of Bengali sounds, sights, smells and flavors that pervade "Bengal, Boston and Beyond" in Lahiri's work. This Bengaliness bypasses the nation but is neither dynamic nor improvisational. Mandal designates it "Calcuttese," which is also the way Bengaliness is stereotyped in popular forms like mainstream Bollywood cinema where Kolkata (former Calcutta) has through the ages denoted a colony of Bengali speaking fish eaters, sweets-lovers, or football enthusiasts. Thus, the Bengaliness or Indianness of Lahiri is received in Mandal's article as the affirmation of

a stereotype; vague insofar as origin and historical specificity are concerned, but rich in intertextuality with popular notions.

Fetishism of Bengaliness (and by extension, Indianness) is ever-present in Lahiri's texts and, as far as gender-politics is considered, her "Indian" women are decidedly regressive. In addition to the stereotyping of Bengali language and habits, there is in her fictions the fixed and unchanging figure of the middle-aged wife-mother who may be said to have overtones of the nineteenth-century Bharat Mata. Dressed in a sari, with sindoor in the part of her hair, wearing red and white bangles signifying her married status, and attempting as though in a Sisyphean enterprise to replicate the Bengali *hilsa*, or *jhaal-moodi* in her American kitchen, the eternal figure appears in no less than six stories[6] apart from the novella "Hema and Kaushik" and the novel *The Namesake*. She is a putatively traditional woman who holds on to her roots in an alien soil: she cannot drive a car, learn to email, or conceive of a life without family. She enjoys the same centrality for Lahiri's characters as her own parents described in her article "Two Lives" do for the writer.[7] The ubiquitous older woman in Lahiri's fiction evokes nostalgia for the mother country, but due to the associations with the deified wife-mother of nineteenth-century Hindu nationalism that she invites, her idealized portrayal is beset with the limitations of Hindu essentialism and gender regressiveness.

The complexity and ambition of Rushdie's magical narrative wherein he tries to encapsulate the diversity of India and her history into his text by polyphonic narration does to some extent build bulwarks against reduction and essentializing of this kind. The reception of Lahiri's intensely personal narrative as quintessential Indian fiction seems to be the logical culmination of the legacy of *TGST* where the biography and book of the woman writer were conflated. In Roy's case, the autobiographical narrative facilitated the foregrounding of the author at the expense of the socially grounded theme.[8] In Lahiri's, the author's necessarily limited representation of Indianness via her expatriate community is transmuted to suggest the entire country.

For Lahiri, India is pre-eminently, if not only, a country of the mind that she accesses through her experience of growing up in a Bengali Hindu family. Cronin, too, rightly describes Rushdie's India as "a country of the mind: "an imaginary country," a "mass-fantasy," a "collective fiction," a country that could never have existed "except by the effort of a phenomenal collective will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream" (137). But if Rushdie's Nehruvian India was in the shape of the map of the country, for Roy, India is overlooked in the Ayemeen she had experienced as a child. In Lahiri's work, the occasionally experienced India that she often describes inaccurately

becomes the *jhaal-moodi* and mustard fish of Bengal compiled in a Boston kitchen: an exotic dish made out of ordinary American ingredients. The dream of a united secular country that Rushdie's fiction interrogates is largely irrelevant to Roy's narrative; but in Lahiri's, it is eerily unknown.

Steeped in their respective regions, both Roy and Lahiri may be seen to represent India via the extremes of pre- and post-nation formulations. In their fictional texts Indianness is identified with hoary tradition, unqualified as it is by the promise of modernity that the nation-state offers to all its citizens. For instance, the tragic end of Ammu (the transgressing woman in *TGST*) and the empty world of the widowed Ashima in *The Namesake* are determined by gender inequity prevalent in the extended family and the community, respectively, and act as signifiers of authentic (present-day) Indian conditions in the texts. In contrast, the cutting-edge cosmopolitan personas of their younger authors, whose biographies are also embedded in the text, are decidedly post-nation. The two options exclude the normative experience of post-Independence middle-class Indian women that have been subject to discernible amelioration in the family and community, due to the progressive policies of the nation-state. It is noteworthy that Roy's mother, on whom Ammu is modeled, had fought a court case for many years to secure equal rights of succession for Christian women. As a single woman with two small children, she stood to inherit only a very minor part of family property under the Travancore Syrian Christian Succession Act 1916 and the Cochin Succession Act of 1921. In 1986, pronouncing the judgment in the Mary Roy case, the Supreme Court of India overruled the two Acts and upheld the supremacy of the Indian Succession Act of 1925, ensuring equal rights in family property for women of the Syrian-Christian community of Kerala along with their male siblings. Mary Roy's successful battle against ingrained gender disparity in the Indian family was long and arduous, but hardly isolated. Middle-class Indian women in various parts of the country have fought similar battles and even received support, albeit qualified and limited, from progressive forces such as the Supreme Court in this particular instance.

Similarly, Lahiri's Ashima seems to be in a time warp. As a result of empowerment discourses that the nation-state has facilitated by women-friendly legislation and women's commissions, most middle-class Bengali widows in India no longer assume on their person and in their personal lives traditional symbols of widowhood the way Ashima gives up wearing jewelry, for instance (189); nor does the community continue to insist on what are widely considered to be outdated observances.[9] No such possibilities are admitted in the fictional worlds created by Roy and Lahiri, where the regionalized Indian woman is

represented battling all alone with patriarchy in the former case and colluding unquestioningly with it in the latter. In both cases, the past is a tragic or melancholic loss and the future indicated exclusively by the post-nation woman writer.

Positioning the Glamorous Indian Woman Writer

It may be argued that as a result of the packaging of *TGST* as an object of desire,[10] relentless media blitz, and the myths about Roy that were disseminated[11] the only meaning that could ultimately attach itself to *TGST* is the cult of the beautiful Indian woman. This was suggested by Boehmer in her critique of the western reception of the novel in the article "Naidu and Roy." However, it needs to be added that successful marketing of literature would need the co-operation of the author and—in spite of the many contradictions between creativity and commerce—the highly sophisticated enterprise of contemporary marketing cannot be envisaged as a purely commercial activity at odds with creative intentionality.

In the case of *TGST* the subject matter of the novel powered the marketing strategy as Roy, in the manner of some first-time novelists, has written herself transparently into the text. Rukmini Bhaya Nair argues persuasively for reading *TGST* as a "woman and children" genre of fiction rather than as a "great" text with profound political and existential insights (4). Roy, she submits, is narcissistic to a middling degree and the novel, intended as an expression of self-love, fails to rise to its logical culmination of self-annihilation. Nair identifies the protagonist Rahel as Roy's unmistakable reflection in the text:

> When the adult Rahel is described, one would have to be blind not to recognize Roy from the photograph on the back flap of her book, even if one had managed somehow to miraculously avoid all the hoopla, the glossy magazine photographs and the interviews. "She was in jeans and a white T-shirt. . . . Her wild hair was tied back to look straight though it wasn't. A tiny diamond glittered in one nostril. She had absurdly beautiful collarbones and a nice athletic run." Every detail is attested. (7)

The marketing strategy of *TGST*—selling the novel as the photogenic author's autobiography—took off from the text and was successful for that reason. It thus follows that no assessment of *TGST* is possible without references to Roy's life and no review considered complete without her photograph.

A similar conflation of biography and the book was effected in Lahiri's case by the film version of *The Namesake* even though Lahiri has not been known to be media-savvy like Roy. The 2006 film was also marketed as being based on the real-life experiences of the author. This proved successful as Lahiri and some of her relatives had played

screen roles in the film. In an interview entitled "Why *The Namesake* made Jhumpa Lahiri cry," Lahiri speaks about what the film meant to her to Pais. The introductory remarks to the interview claim that Lahiri was so delighted with the film that the "reticent writer" has been doing "a lot of publicity" for it. Lahiri publicizes the film as a story that belongs to her family and that is important to her for that reason. She speaks feelingly about the involvement of her parents, daughter and other relatives in the creative enterprise, confining its scope to a sentimentalized domestic sphere. An excerpt from the interview:

> You have also talked about the film being a deeply personal experience.
>
> For one thing, Mira and I developed a strong bond from the time we met, through the filming, and the bond continues. I did not write the screenplay but she kept telling me what she was doing with my novel. My parents met with Irrfan Khan and Tabu offering them insights into immigrant lives. My relatives in India appeared in the wedding scenes in the film. And my daughter Noor plays the part of Gogol's sister Sonia receiving her *annaprasan* [*when Bengali babies are given their first taste of solid food*.] ("Why *The Namesake* made")

With the endorsement of authenticity from the writer and her family, *The Namesake* set a new benchmark for crossover films in India and played an important role in boosting Lahiri's popularity as a glamorous writer of accessible Bengali fiction. The subject matter of the novel—the Hindu-Indian immigrant experience in America, especially when visualized via film—also served to reaffirm Lahiri's class orientation for the dominant yuppie class in India in a way that her first book *Interpreter of Maladies* (with its couple of stories about poor women in Calcutta) did not. Correspondingly, Lahiri, who had been regarded as mainly diasporic in India in 1999,[12] came to be proposed as a major Indian voice by 2008.

It is relatively simple to understand how an autobiographical representation of India by a personable woman would feed into Orientalist notions of Indian femininity and stereotypical experiences of oppression that continue to be attributed to all Indian women. However, a more complex formulation of consumption is required to explain why Roy and, subsequently, Lahiri have been successful in capturing the Indian market as writers of authentic Indian experience.

India's Liberalization and Her Fictions

In her influential essay "Indo-chic: The Cultural Politics of Consumption in Post-Liberalization India," Toor discusses the subject matter and reception of *TGST* and also, interestingly, Mira Nair's 1997 film *Kamasutra* among other new Indian offerings, as aspects of cultural consumerism in which India is newly participant. Nair went on

to direct the eponymous film based on Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*. Toor firmly places the iconization of Roy in India in the context of the accelerated liberalization of the country in the 1990s, wherein the newly emerging capitalist elite "yuppies," with greater disposable incomes than experienced by previous generations of largely austere socialist India, find in Roy's global success an opportunity for self-exoticism and the forging of a new, conservative aesthetic. Thereby, in Toor's argument, the home success of *TGST* (or of the film *Kamasutra*), mimics established patterns of consumption in the West and indicates a relatively new neo-Orientalist and cannibalistic trend of consuming India at home (1-20).

The trend of consumption that Toor indicates is evident as Indians in India participate in the women writers' glorification as feminine women in the West and revel in the blatantly Orientalist Indian beauty myth. For instance, Indian media widely dispersed the news of the international acclaim of Roy's beauty that allegedly charmed the British publishers into giving her an unprecedented amount as advance royalty. To quote a 1997 article on Roy in *India Today*: "It is better if we first get this out of the way that she is truly beautiful. How beautiful? Here's a story. The brother of her friend met his friend who said publishers were paying all the money to an unknown girl for a first book not because she is bright (mind as sharp as a gutting knife) but because she is beautiful. That beautiful." ("Flowering of a Rebel"). The article is written in a breathless manner signifying awe at the effortless achievements of Indian beauty in the rapidly globalizing world.

Similarly, a dubious distinction attributed to Lahiri in the U.S.A. was discussed at some length in an article in *The Times of India.* It also became the lead story in the *Delhi Times* of the same day. A quote from the article reads, "Indian-descent writer Jhumpa Lahiri, with her 'hypnotic eyes' has been placed among the top in the list of 'Thinking Man's Sex Symbols' for 2008" (22). The popular website "The Daily Beast" featured the list and journalist Touré explained, in an arguably sexist manner, that a "thinking man's sex symbol," or TMSS, is "someone we imagine having great conversations with," whereas Maxim girls are "purposefully brainless" ("Jhumpa Lahiri Among Top Ten"). News items of this sort, along with fashionable photographs of the author, were posited as anecdotes of achievement in the mainstream press. This kind of glorification of writers' appearances is counter-productive as it confines the purpose of Indian women's literature to high-end living and helps create a bizarre situation where Indian women's increasingly poignant concerns are left bobbing helplessly in the sea of commerce.[13]

The pattern of consumption of Indian fiction in English seems to have changed dramatically from the 1980s when Cronin problematized

Rushdie's Indianness on the ground that he is a member of the deracinated elite and thereby out of touch with Indian conditions. This was in spite of the fact that the fiction of Rushdie and his counterparts—with its forays into Bollywood and Bombay slums—is self-consciously inclusive and progressive. Similarly, well-regarded women writers of an earlier generation like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, and even Githa Hariharan write self-consciously feminist fiction taking into account the problems identified by women's movements in the country.[14] Their kind of feminism is now considered passé. The media positions younger writers more with fashion designers and glamour queens than with activists.

It may be argued that globalism associated with the new fiction in English is so pronounced that it comes at the cost of exploration of local conditions and activism. While critiquing the Roy phenomenon, Toor identifies the new constituency of Indian fiction in English as different from the generic middle class basically due to its "cosmopolitanism":

> This class of young professionals is very different from the generic Indian middle class because it is a new phenomenon (definitely a product of liberalization), both demographically young and urban in location, self-consciously cosmopolitan in orientation. (4)

Interestingly, Francis in his 2008 trade report that is intended to guide foreign investors delineates the psychographics of the potential consumer of Indian writing in English also emphasizing their youth, prosperity but above all globalism. He characterizes the new readers as world-citizens not only in their vision but also in terms of lifestyle. In his submission, the readers of English books in India:

- Travel overseas
- Have family in the USA and the UK
- Have a global view (26)

It is quite evident that Francis, too, is delineating not the middle-class but a much smaller and select class-fragment—the yuppie.

The reasons for the Indian-American Lahiri's surprising popularity in India may be traced to the desire for cosmopolitanism on part of the Indian yuppie. The transnational Indianness represented by Lahiri brings the yuppie cosmopolitan closer to the center of the globe. For instance, the March 6, 2006, *Newsweek* lead story "The New India" that featured an article titled "India Rising" by Zakaria describes the economic rise of the country after liberalization; its mainly pro-American middle class and the importance of the Indians "inside" the U.S. to the evolving relationship between the two countries. It is accompanied with a piece by Lahiri titled "Two Lives" in which the

author discusses the actualization of her Indian-American identity through fiction. An aspirational relationship for Indians in India with those in America is affirmed via such stories.

Zakaria in the abovementioned article states that Indian immigrants to the U.S. have contributed greatly to the economic mobility of their families in India. Much in the fashion of Lahiri, he too conceptualizes the choice exercised by the migrant to leave India and settle in the U.S. as fulfillment of duty toward family and community:

> The Indian-American community has been a bridge between the two cultures. The term often used to describe Indians leaving their country is "brain drain." But it's been more like brain gain, for both sides. Indians abroad have played a crucial role in opening up the mother country. They returned to India with money, investment ideas, global standards and, most important, a sense that one could achieve anything. ("India Rising")

Indian immigration especially in the 1960s and '70s to the United States was mainly limited to the upper, educated and professional classes. It is the next generation within the same extended families that has gone on to constitute the upwardly mobile yuppie class in India, no doubt with support from their extended families in the U.S. Toor and Francis may be describing Lahiri's and her characters'—by extension any U.S. immigrant's—extended family in India in the above-mentioned psychographics of the new Indian consumer of fiction in English. These are the people who frequent multiplex theaters where crossover films are screened and the price of tickets is well beyond the affordability of the generic middle class. One begins to understand why *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri's latest book—with the entire cast of characters based in the U.S.—should be the biggest title for Random House India till date or why an author who is only an occasional visitor to the country should be seen to occupy such central literary and commercial positions in liberalized India.

The Limits of Roy's Cosmopolitics

The essential conservatism of the Indian English fiction reading public that lionized Roy in 1997 was no secret to her. In her first political essay she lashes out in her inimitable style at those who celebrated her Booker award in the same breath as the winning of Miss Universe and Miss World crowns by Indian women:

> Last year I was one of the items being paraded in the media's end-of-the-year National Pride Parade. Among the others, much to my mortification, were a bomb-maker and an international beauty queen. Each time a beaming person stopped me on the street and said "You have made India proud" (referring to the prize I won, not the book I wrote), I felt a little uneasy. It frightened me then and it terrifies me

> now, because I know how easily that swell, that tide of emotion, can turn against me. Perhaps the time for that has come. I'm going to step out from under the fairy lights and say what's on my mind. ("The End of Imagination")

It has often been remarked by those who have critiqued her as Indo-chic that Roy has her finger on the pulse of the market. It would seem that the same socially dominant people who made the Roy phenomenon in India in 1997 have gone on to condemn her for her betrayal of the class aesthetic via her outspoken political writings. Countless letters in the Indian magazine *Outlook*, in which all of her essays have been published, have repeatedly told her to go back to doing what she knows—i.e., write fiction, not meddle in affairs she does not understand. Many have reviled her for being anti-national.[15] Roy's iconography has also changed in the Indian media—no longer is she portrayed as Rahel with "absurdly beautiful collarbones" or "a tiny diamond in one nostril"; Roy in her pictures is now deglamorized and purposeful (Ramdev 148). Interestingly, Lahiri's pictures in the Indian media follow the reverse sequence. Her earlier pictures (immediately following the publication of *The Interpreter of Maladies*) show an average comely graduate student; in her later pictures she is photographed by a fashion photographer—chic, feminine, and undoubtedly, world-class![16]

It must be kept in mind that worldwide, fiction is being marketed more and more as a leisure product with celebrity authors playing a key role in its global disbursement, whereas political essays still lie quietly with activism and investigative journalism. The contemporary Roy is a very different quantity from the novelist Roy in popular opinion. Due to her changing gears from fiction to essay-writing and her own utterances, it has been possible to bracket her activism in order to not let her uncompromising political stances repudiate the commercial legacy of her novel.[17] Also, it cannot be denied that if unqualified by the activism of her political essays, *TGST* may be read as a text complicit in exoticizing India and Indians as is established by earlier criticism that charged her with exoticism and put her with Indo-chic. It has been argued that Roy's exoticism in *TGST*, even if "strategic" (the term "strategic exoticism" is offered by Huggan), has at best ensured commercial success even as it compromises the avowed political purpose of the text.[18] Even Ghosh in her commendatory work on Cosmopolitics, in which she attributes the mission of third-world advocacy to Indian fiction writers and defends Roy against charges of complicity with market forces, points out, "Indeed there are some palpable disjunctures between their (cosmopolitical writers') explicit political agendas and literary articulations. We see this most dramatically in Arundhati Roy's passionate immersion in everyday

local struggles while she reifies the 'subaltern' of *TGST* in the godlike Velutha" (11). Ghosh might go on to defend the reification as essential to the aesthetics of the novel, but the question to what extent the unconvincing love-affair affects the interrogation of caste and gender hierarchies in the text does need to be raised and considered. This is not to deny either the literary merit of the novel or the value of Roy's political activism. But to shift the activism of the essays to the commercially celebrated novel is to ignore the different ways in which space for multicultural fiction and political writing is being constructed in the present time.

Political essays do not easily get co-opted into literature as the term is understood in popular opinion or even in academia. Srikanth, discussing the limits of multiculturalism in American academia, narrates an anecdote wherein she proposed to introduce a political essay by Roy as part of the course she intended to teach and was met by resistance even by like-minded people:

> My colleague, while admitting that the essay ("The End of Imagination") is brilliantly written hesitated to introduce it to American college students. They would require too much background information to appreciate the essay fully, he claimed, and that would make it an impractical entry in the anthology. (31)

The readership of political essays and novels cannot be presumed to be the same even in India, where background information or the knowledge of the culture premised on linguistic competence would not be such an insurmountable obstacle in understanding Roy's political prose. In a market survey conducted in India on a collection of essays entitled *13 Dec The Strange Case of the attack on the Indian Parliament: A Reader* (2006), the researcher Parel notes, "This book becomes an interesting case for it is anonymous. The front cover only states 'With an Introduction by Arundhati Roy.'" However, to his amazement, he found:

> Not a single person within the age group of 17-30 to whom the questionnaire was circulated, has read the book. Most have on the other hand, read *The God of Small Things*, which is the book that won her the Booker Prize in 1997, making it all the more commercially tactical to put her name on the cover. ("The Market and the Reader: Five moments in the Indian Publishing Industry")

Roy's popularity and reach as a glamorous author of fiction may help sales of activist writing to a certain extent, but her activist writings do not seduce all fiction readers into reading political essays, nor do they make a dent in the political ambiguity of Indo-chic. It is important to keep this fact in mind when discussing the political scope and purpose of her novel that occupies the reified field of literature.

The New Cosmopolitan Writing: The Issue of Cultural Translation

The fictions of Roy and Lahiri and other globally celebrated Indian writers are part of the rubric postcolonial or multicultural literature. The political purpose that is attributed to them is derived from and shaped by these nomenclatures. The vexed relationship of postcolonial literature with the market has been interrogated by Huggan, Bongie and several others. The term "multiculturalism" too has come under severe questioning.

Srikanth, who discusses South Asian writers in America as fulfilling the important need of advocacy for the rights of the South Asian community, and who makes a case for dissolving the distinction between postcolonial and South Asian American writing, admits the limitations of the way American multiculturalism has been conceptualized (21). Similarly, Talbot, speaking about the declining interest among American students in studying foreign languages, holds multicultural literatures responsible for the trend:

> But if multiculturalism is not precisely to blame, it is odd that a movement so flamboyantly dedicated to the celebration of cultural diversity did so little to check our tendencies to cultural isolationism. In fact, it may have reinforced them, by lulling us into the sense that we were getting a resoundingly global education when all we were really getting was a little Arundhati Roy here, a little Toni Morrison there . . . Multiculturalism was easy, whereas deep knowledge of another place, predicated as it usually is on linguistic competence, is hard. (23)

If Roy's fiction is soft multiculturalism, the problem is exacerbated by reception of writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, who due to her own origins and that of her characters, is ascribed the responsibility of communicating Indianness to Americans. Researcher Chetty, in the same vein, complains about the irony implicit in regarding a writer like Lahiri, who is only an occasional visitor to the country, as authoritatively "Indian" (24).

As Talbot and Chetty argue, when multicultural novels become ways of consuming other cultures—at least one review of Lahiri in the U.S. was entitled "Passage to India"[19]—there arise too many problems of reduction and essentializing. If a decontextualized *TGST*—as in Talbot's opinion—is a lazy option of knowing India, then Lahiri's work is a further dumbing-down of cultural translation, because contrasted with the complexity of *TGST*, Lahiri's fiction is simple, even formulaic. Premised as it is on the melancholia of failed communication, it conveys the "old" world of India as rigid and fixed. Lahiri's work, in a curious way, is emblematic of what cultural translation—that in Ghosh's above-mentioned argument gives value to

Cosmopolitical writing—amounts to, when in addition to originating beyond national boundaries, it is also devoid of the kind of activist politics and bilingual sensibility that Boehmer and Ghosh respectively attribute to Roy. However, the position of a cultural translator is easily ascribed to Lahiri in criticism and the one the writer feels qualified to claim (as in her article "Jhumpa on Jhumpa: Translato Ergo Sum").

My argument is geared not to oppose the empowering concept of "Cosmopolitics," but to build on aspects of the same argument. Rushdie's intervention in the 1980s cannot be equated with the writing of Jhumpa Lahiri in the twenty-first century. To my mind, the gap of almost twenty years and the way the world has changed between the publication of earlier cosmopolitan work of Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh and the later cosmopolitan writing of Lahiri is crucial and should be taken into consideration while computing the political value of cosmopolitan writing. Critics Rajan and Sharma underscore this point while touching upon the difference in writers' sensibilities between then and now:

> . . . the important distinction between an old kind of cosmopolitanism that rests upon privileges of education class and a transcontinental urban readership that is inculcated upon an acquired understanding of the other depicted by a Ghosh or a Rushdie and a newer kind of cosmopolitanism that is infused with a familiarity of the other conjured up by the media and is seen in the fictions of Lahiri or Divakurni. (172)

Unlike Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh (or Roy in her political essays), Lahiri finds little need for research for the kind of Indianness she represents in her work. For her, the sociopolitical context of India is quite irrelevant to her Muse. In one of her interviews while she was writing *The Namesake*, when asked whether she plans to come more often to India in order to get to know it better, she asserts the primacy of personal impressions for her art:

> I don't feel I need to get to know it better [*laughs*]. It's not a topic for me in that way. It's just a place I carry inside of me, sometimes it is around me, and sometimes it is not around me. But I've been coming here all my life, I spent long stretches of time here, and it will never be unfamiliar to me. I don't think I'll ever be able to forget India, so that I have to come back to refresh my imagination. ("Interview with Sheila Reddy")

It is surprising that Lahiri sees no contradiction in her avowed purpose of cultural translation as a writer and her refusal to make a deeper study of the source text that is India. Surely, the migration of her parents from India and her assimilation into American society is too slight a theme to

bear the burden of speaking across two cultures unless it is contextualized at both ends.

Thus, cultural communication via fiction may, in fact, be working to reduce, essentialize and perhaps misinterpret India and Indian culture. To argue as Chetty does in the case of Lahiri that when read aesthetically, her work resists her delineation as an Indian-American writer and so should not be read for its cultural communication (39-73) is to go against the entire process of marketing and making of Jhumpa Lahiri, the writer of bestselling serious fiction. Marketing is so much the making of contemporary writing that to look for a market-resistant meaning embedded within the text beyond marketing strategy, reviews, criticism and the author's own utterances becomes an academic exercise having little to do with the reach and impact of the work. As Squires points out, while theorizing the market for books, contemporary marketing is a creative and interpretive process during which the object to be sold is created by the writer, and also by publishers, designers, editors, reviewers, publicists, critics and readers: "*Marketing is the making of contemporary writing*" (3). It, thus, might be the logical corollary of India's liberalization-led globalization and the unprecedented intrusiveness of the market in the cultural field that Indian literature in English in the present time should be forged in America, the center of the globe; or that as the mantle of market leaders of literature passes on from elitist men to glamorous women, feminist activism should recede further from celebrated Indian women's fictions.

Notes

1. Indo-chic may be best explained as "taste" (signifying social distinction) for authentic Indian food, clothes, and artifacts. It is exemplified by the global buzz that some Indian objects have attained in the higher echelons of the market in the late 1990s. Sengupta used the term Indo-chic with reference to Roy in an article in *The New York Times* in 1997 ("Beyond Yoga"). Mongia (103-09), Boehmer ("Naidu and Roy," 62-70), Toor (1-20) and Huggan (58-82) further developed the concept of Indo-chic in literature. In literature Indo-chic may be defined as a commodification of the putatively marginal India as a result of which perceptions of the distinctiveness of India are emptied out from the reception of the text and replaced by exotic Orientalist tropes.

2. It is possible to identify a bifurcation of the market in the late 1990s with India-based publishers concentrating on producing popular, genre, or commercial fiction—like campus novels and chick lit.—exclusively for home consumption.

3. Bose (87-100), Navarro-Tejaro, and Ghosh discuss Roy's novel as an empowering feminist text. Bose argues that eroticism is political in *TGST;* Navarro-Tejero discusses *TGST* with Githa Hariharan's novel to underscore the centrality of gender and caste in Indian women's novels; Ghosh, who I quote

later, discusses *TGST* and the works of four other authors as instances of Cosmopolitics.

4. Some critics welcomed *TGST* as a woman's subversive text that defeated Rushdie at his consummate game of postcolonial subversions, but consensus emerged only after Roy established her political credentials with her essays. For instance, in 2000, Boehmer, critiquing the publicity blitz, noted that Roy's valorization in postcolonial criticism "locked together characterizations of the eternal feminine and the eternal oriental" ("Naidu and Roy" 67). However, in her 2004 essay "Beside the West," Boehmer changes her position quite radically by extolling Roy's feminist politics.

5. Advertising Guru Rapalle prescribes a strong statement of the village of origin (real or invented) for successful brand-making of high-end products like luxury cars in the globalized world in his treatise *The Culture Code* (204-06). The marketing of Indian literature seems to be following the same trajectory.

6. The six stories are "When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine," "Mrs Sen's," "The Third and Final Continent," "Unaccustomed Earth," "Hell Heaven," and "Only Goodness."

7. Lahiri pays a touching tribute to her parents in the essay "Two Lives": "I have always believed that I lack the authority my parents bring to being Indian. But as long as they live they protect me from feeling like an impostor" ("Two Lives").

8. For instance, critiquing the politics of gender in the reception of Roy's novel, Boehmer observes: ". . . could the critical perception of Roy in western critical circles not be said to intersect her harrowing themes and verbal extravagance with her Indian and feminine identity (with comparatively little regard for the regional complexities of 1969 Kerala with which the novel is so intensely concerned)?" ("Naidu and Roy" 66).

9. Hindu widows were traditionally expected to abjure pleasures of the flesh and live secluded lives like nuns. They would give up eating meat and fish and subsist only on pulses and selected vegetables; observe many fasts; not wear jewelry or colored clothes, etc. In the Indian middle class these practices have become, more or less, obsolete. In the last scene of the film *The Namesake*, the widowed Ashima dresses in a white sari on her return to India.

10. Mongia analyzes the cover of *TGST* and the author-photograph to emphasize the recall of Orientalist tropes in the marketing of the novel.

11. Many stories circulated about Roy's unconventional lifestyle (that she was a hippie or a prostitute); extreme poverty; lack of formal education; inspired writing that needed no editing or revising; beauty so irresistible to British publishers that they vied with each other to sign her on, etc. Toor, Nair and Mongia list some of these stories, and also comment on Roy's complicity in the marketing offensive.

12. For instance, Pais in an article "Uncle Sam's Sisters," published in 1999, discusses Lahiri with other diasporic writers like Sujata Massey and Bharti Kirchner.

13. Feminist scholars have pointed out that globalization has further impoverished women from the South or two-third world and made them more vulnerable. Mohanty argues that the present-day feminist practice needs to range itself against global capitalism (514).

14. Jackson makes a persuasive case to situate Deshpande, Desai, Markandaya, and Sehgal as feminist intellectuals even though they address the middle class. Their work, she argues, touches upon issues like curtailment of the education of daughters and child marriages, etc that grassroots women's movements in India have been concerned with. (1-15) Hariharan, who is younger, belongs with them, as her fiction too explores the conditions of women in deprived provincial and rural contexts. The earlier-generation writers did not feature much in gossip-columns and lifestyle pages with celebrities from the film world—Hariharan, with her avowed allegiance to the Left, does not either!

15. Vituperative criticism has been directed against Roy in mainstream Indian media after the publication of her first political essay in 1998. A nadir was reached when a TV show host on the channel "Times Now," Arnab Goswami, following the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack, called her "disgusting" for her allegedly anti-national proclamations. No disciplinary action was initiated against him. Roy rightly complained: "For a TV anchor to do this in an atmosphere as charged and as frenzied as the one that prevails today, amounts to incitement as well as threat, and would probably in different circumstances have cost a journalist his or her job" ('The Monster in the Mirror").

16. Lahiri's photograph on the cover of the Indian edition of *The Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999 and the photographs accompanying Bhattacharya's article in *The Hindustan Times* and *Times of India* news reports in 2008 are good illustrations of the contrast.

17. Roy has at times indicated that her novel is equally "political," but in other places she has prioritized fiction in fairly lyrical terms, distancing it from the pedestrian activity of writing about political matters. In *Outlook* magazine, for instance, talking about her story written after eleven years of "fictional" silence, she likens the process of writing the story to "dancing" as contrasted with walking ("The Briefing").

18. Bongie, for instance, situates *TGST* as middlebrow and suggests that the phenomenal marketability of such postcolonial texts needs to be interrogated ("Exiles on Mainstream").

19. Flynn's review of *The Namesake* is entitled "Passage to India." At least three reviews of the diasporic writer Kiran Desai's award-winning *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) are also similarly titled.

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