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Re/constructing South Asia

Paul Sharrad
University of Wollongong, psharrad@uow.edu.au

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In her early essays on life in India as an expatriate writer, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala describes her cycle of emotional responses to living abroad. Firstly, everything in India is wonderful; secondly everything about India is appalling; thirdly, reality is a mix of the two. In her model of the Westerner doing Asian Studies, at least in the Indian context, the wheel keeps turning from delighted fascination to extreme irritation to more moderate feelings that are nonetheless never a state of completely stable harmony (An Experience of India).

Jhabvala suggests that this is the pattern for all Westerners visiting India, and social psychology reports of sojourners abroad indicate that it may be a generic model for the experience of encountering any foreign land (Brislin et al). Travel writing has also been scanned for its generic tropes and topoi by people such as Paul Fussell. However, I am interested here in how the general psychodynamics of travel and the standard devices of accounts of journeys are affected by both where the travel occurs and the particular roles occupied by the traveller.
Obviously, this points towards Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, and how Westerners in general come to India through an archive of ‘knowledge’ about the East, some of which has been internalized by nationalist interests in ‘Eastern’ countries to assert difference and superiority against a decadent imperialist or Western modernity. Said’s model of the outsider managing often contradictory representations of foreign lands in order to preserve a strategic balance of superiority admits of positional differentials, so that, while they are equally formed by an orientalist archive, the colonial officer and the itinerant litterateur do not necessarily see the same things or interpret them in the same way (Orientalism). However, I think there is more to be said than Said offers in his landmark book about the ways in which dominant tropes applied by orientalists can vary across the field of the ‘Orient’ according to the particular nation/culture being represented, even though the overall dynamic of discourse stays consistent. In similar manner, individual positionality shapes (while being shaped by) the predetermining power of orientalist discourses. The kind of work done by Sidonie Smith and others on autobiography seems pertinent to consideration of writing about India – to writing in Asian Studies generally, perhaps – as a means of teasing out the strategies and interests of particular kinds of writers as they process their experience of another country and recount the experience to their co-nationals back home. To some extent, Said anticipates attention to these differences when he briefly explains his notions of “strategic location” and “strategic formation” (20), although his ensuing commentary tends to swallow the distinctions I have outlined.
This same structure of significant differences working within a similar general dynamic can be thought of as applying to genre. Travel writing works to a set pattern, but I suggest that there are intersecting ratios of insulation to exposure, patronage to victimhood, knowingness to innocence that shift according to the subject position/social role of the traveller/writer. The test case I am offering here is three books about India, one by an ABC foreign correspondent on assignment, another by his female companion who joined him as fiancee and then wife in New Delhi, and the third by a veteran reporter in South Asia returning to India to explore in freelance capacity his surface encounter in more depth and marrying there into a Delhi family. The texts are Jonathan Harley’s *Lost in Transmission* (2004), Sarah Macdonald’s *Holy Cow* (2002) and Christopher Kremmer’s recent *Inhaling the Mahatma* (2006).

The first thing we note from the productions (if not the contents) of all three books is the consistent focus on religion as defining India, specifically Hinduism. Historically and demographically, this may not seem anything other than inevitable realism, but it is by no means a necessary governing figure when the writers are political commentators from a mainly secular background, and it is a different image than we might find in similar books on China or Burma, just to pick two instances. The Hindu imagery is relevant to Sarah Macdonald’s book since she embarks on a tour of the major ashrams and religious communities of India, and it is perhaps called for by the fact that all three authors happen to be in the subcontinent at the time of the huge once in five years Hindu gathering, the Kumbh Mela. How they incorporate this into their personal engagement with India, rather than reporting ‘from a distance’, though, is interesting.
Two of the writers are professional reporters whose job it is to see and know and tell it like it is. They have an understandably different take on South Asia than the sojourning female partner who, though she has a background in radio journalism, has now to find a new role for herself, especially when her partner is constantly away covering the next major political drama. So too, the reporter’s exposure to the country is to some extent insulated by his profession and entourage while the partner is more exposed to the everyday life of servants and shopping though insulated by her confinement to a more domestic, and in this case, spiritual sphere. Kremmer provides an interesting blend of the two, since he is, by the time of writing, a freelance journalist with access to India through an individual and family connection that is more relaxed and domestic (less masculinised) but who is still sending reports back to his Australian homeland as an Australian abroad. All three, as white anglo-Australians in India, are exposed to the public gaze as likely tourists and targets for all kinds of attention. And the three of them as longer-term expatriates will be differently exposed and insulated than the tourist whose experience is a mediated, pressure-cooked visit. The fact of their common Australian identities is also a determinant of the particular kind of relationship they manage to strike up with the subcontinent: they are neither heir to the British colonial officer on tour of duty, nor relation to the diasporic Indian returning to ‘home’, though they may carry aspects of both personae as the result of common colonial histories.

The investigative (or even ‘regurgitative’) reporter (as Jonathan Harley ruefully puts it)
is in the business of destroying stereotypes by getting at truth through local detail, so we could expect something more than India the homeland of gods and piety. In fact, Harley’s profession sends him to mostly political assignments such as the war in Kashmir, the bombing of Afghanistan, the Gujerat earthquake, Clinton’s visit to India, and refugee camps in Pakistan. So immediately there is a shift away from both India alone and the orientalised tourist view of it. The picture Harley does paint of India is as “the poor man’s America”: a proud nation of immense enterprise and dreams of prosperity (129). In most cases, and in contrast to the chaos of conflict zones, small encounters prove Harley’s claim that, despite everything, India works. (A particular instance of this is his following the intricate and unique network of tiffin-carrier lunch deliveries in Bombay 132-9.) There are encounters with religious practices in India (he attends the Kumbh Mela; he reports on the torching of an Australian missionary and his sons by a Hindu mob), but they do not colour the book as a whole. As suggested earlier, it seems more a marketing device to attract the popular reader when a moment in a taxi in Bombay noting a small statue of Ganesh on the dashboard is taken for the book’s cover and becomes the icon separating sections of the book (131). Stereotypes die hard, no matter what an author comes up with! For Harley, India is the friendly if frustrating surrogate home; relief after the horrors of Pakistan and Afghanistan. But it does not really get much attention in the book, so that when he leaves, the “strong feelings” displayed by Harley’s ABC staff house support crew in Delhi seem unearned (324-5).

The framing device establishing Harley’s professional drama of being posted to an exotic location he knew nothing about (the customs officer farewelling him with ‘Christ, mate
that’s another universe over there”) seems to suggest the absolute foreignness of the orientalist/ travel types, but it comes to be seen ironically in terms of the little ‘we’ know (in Australia) about India and its neighbours. There is a reflective strand to the narrative in which Harley assesses both his own position as a reporter and its effects on his personality, and the text uses his experiences abroad as a foil against which he can consider his own country. Being not just a reporter on the make, but an Australian is also used to privilege Harley’s perspective by engaging the main readership in a cosy ‘us sympathetic lot versus the uncaring global media circus’ — a Euro-American machine that works against critical assessment of what is represented as the truth of the times.

Harley’s identity as an Australian is important as a fragile protection from despair and cynicism. Not only does the small budget of the ABC in contrast to some of the US and UK media teams allow him to be seen as an amateur enthusiast, but his relative inexperience with TV and radio links etc. gives him a role of ‘innocent abroad’ that is particularly pertinent to his construction of Australia in relation to world politics and his own authenticity as a well-meaning and reliable transmitter of overseas knowledge. Harley strategically opens, not with his arrival in Delhi, but with his later presence in the American media tent during the first Gulf invasion. Exposing the spurious non-information of military-controlled propaganda, he concludes,

“But I shall not judge them. I have been there myself. Almost.” (4)

This ‘almost’ becomes its own leitmotif, reflecting Harley’s view of his own professional standing, his ability to transmit the news faithfully, his capacity to lose human sympathy
with the people involved in the situations he reports on, and Australia’s marginal involvement in world affairs.

Harley presents himself as a “bumbling amateur” (25): “like a kid” (8) admitting an embarrassingly small “sum total of my knowledge” (10) as he pushes on “clueless” (52). This seems to have some basis in the historical facts of his appointment and fast professional learning curve. Nonetheless, such an image is significant in other ways, as it corresponds to many fictional and non-fictional representations of Australians in the international, and especially Asian political arena (Chris Koch’s protagonist in *The Year of Living Dangerously*, for example). We seem to consider ourselves charmingly naïve, and, compared to the brasher professionals from Europe and America, we take on the superiority of the second-rate. The implication is that this gives us a more trusted and trustworthy access to the lives of foreigners, especially foreigners who have shared a British imperial past and with whom we play cricket (see chapter 17 on the death of Don Bradman). We may belong to the Western First World – but only almost – and we are not as bad as it is – almost. Our marginality automatically confers on us a tiny but significantly greater degree of humanity and saves us from the soul-destroying aspects of both professional journalism and travel in general.

It only saves us in the end, though. Until then, Harley confesses to failing in his resolution to show more care for people, but he also claims a duty to make Australian audiences care by showing them the bad facts of life for many people overseas (186-7). Unlike the macho reporters from big agencies, Harley cries (27), refuses to drown the
stress of work in alcohol or massage parlours (264-5) and admits to heartless cowardice in abandoning the people he reports on (260) and compromising them by his very presence (as with his Kabul guide during his scoop entry to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan 173). The honest self-evaluation produces an image of the Australian abroad as a sympathetic if ineffectual figure saved from suffering by luck of birth (86) and from opportunistic heartlessness by lack of ruthless ambition and by a critical awareness of the limitations of his craft (229).

And by ties to family and home. Harley uses his relationship with his girlfriend and then wife, Sarah, as a benchmark against which his reporting can be measured. She frets about his being in danger, and he about her fretting while still relishing the excitement of his work. Caught up in male bonding with his crew, he offers his flak jacket to a guide, hoping that Sarah doesn’t get to hear of it; later, Sarah flies in bringing him another flak jacket and snatching a few days together. After running off to new assignments every time they have a holiday together, Harley’s twelve-month marriage with Sarah is, not surprisingly, on rocky ground, and they resolve to rebuild and return to Australia (323).

But the purported marginality that separates us from other would-be ‘Asia experts’ also ties us to them, inducing orientalist attitudes even as we pretend to be exempt from them. Thus Indian journalists are somehow absurd in their old-fashioned English, and we know better (32); Indian servants obtusely refuse to follow invitations not to call their boss ‘sir’ (20); cameramen have no idea of professional conduct (120), politicians lapse into debates about the benefits of drinking your own urine, and are thus not to be taken too
seriously (128); all Indians (and some Pakistanis) reduce conversation to Shayne Warne (10, 49, 267), relegate President Clinton to the same meaningless superstar status (143), and thus have a limited knowledge of or interest in the outside world.

This is why the self-representation of the narrator is so important. An unreflective narration would allow us to conclude that the writer subscribes to colonialist stereotypes; a writer/narrator who ironises the voice and/or position of the commentary is not necessarily just reproducing standard attitudes. Harley’s prose can be compared to V.S. Naipaul’s travelogues on India. Both writers set up a colourful character, frame him or her in a dramatic event, supply the background information and then reflect on not only the general meaning of the situation but also the observer’s involvement in it and its effects on him. Unlike Naipaul, however, Harley is prepared to send himself up, recording his humiliation at the hands of airport traffic police (146-8) and those of a nurse, when he is bitten by a scorpion (150-2).

During the mainly chronological sequence of edited copy from Harley’s field transmissions we get an autobiographical story of his personal journey in which he progresses from stressed-out rookie to battle-hardened veteran. He accumulates friends and idols amongst the international journalists and learns to differentiate himself from those — like the American loudly demanding a tennis court at the Islamabad hotel where he has arrived to cover the invasion/liberation of Afghanistan (272) or the shamelessly partisan Fox network anchorman (312). He also records the growing fascination with his
work and the countries he works in – particularly India and Afghanistan (Pakistan does not fare at all well in his reporting):

I am amazed to have come this far – and that any job could be so thrilling. I am in journalistic heaven, exploring a story largely untold, and intoxicated with exotica. (233)

The heady highs of adrenalin and feelings of being adopted by Afghans, soon mutate into terror during shelling, awareness of betrayal of his friends (260, 297), mourning for the loss of colleagues caught in the violence, as well as sheer exhaustion from impossible assignments, failed technology (256) and prolonged lack of sleep. Harley finds himself resenting the world media machine muscling in on his patch (261) and is chagrined to find rival reporters in Australia attacking him (and the ABC) for creating a headline out of nothing when it was potentially a major declaration of jihad against his homeland (278). Harley not only finds he has become uncaring about the people whose suffering he documents, but that his Australian audiences care little unless it suits home politics or there is an Australian involved. (He is particularly scathing about the Australian government’s scare campaign that demonized and interned minority Afghans fleeing the famine and political chaos he was reporting on while the West was turning Afghanistan into a new war zone on a dual agenda of liberation and vendetta after the jihadi massacre in New York. 237-8) Finally, realizing he is “losing it” (282), drinking (274) and ‘going troppo’ (287), in danger of becoming unstable or hopelessly lost to roaming the planet to exploit the next big story, he opts for retreat, salvaging his still new but already fragile marriage, and returning to Sydney.
As he notes earlier in the book, Harley is lucky to be able to return home away from the turmoil of the places he reports on, but there he also finds that his old friends are dying (328, 331) despite, or perhaps because of the placid good fortune of a city “of carefree swims and anxious home renovations” (326). Nonetheless, he finds solace in beach swims and his new daughter, domestic life taking on a normality he had not envisaged, renewing his vow to be gentle and cherish life:

> If we run too fast, love too much the deadlines and headlines, we lose the touch that makes us human. I replaced it with indifference, wallpapered over with bravado. I thought South Asia would make me tougher, it just made me meaner. Would I do it again? One hundred per cent, first-class, affirmative sir. No doubt about it. We make mistakes, we learn, we grow and one day, hopefully, we come home. (332)

Australia is seen as holding out against the “weight of the world outside”, but doomed in the face of senseless death both abroad and at home. What matters is staying in touch with “life’s gentleness”.

As distinct from Jonathan Harley’s straightforward self-presentation as professional chronicler and reflective returnee, MacDonald creates a hyper-dramatic persona ‘Sarah’ as someone writing a personal account grounded in emotional responses to being overseas; there is no attempt at dispassionate reportage. She goes back to India after reaching the nadir of Jhabvala’s wheel of traveller’s reaction on her first visit and swearing never to return. She brings to her narrative the hysteria of the radio ‘shock jock’ and the hip of a turned-on young adult Aussie audience of her Triple-J career.

Consequently, the tourist stereotypes are already to the fore in the narrator’s mind and are played for all their worth, even when they do get debunked. The result is a very Austro-
centric archness not unlike Cath and Kim’s fond / cruel mockery of lower-class ‘aspirational’ Australia. It is indicated on the cover with the culturally ambiguous title (Holy Cow!) emphasizing the Western idiomatic put-down expression of amazed disbelief, plus a full-colour glossy of Shiva with cobra, trident, blue face and lots of ‘Om’ signs.

She returns not to see India, but to be with her boyfriend. The writer depicts herself as Alice not in Wonderland, but through the looking glass, and India is the reversal of everything that is normal. The whole book is encapsulated in jokes that assume a West-centric viewpoint and a hip sexually knowing, irreverent attitude: ‘A Good Hand Job’ is a palm reading, ‘Sex Lies and Saving Face’, ‘Three Weddings and a Funeral’, ‘The Big Pot Festival’ (this last title being a loose translation of Kumbh Mela). In the same vein, its text is peppered with Australian idiom: air hostesses are ‘trolley dollies’ (2), airport porters are likened to a ‘mosh pit’ (4) and there are references to Gary Larson cartoons, the magic pudding and Doctor Who. At a wedding ceremony, the prayer chanting looks serious but “Jonathan’s mum and I are the only ones being respectfully quiet and attentive” (58): the rest of the party is a chaotic jumble of cooking and chatting. We know what’s going on; they just haven’t got it right yet. Securely located in our cultural space, we are invited to join the authorial persona in a spaced-out ‘Oh wow, isn’t this weird!’ tour of alternative reality that lurches between late-adolescent snigger and revulsion. Good Indians here are not dead, but are would-be Westerners with a taste for ‘Massive Attack’ CDs (60), booze and jeans.
Both Macdonald and Harley use catch phrases from the world of the primary audience as a humorous hook by which to catch attention. Thus Harley parodies TV ads with “but wait, there’s more” (8) and Hollywood tags such as “In India no one can hear you scream” (28); local spiced cooking is described as the gift “that keeps on giving all day long” (34) and we are enjoined to “have a nice war” (58). In several cases, at least, the humour of travesty turns as much on the source phrase and its context as it does on India, so that Western media and attitudes come to seem shallow and uncaring. This is part of the reporter’s arsenal of rhetorical weaponry: making the unfamiliar seem interesting by way of connection with things local to the readership/viewers and enacting a kind of double-handed irony that implies objectivity. Nonetheless, this kind of audience-aware writing does tend to belittle the foreign subject matter by appealing to the shared author-audience norm of Western media and culture and thus estranging what is incongruously attached to its idioms.

While the book never entirely loses this annoying self-centredness — reflected often in a prose whose self-awareness undoes the sincerity it expresses (puns and alliteration abound, turning serious moments into ad-bites (287) — which implies possession of some golden mean against which India is forever a site of ridiculous or scary extremes (“India is the worst of humanity… the best of humanity”, 66; “stupor to frenzy in seconds”, 37), it does have points in its defense. If Macdonald is returning to India for the second time, unlike Chris Kremmer, she is doing so reluctantly, having had a bad case of culture shock the first time round and being almost immediately destabilized (literally) by an earthquake (20) and psychologically by the dissolved face of a badly burned beggar
woman (15). This gives a clue to the histrionic narrative tone of the hip tour-guide to the East because, unlike Kremmer, Macdonald is female and thus prone to many more invasions of her peace of mind in a world of male sexism. Oppression of women and their internalizing of it even by her Generation X smart-set Delhi friends in seeking husbands is a recurrent strain (43-4, 113, 224-5) and it is primarily the external social constraints she feels as a woman that drive her to seek inner liberation and put her on the book’s spiritual road trip. On Jhabvala’s wheel of experience things can only get better, and they do, but also because of Sarah’s position as a privileged traveler, usually with an entourage, and irritated when Indians harass her, mistaking her for a tourist.

The narrative also records change over time in the narrator. What begins as a kind of dilettantish dash down the various aisles of India’s spiritual supermarket (100) gradually becomes more self-aware and self-critical. The hectic sensationalizing stops for a passage of lyrical description in Kashmir (120) and the writer is able critically to see Western sex-based advertising and porn movies from a Pakistani male point of view (274). In between outrage at the constant pestering, she reflects that it may be fair exchange for her voyeurism (12) and later considers whether her critical view is merely prejudice (96). The narrative becomes a series of advances and setbacks along a path of rage management (20, 114), confessing after the 9-11 attacks that sorrow may have more strength to it than anger (260) and arriving later at the point where the narrator rages against not being able to manage her rage (287). Eventually, in the face of violence in Kashmir, bombing in Afghanistan and communal atrocities in Gujerat, Sarah accepts a need for “extreme” and “gentle love” (293), finally coming out as “a better person” (296) having sampled a
dozen different brands of religious experience that help her to work through the
differentiating experience of marriage to a perpetually absent and endangered foreign
correspondent (266). Sarah’s cynicism and hostility is framed ironically by the two palm
readings at the beginning of her story, both of which turn out to be true, and she has
“stopped seeing the world as a story; as something I can package and explain” (275). The
book itself, however, is exactly what she denies: a package full of authoritative
pronouncements about India and Indians. The book is a lively for its ups and downs and
satisfying climb to pregnancy and return home read (“adventure” is the framing subtitle),
but it never gets past a discourse of consumerism in which the white Australian is
endowed with “gifts” by generous but odd Indians. And we experience them in such
rapid vignettes that India remains the two-dimensional schmaltz of the book’s ad-agency
cover.

Despite their being in the country at the same time, there is almost no cross recognition
between the Harley/Macdonald duo and Christopher Kremmer. The one connection
underlines my point about how different positions affect the stories told. Harley mentions
Kremmer as also reporting on the torching of an Australian missionary and his sons (22):
Chris is “a legend for his decade of reporting throughout the region. … Chris has been
welcoming since I arrived in New Delhi but he is also my fiercest Australian competitor
and I don’t want to be shown up on my first story.” (22). So professional patch-
protection governs what gets told. Equally, since Kremmer is living on the outskirts of
Delhi with his Indian relatives, he is no longer moving in the younger fast set of expat.
life that Sarah parties with.
Christopher Kremmer has been in India before and in South Asia for around ten years on and off, so his 2004 return is a mixture of seeing where India has gone since he was last there and rediscovering his own responses to the country. It is a personal story, working in edited material from previous copy on news items and it builds into it his marriage to a Delhi journalist and relationships with her family, culminating in his extended conversation with the Mahant of a leading temple in Varanasi in which he finds his own kind of belief and is enabled to surrender to India by way of immersion in the Ganges.

As an experienced foreign correspondent, a private individual and a freelance journalist, Kremmer can be more relaxed about his time in India and writing about it. But he is also more exposed in not having the protective shell of the expatriate professional community or a work team of cameramen, go-betweens etc. (130). Stories are focused on personalities and his own feelings towards them as much as on the public events that occasion his meeting with them. It is a journey of accommodation in which the writer changes his opinions (154) and learns to adapt and take on some elements of local life (234), seeing it all as a shift into a new asrama (335). The books gives an impression of greater intimacy with India accompanied by a more dispassionate reflection on its dynamics. Perhaps to compensate for not having Harley’s close-to-topical ABC reporter’s status, Kremmer’s book is given the effect of authority by its notes, glossary, index and long list of acknowledgements.
What we get in *Inhaling the Mahatma* is a picture of social change from the closed economy of 1990’s ‘license raj’ (12) to the boom open market of the globalised present. Kremmer is critical of the inefficiencies of the former period, but by no means completely celebrative of the latter. His theme running through this aspect of the book is the national loss of Gandhian ideals (124, 130) and descent into sectarian politics through the BJP era, with focuses on the destruction of the Babri Mosque, the killing of missionary Staines and his children, and the hijacking of a small plane. He also tracks the fortunes of the Congress dynasty as experienced via Rajiv, Sonia and then Rahul Gandhi. In and around these episodes, we get panoramic lessons on the history of Indus valley civilization (18), Partition (8), the secular state (72) and so on. There is a running motif of cows in this book too (194), but it is a serious look at rural politics and the uses of tradition by modern states, the ‘cow belt’ being the equivalent of the US Bible belt. Presenting us with scenes of mob violence, self-interest and hypocrisy (17, 44), Kremmer nonetheless stresses “the less spectacular but much more important story — the one about India’s remarkable progress and resilience” (144).

Nicholas Rothwell, reviewing reportage of the Baghdad invasion, comments that TV has taken over the task of conveying ‘the facts’, while reporters are left to confess to their own limitations and become self-reflexive in their writing:

> The reporting ‘I’ is central to this style of journalism…. Reporters no longer have a strong obligation to record the facts of the matter or focus on the grand events they see: that’s taken care of by the primary media source, TV, by photography and by agency journalists. What they have to offer is their secondary account of how it feels to be where they are, a memoir of the passion and the danger, the little weirdnesses that beset them in their difficulty-laden lives.
The story becomes them, their subjective consciousness, the adventures of their colleagues…..

Today, this dream of precise coverage has disappeared and war reporters openly embrace the impenetrability of the combat zone. Emotive, cinematic details stand out in their prose, while rumours become tradeable currency… in the phantasmagoria of postmodern reporting life. (13)

This is partly due to the ‘embedding’ of reporters with agencies and official organizations. All of the writers we look at here are at pains sometime in their narratives to distance themselves from the ‘media circus’ of First-World newshounds.

Another cause of the change noted by Rothwell is the “veil of language” surrounding most Western journalists in other parts of the globe. Again, while comic mismatches of language ability feature across the three texts, all writers show that they make some effort to acquire passable vernacular, Kremmer even featuring a cassette tape of ‘Teach yourself Hindi’ on the fly-leaf photos and pointing to his own use of the language. Kremmer is relatively comfortable in returning to work freelance there and explore his own connections to people and places. His narrative operates through personal ties, in particular those around Rajiv Gandhi and to individuals he happens across and becomes curious about like the hapless hijacker Satish Chandra Pandey. Kremmer’s language teacher, Hari Lal, is taken up as a friend from whom the journalist learns not only a passable Hindi, but also a kind of broad-minded spirituality and human graciousness that comes to stand for India’s best qualities (36-7). One has the sense that Kremmer is writing for himself, filling in the personal context and impressions to events previously reported with the quiet expectation that others will find his story of interest.
Sarah Macdonald, on the other hand, imprisoned in her touristic comedy routine beamed like TV’s ‘Getaway’ at the Australian consumer, has no time to dwell on things. She picks up a few works of Hindi from Moolchand the dhobi wala (20) and when she gets her visa extended takes on a language teacher. Since he works the ‘expat’ circuit, this turns out to be Hari Lal, but the thoughtful man of Kremmer’s later narrative is here merely a clown whose name is reduced from its allusions to the divinity and caste to the ridiculously dictionary literalism ‘green red’ by the spuriously authoritative narrator. Lal’s correctly formal phrases are mocked as obsolete (45-7), while both Harley and Macdonald go to some orthographic pains to reproduce ‘Babu’ English for our amusement. This again, is a narrative device lending dramatic liveliness to the text, but it does little to dignify characters consigned to bit parts against the narrator’s leading role. Mercifully Kremmer plays down this aspect of mimetic ‘authenticity’ and his book sacrifices some entertainment value in exchange for a greater effect of intellectual engagement.

If there works are not completely immune from recycling aspects of orientalism within the covers, it is also worth asking what uses we readers make of travel and its writing. Kevin Murray has an interesting article in which he surveys Australians who have been abroad, differentiating how they understand the lessons for them of Africa, India and Latin America. Africa is used to reflect on the complicated lifestyle of the modern West; Latin America politicises its visitors, while India is apprehended as a “token on livable disorder” (39). India breaks down the neat categories of bourgeois life and dissolves the dread of transgressing or having one’s own boundaries broken open. It is unusual that
Murray’s informants say nothing of India as a religious lesson for materialist Aussie sceptics. Both Macdonald and Kremmer depict their travels in the land as *yatra* or pilgrimages, even though Kremmer is mostly not engaged in spiritual searching. But it is the polytheistic fluidity of Hinduism that supplies them both with a framework for avoiding chaos and despair.

Civil disorder as encountered by the journalist may, unlike Murray’s tourists, emphasise the ultimate dread of being wounded or killed, and, as Sarah Macdonald’s account of tourists and travellers on the guru trail demonstrates, self-reformation, even in its most peaceable meditative modes, can produce feelings of extreme discomfort before equanimity is attained. Nonetheless, each writer experiences social disorder such that they reassess their individual autonomy and safety and learn to live with the idea of not being in control of things (Macdonald in earthquake, illness, and the conflict in Kashmir 128; Harley, in his coping with system breakdowns in his professional life and reporting from war zones, and Kremmer becoming caught up in the riot at the Babri Mosque).

Macdonald also reflects on the injustice of privilege, feeling some guilt about her own relative wealth (114) and shame about her country’s selfish isolationism (276) when it is hypocritically engaged in the wars that destroy the lives of the average family in Afghanistan and now Iraq and force them onto boats seeking refuge elsewhere. Harley blames South Asia for making him meaner (though it is actually the general nature of the disasters he reports on and his job), but uses the disorder of that world to reconnect to home, family and friends. Like Macdonald, he realizes in the death of his Australian
mates that there is no immunity anywhere from tragedy, but Australia still offers some
‘holding out’ “against the weight of the world” (332).

Each takes back to Australia a set of experiences that enable a new perception of home.
Australia is at once isolated, innocent, selfishly protective of this, blessedly uncrowded
and, since they are all Sydney-siders of middle-class background, cleansing of the soul
through immersion, not in the Ganges, but in the sun and surf of the beach (Macdonald
276). Circumstance, however, does alter perspective, since Kremmer marries in India and
so matches his comforting return to Sydney with learning to settle into the comforts of his
extended family at 3 Commissioner’s Lane, Delhi.

If these three texts are so different, then those scenes that repeat across them may reveal
something of either established generic conventions or common experiences of India by
white middle-class Australians. Following Paul Fussell’s reading of British travels in
Europe between the wars, we can see the tropes of bad driving (Harley, 12, 20, 86-7;
Macdonald, 6; Kremmer, 5-6) and cranky bureaucracy (Harley, 10-11, 56, 80;
Macdonald, 45; Kremmer, 242-54) as endemic to all travel writing no matter where it is
set. Both Harley and Macdonald invoke the ‘snob value’ of travel identified by Fussell
when they overtly position themselves as localizing sojourners rather than transient
tourists or agents of the global media circus (Macdonald 151, 275; Harley, 264-5), while
Kremmer doesn’t need to because he displays as central to his return visit his gradual
entry into Indian life as an in-marrying resident. The multi-faith variety and human
decency against odds of numbers and poverty are noted by all three writers (Macdonald,
and the spiritualizing of the secular Western sceptic occurs for at least two of them at the Kumbh Mela (Macdonald 151; Kremmer, 257). Jonathan Harley is just too busy it seems for such moments of calm. One lesson both Macdonald and Kremmer learn from the broad church of Hinduism and India’s cultural pluralism is that they cannot and do not need to forsake their own cultural/spiritual formation in order to take up supportive aspects of other faiths (Macdonald, 258; Kremmer, 359) and indirectly this accords with Harley’s negative responses to fundamentalist Islam and Hindutva violence.

Within this surrounding frame there are the particular differences outlined, but all three texts assume the same readership. The reading ‘we’ of these books is not Muslim, is largely agnostic, mainly secular and multicultural in the sense of being tolerant from a secure position of superiority. Ironically perhaps, it is Sarah Macdonald who most reveals and critiques this smug Oz-centricity as she also performs it. Possibly the nature of reporting assumes the power and superior access to understanding of the reporter and (in this case) his audience over those being reported on who merely experience life without the luxury of critical reflection. This commonality admits of certain differences and different reading agendas. The demographic implied by constant West-centric media-related puns, the flippant title redolent of ‘The Simpsons’, and the slick orientalising poster-art cover of Macdonald’s book, combined with what we know of her late-teens early adult rock radio audience will not be looking for or responding to the same things in the same ways as those readers who know who Kremmer’s ‘Mahatma’ actually is and are capable of appreciating the ironies of expecting a narrative about an India from which one can inhale sanctity while discovering stories about the political destruction of
Gandhian ideals as well as the literal inhaling of the great man’s ashes in a botched funeral delayed for years by a moribund legal system. (The cover features another ‘cow’, but not a ‘holy’ one — a working animal in a paradoxically tranquil setting that carries the general impression of the writer being regularly outdoors mingling with the life everyday Indians.) Readers are much more likely to use Macdonald’s book for entertainment and Kremmer’s for education. Harley’s sits somewhere in between as a record of professional development and journalistic scoops. As its cover misleadingly emphasizes Hinduism, it also *downplays* religion as a cute icon in a taxi, given that its focus falls often on Taliban, American and Hindutva violence. But the taxi itself is a claustrophobic black space from which one can see very little: perhaps indicating the nature of the junior reporter’s experience and providing a salutary caution to the reader looking to exploit vicarious adventures or find first-hand access to foreign affairs. The intertextual echo to the film ‘Lost in Translation’ suggests a sophisticated readership who will appreciate the artificiality of this transitory space of observation closed in by a wall of glass and the irony of relying on this chronotope of enclosed peeking for first-hand access to what goes on overseas: the experience tagged by the book as being “*almost there*” (329). Harley’s book is directed at a serious reader who might know the reputation of the author; the cover suggests that work will have to be done to penetrate the barrier between inside and outside so as to appreciate what is actually going on.

Part of my point here is that publishers are also players in the construction and marketing of Asian studies, selecting texts such as these and packaging them in ways that either critique or perpetuate stereotypes of ‘out there’ and at the same time conveying subtle
messages about who we are as readers and how we relate to the places encountered in the pages of their books. Against this generic and institutional othering in writing about South Asia by Australians, there is, in these three records of time abroad, a reconstruction of India as no longer a Third World of poverty but an emerging success story (especially relative to Pakistan and Afghanistan). There is an opening up of the ‘mystic India’ spiritual stereotype to political and social analysis, and a good deal more self-analysis about responses to being in India or taking on elements of life there. Kremmer is more able to show Indians also engaging in critical self-reflection because he is mostly not in the thick of action. Even so, all the books imply a privileged outside in which Australia is a sympathetic if sceptical onlooker. Macdonald does begin a critique of this, but the personal nature of her account tends to obscure its effect. The three books represent South Asia as a place of extremes (Kremmer 347, 362) against which Australia stands as an unspoken normative middle-ground of reasonableness, except that after the shocks of reporting on war and earthquake in South Asia, Harley returns to Sydney to find it alien in its very quietness: “Sydney as week before Christmas can’t be real at all. It twinkling beaches and laid-back parties are a surreal wonderland…. we are the weird ones, not them…. By sheer weight of numbers, India and its neighbours are more ‘normal’ than Australia.” (175). Perhaps this is a message that books like these and Asian studies in general still need to drum in to parts of Australia’s readership and leadership.

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