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Abstract

Indian writing in English over the last ten years - 1984-1994- has been plentiful though of uneven quality. A brief personal selection has to make several omissions and the major gap here is the exclusion of women writers of the South Asian diaspora, such as Meena Alexander, Sujata Bharati Mukherjee, Suniti Namjoshi. What follows is a strictly geographic choice, restricted to women who write in English and live in India. With the mobility now fashionable in literary circles there is a tendency of some writers to gravitate between the motherland and the West, especially the USA.

Silva. It is a reminiscence of key events from the point of view of a curious and energetic youngster growing up in her grandmother's home. These sketches of 'Ceylon' life convey the essence of what, in retrospect, seems a halcyon era in our history.

The question of translation is receiving a great deal of discussion in academic circles right now. Lakshmi de Silva and Ranjini Obeyesekere are two women writers who have translated significant Sinhala literature into English. De Silva has translated into English two of the most popular plays in Sri Lanka, E.R. Sarachchandra's *Sinhabahu* and *Maname*. Obeyesekere's most recent effort is *Jewels of the Doctrine* (1994) and in 1987 she edited the special issue of the *Journal of South Asian Literature* on the subject 'Sinhala and Tamil Writing from Sri Lanka.'

Women have not been as prolific in creative writing and drama. Nedra Vittachchi and Indu Dharmasena persisted in this regard, but the present seems a fallow season. We saw, however, in translation, successful productions of the work of Wole Soyinka and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o by Somalatha Subasinghe and Neloufer de Mel.

In criticism, although women writers published a number of journal articles, no major texts have appeared yet, except from Yasmine Gooneratne residing in Australia. Gooneratne is, undoubtedly, the best known and most published contemporary Lankan scholar in literature. The latest of her critical texts is *Silence, Exile, and Cunning: The Fiction of Ruth Praver Jhabvala* (1983). She is also the author of the acclaimed novel *A Change of Skies* (1991).

From Chitra Fernando, also living in Australia, we have *A Garland of Stories*, a collection of tales for children. Fernando's three other works of fiction have the lives of Lankan women characters as the main focus: *Three Women* (1984), *The Golden Bird and Other Stories* (1987) and *Between Worlds* (1988). Chandani Lokuge also lives in Australia; she published *Moth and Other Stories* in 1992.

In 1991 Eva Ranaweera compiled *Some Literary Women of Sri Lanka*, which is based on a survey of fifteen women writers who use English as their medium. As Ranaweera points out, Lankan women writers in English belong to a class that enables them to have the freedom, exposure, and the economic independence necessary to write. However, in spite of that few Lankan women can claim to be earning their living by writing. As Punyakante Wijenaiké said in her 'Why I Write', the 'financial rewards are small and limited'.

RANJANA SIDHANTA ASH

Indian Women's Writing in English

Indian writing in English over the last ten years - 1984-1994 - has been plentiful though of uneven quality. A brief personal selection has to make several omissions and the major gap here is the exclusion of women writers of the South Asian diaspora, such as Meena Alexander, Sujata Bharati Mukherjee, Suniti Namjoshi. What follows is a strictly geographic choice, restricted to women who write in English and live in India. With the mobility now fashionable in literary circles there is a tendency of some writers to gravitate between the motherland and the West, especially the USA. However, the work of the writers mentioned here continues to be India-based and not unduly

coloured by what might be described as the double vision of migrancy literature, that is, viewing India and things Indian from a foreign perspective.

Probably the dominant note in much of the decade's fiction and poetry – the two genres under discussion – is that of 'womanism', to use Alice Walker's term. It is writing that celebrates women, mainly Indian woman and roughly of the writer's own class and community. Boundaries are crossed rarely and mainly by the older generation – Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal in fiction, or a cosmopolitan academic like the new poet, Rukmini Bhaya Nair. Male characters are often of secondary importance, and the central narrative or poetic voice is that of a woman whose consciousness directs her relationships. This female-centred writing received new encouragement when India's first feminist book publishing house, Kali for Women, was established in 1984. Its decade of publishing helped to promote an intellectual milieu in which Indian feminist thought has produced its own interpretations of India's past, the colonial legacy, the impact of Indian and third-world nationalism, and the fact of social and economic development. The publication of *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Kali for Women, Delhi, 1989) marks a significant landmark in Indian feminist perceptions within academia similar to the tremendous influence exerted by the establishment of India's premier feminist journal, *Manushi*.

Kali for Women's anthologies of short stories by Indian women embody this new note of celebrating womanism. The stories do not always end on a note of female liberation. Lesbianism is scarcely touched on and the absence of working-class and peasant women disappointing. However, the stories reveal a new concern with women's sexuality, desires and interesting variations on the theme of motherhood. *Truth Tales* (1986) and *Slate of Life* (1990) were mainly stories translated from Indic regional languages, whereas the most recent collection, *In Other Words* (1992), has 14 stories written in English. Some of the writers are well known, like Vishwapriya Iyengar, Shema Futehally: others include Githa Hariharan, a newcomer who has received almost instant acclamation with the publication of her first novel and a collection of short stories.

The Iyengar story, 'No Letter from Mother', encapsulates the still problematic place of English within Indian society and literature. The girl in a boarding school longs to hear from her mother rather than to receive letters from her father but the mother's poor knowledge of English can only produce a few lines. It has been a decade also of fulminations by Indian women academics and others against the imposition of English and English literature on India by the British and by the post-colonial Indian establishment. (see, for example, Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, New York, 1989; Svati Joshi, ed., *Rethinking English*, Delhi, 1991; Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, ed., *The Lie of the Land*, Delhi, 1992). Nevertheless, English has become more entrenched in the capitalist development of the subcontinent and an avenue of upward mobility into the world of privilege.

Among the ramifications of this Indianisation of English are two that affect women's writing. There is a shift to English to gain a wider and foreign readership by those hitherto hostile to the language. Mrinal Pande, a major Hindi writer and editor, has recently had a semi-autobiographical novel in English published in London (*Daughter's Daughter*, Mantra, 1993). More marked is the effect of most women's bilingualism and multilingualism on the kind of English they write. In one of the short stories in the latest Kali collection, an entire paragraph has a third of the words borrowed from the writer's mother tongue while most others have incorporated regional languages. Whereas Anand had to create very meticulously a pastiche of Panjabi in his 1930s novels, today's women writers slip into an easy flow of an Indianised version of English, translating freely oral and religious verse from regional languages and from Sanskrit. Shashi Deshpande makes use of her native Kannada and the Sanskrit she learnt at school as central features in her recent novels – *That Long Silence*, (London,

1988) and *The Bending Vine* (London, 1993). Githa Hariharan's first novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (Delhi, 1992), contains some of the most luminous translations to be found of Sanskrit scripture and a recreation of Sanskrit descriptions of the many manifestations of the great goddess, Devi.

The decade's writing by Indian women has broken with the alleged homogenised culture of the upper classes of India, pursuing similar life styles in club bars and five-star hotel bedrooms, that tended to colour Indian English writing. There is a greater emphasis, for example, on regionalism. This could have had a negative result considering the rise of religious fundamentalism in India over the decade and the threats it posed to the country's secularist policy and a much-treasured cultural synthesis of Sanskritic and Indo-Persian inheritance. Fortunately writers like Deshpande and Hariharan who create their narratives from within their known communities - high caste Hindus, generally Brahmins - are also feminists who use Hindu custom and scripture to subvert tradition, and to underline their injunctions to liberate women.

It is the old guard that maintains in their writing the earlier broad vision that characterised Indian writing of the 1930s and 1940s, and the even earlier humanism of Tagore. Anita Desai's last two novels have not only moved away from her earlier fictional world of neurotic privileged women imprisoned in domesticity but they have also begun to explore political issues especially in the field of communal tension and conflict. *In Custody* (London, 1984) continues her engagement with Urdu and Urdu poetry first evident in *Clear Light of Day* (London, 1980). It is the story of the neglect and death of a major Urdu poet symbolising the fate of the language in an ever-growing Hinduised India which regards Urdu merely as the language of Muslims and not worthy of protection.

It is also a novel where she discards a woman's perspective writing very skilfully from the viewpoint of a man, a Hindu college lecturer devoted to Urdu poetry. Her latest novel to date goes further into contemporary politics and the meeting of cultures as circumstances force people out of their protected ethnic identities into the turbulence of refugee life. *Baumgartner's Bombay* (London, 1988) depicts the life of a German Jew cast out of Nazi Germany and finding refuge in India. It reveals a Desai who can create a world of moral decay and urban squalor with the same confidence as she did with her earlier settings in gardens and boudoirs.

Nayantara Sahgal, always concerned with macropolitics through her journalism and family upbringing, had made only marginal references to the larger world of Indian political and economic development in her earlier work. Her last three novels, however, have made politics a pivotal to the narrative. *Rich Like Us* (London, 1985) dealt with Indira Gandhi's Emergency, which suspended India's democratic rights and civil liberties for several years, and its impact on the lives of three sets of characters. *Plans for Departure* (London, 1986) is that rare Indian-English novel with a European woman as its central character. In this Sahgal links western feminism in the phase of suffragette activity with Indian nationalism pre-World War I. Her last novel to date *Mistaken Identity* (London, 1989) is an allegory of the cultural synthesis of Hindu and Muslim traditions and heritage in the 1920s and 1930s. Sahgal's established position as a major political novelist in English, similar to Mahasveta Devi's in Bengali writing, has recently been given a new dimension. The publication of a correspondence with her partner, now her husband, of extracts from letters written over three years in their relationship connects her two concerns - commitment to a better democratic state and equal rights across gender and class, as well as providing Indian women's writing with a new genre of personal letters. (*Relationships: Extracts from a Correspondence*, by Nayantara Sahgal and E.N.Mangat Rai, Kali for Women, 1994).

Poetry by Indian women writing in English is prolific. A fourth of a new anthology of women poets is in English, the rest being translations though many of the poets,

Meena Alexander, Shanta Acharya, Sujata Bhatt, Ketaki Kushari Dyson and Suniti Namjoshi are part of the South Asian diaspora. (Arlene Zide, ed., *The Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets*, Delhi, 1993). Perhaps it lacks the sensuality and musicality of the oral poetry Indian women have been composing at work and in enjoyment. Sarojini Naidu was able to capture some of the rhythm and colour in her English poetry written at the turn of the century but that is now decried in today's love of the unadorned and low-keyed. However, when the unadorned is compressed with many layers of meaning, suggestion and allusion, as in Alexander and Bhatt, the poem gains a new strength.

The big names of the past have not had new volumes published in the decade. Kamala Das's self-published first volume of collected poems contains her best work from the 1960s and 1970s. Gauri Deshpande's poems appear regularly. Since her much acclaimed first collection, Eunice de Souza has published two others, *Women in Dutch Painting* (Bombay, 1988) and *Ways of Belonging* (Edinburgh, 1990). They contain some of her best work in an ironic style spiced with her acerbic wit. She has explained her poetic credo as validating the stuff of women's lives as it is, not transcending it. In these volumes that stuff is drawn from Dutch paintings, Goan Catholicism, Greek mythology and Konkani villages.

Among the newcomers the common thread is the desire for freedom, especially in the exploration of heterosexual desire and an exposure of the hypocrisy of institutionalised religion and tradition. Tara Patel's persona in her first collection, *Single Women* (Calcutta, 1991) is caught between the desire of being free – wanting out of being someone's daughter or wife – and to experience sexual fulfilment. 'Even a one-night stand is luxury', she writes in the title poem. She wonders how her mother reacted to sex and whether she turned to religion, to Rama and Krishna, imagining herself to be Sita and Radha, their consorts, while her husband was becoming an alcoholic.

Imtiaz Dharker's *Purdah* (Delhi, 1989) crosses cultural frontiers as the poet, born a Muslim in Pakistan, raised in Britain and returning to India through her marriage to a Hindu, writes of women ambivalent about traditional morality and mores. The *purdah*, for example, protects and secures a woman in her privacy but it also imprisons her and, with time, becomes her shroud. She goes to the mosque for peace and 'the grace of light through marble' only to hear the mullah's wrath and some woman's 'defilement'.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair, a cosmopolitan academic, writes of her experiences at Cambridge, California and various countries of South and Southeast Asia in a very sophisticated first collection – *The Hyoid Bone* (Delhi, 1992). She is a meticulous poet whose craft is subtle and varied. She can write with a sense of mischievous fun about a clay horse from Bankura in West Bengal, as well as forge complex links between the illusory deer in the *Ramayana* which lured Sita into the clutches of Ravana and real deer being hunted down by sportsmen in the redwood forests of California. She uses her knowledge of several languages and her professional expertise as a professor of Linguistics in Delhi to construct interesting stanzaic patterns as in a poem called 'Genderole'.

It is their multilingual skills that one looks forward to among new developments in Indian women's poetry in English. Ruth Vanita, for example, with her first collection due out shortly, is both a lecturer in English at Delhi University and a translator from Hindi for *Manushi*. It is the combination of such talents that makes the 1990s appear promising.