Postliberalization Indian Novels in English

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Politics of Global Reception and Awards

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ANTHEM PRESS
LONDON · NEW YORK · DELHI

Anthem Press
An imprint of Wimbledon Publishing Company
www.anthempress.com

This edition first published in UK and USA 2013
by ANTHEM PRESS
75–76 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA, UK
or PO Box 9779, London SW19 7ZG, UK
and
244 Madison Ave. #116, New York, NY 10016, USA

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Postliberalization Indian novels in English : politics of global reception and awards /
edited by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-85728-564-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Indic fiction (English)–History and criticism.
I. Viswamohan, Aysha Iqbal, editor of compilation.
PR9492.2.P67 2013
823.009'954–dc23
2013004506

ISBN-13: 978 0 85728 564 5 (Hbk)
ISBN-10: 0 85728 564 5 (Hbk)

This title is also available as an eBook.

In loving memory of my father, the late Dr Iqbal Ahmed

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To undertake articulation of any idea is a daunting task. It not only involves private discovery and reflection, but also collaboration and interaction with several like-minded people. It goes without saying that a writer, besides being always in need of concrete information and knowledge, also needs intellectual and emotional support from those whom s/he holds in high esteem.

I am, therefore, grateful to the following:

Prof. Bhaskar Ramamurthy (director, IITM); Prof. T. T. Narendran, Prof. Job Kurien (former deans, ICSR) and Prof. Krishnan Balasubramanian (dean, ICSR); and Prof. Ajit Kolar (chairman, Centre for Continuing Education, IITM) for providing facilities and infrastructure for this endeavour;

Tabish Khair for graciously writing the foreword, and all the other contributors who added value to this volume;

faculty and staff of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences;

the library staff of IIT, Madras; Simon Fraser University, Vancouver; British Council Division, Chennai; English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad; and Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, New Delhi;

the Anthem Press team: Janka Romero, for her suggestions at all stages of writing this book, Tej Sood, Partha Malik and the editorial staff;

the peers who added value to the manuscript via the review process;

my family: son Aneesh, husband Viswamohan, mother Dr (Mrs) M. Iqbal and father (late) Dr Iqbal Ahmed;

my dear research scholars, U. Gopika and Vimal Mohan John for their tremendous support during the various stages of this project.

Foreword

REDEFINING INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH

Tabish Khair

Language is not transparent. It conditions our understanding and narration of events. If this can be the case between dialects of the same 'language', imagine the extent of the challenge when one writes in a particular language about characters who do not – or who do not only – speak that language?

Unfortunately, to say this in the context of Indian writing in English is to show a red rag to two very different species of bull. The first, simpler, species is the language nationalist, who will usually conflate your discussion of the complexity of English (in India) with a dismissal of it. He – it is often a male – will claim that Indians 'should only write in Indian languages', glibly echoing a common colonialist rant despite the fact that English has been around in India for three centuries and is now an 'Indian language' – though it is a language that has a different relationship to many Indian realities and to other Indian languages than, say, Tamil, Hindi, Urdu or Bangla.

But to make this ancillary point, while recognizing the place of English in India, is to show a red rag to the other, subtler and more cosmopolitan, species of bull, who would then read it as a dismissal of Indian English writing or an attempt to question the 'authenticity' of Indian English. However, for Indian literature in English to be read on its own terms, both the particular problems and the particular possibilities of English as a language in India have to be addressed – these might or might not be the same in a diasporic or general 'postcolonialist' context. This leads us to another aspect of the problem of discussing Indian writing in English: postcolonialism.

It is impossible to read Indian literature in English without reference to postcolonial literature, and at the same time it is impossible to read it primarily with reference to postcolonial literature. In fact, one can argue that the tendency to read Indian literatures in English along postcolonial

lines is often distortive: it slants the reading not only towards a particular selection of texts, but also towards a particular understanding of India and history. Hence, a literature written in a region with about four thousand years of extant literary texts is dated, effectively, about two hundred and fifty years back to the colonization of Bengal by the British East India Company. Sometimes, this tendency is resisted by incorporating a reference to 'classical' literature (though these are mostly Sanskrit texts retrieved by Orientalist scholarship), but even this leaves out about a millennia of thriving and cross-fertilizing literature in various languages, ranging from Sanskrit, Tamil and Farsi to more recent ones like Hindi and Urdu.

Again, even English in India exists in a situation that is very different from the one that obtains in such postcolonial states as Australia, New Zealand, Canada or Anglophone Caribbean. English is only one of many other spoken and written languages in India, all of which have thriving literatures. English is also a language that is not spoken uniformly across classes and lifestyles. It is hardly spoken by working-class Indians and in rural India, and it is mostly spoken with difficulty and reluctance in *taluk* (provincial) India. This observation, however, is difficult to make, as I have indicated above. It is mostly transformed into culturalist/nationalist reductionism – either celebrated or critiqued as a dismissal of the 'authenticity' of English writing in India, which it certainly is not.

The matter is not entirely different from the matter of postcolonialism. Indian English writing cannot be read without reference to the problems of English narration in an Indian context, but it should also not be read without reference to the possibilities. Similarly, while Indian fiction in English cannot be read as postcolonial fiction without doing violence to its complexities, it can also not be read entirely outside the discursive framework of postcolonialism.

Another area of mutual complexity – overlapping with what is usually practiced under the rubric of 'postcolonialism' in academia – is what has sometimes been called the Indian diaspora. It has come to represent the visible tip of the iceberg of Indian English writing in most critical accounts (let alone the media). However, any discussion of the literature of the Indian (or, more broadly, the South Asian) diaspora in the UK (and Europe) has to be carried out at various levels.

Any discussion of the South Asian (or Indian) diaspora also needs to address the massive movements of South Asian (and other Asian and African) peoples before European colonization. After all, the first recorded members of the South Asian diaspora to reach Europe in large numbers were probably the 'gypsies'. But, of course, 'gypsies' are not seen as belonging to the diaspora. In many ways, current discussion privileges the movements of certain kinds of people. First of all, it privileges the Eurocentric connection by implicitly

repeating the colonialist myth of European colonization as the great connecting link. This is, as I have indicated in *Other Routes*, a false conception: Asians and Africans moved before European colonization as well as during and after it. Secondly, it privileges the movement of certain kinds of South Asians: usually anglophone South Asians like me who started moving out of South Asia in the 1940s and later; that is, in the postcolonial phase. Even here, there is a deep irony in the fact that Raja Rao, who wrote the excellent novel *Kanthapura* in 1938, is usually not read in diasporic terms. His novel is held up – correctly so – as one of the very few convincing Indian English texts about village life in India. There seems to be a gulf between him and visibly 'diasporic' South Asian writers like Salman Rushdie. But in actual fact, the very young Raja Rao is reputed to have written *Kanthapura* partly in a castle in France and continued to live in France and USA for the rest of his long life.

In fact, the South Asian diaspora goes back a long way even in the colonial and postcolonial context. There are sixteenth-century paintings and accounts of Indian servants in England. The number of Indian servants and lascars (mostly South Asian sailors) being taken to Britain increases in later centuries – and in many cases these servants and lascars seem to have been abandoned on the streets of Britain (and Europe) when their services were no longer needed.

From early on, a small number of Indian aristocrats and gentry also chose to go to Europe, either to travel (as Abu Taleb did in 1797) or to settle down (as Deen Mahomed did a generation before Abu Taleb). Incidentally, both Taleb and Mahomed wrote books about their travels: the former in Farsi (Persian) and the latter in English. Finally, in the early twentieth century, thousands of South Asian soldiers reached Europe to fight the two great tribal wars in Europe: World War I and World War II. During World War I, for instance, India contributed more soldiers to the British cause than all the other colonies (Australia, Canada, etc.) combined.

It is in this context that one has to situate the literature of the South Asian diaspora. True, Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi and co. might have made it particularly visible, but even before them there were writers like Attia Hosain (who stayed on in London in 1947 because she could not choose between Pakistan and India) and Raja Rao. And before Rao, Hosain and others, there were writers like Deen Mahomed and the thousands of invisible South Asians who moved to and across Europe: servants, nursemaids (*ayahs*), sailors, travellers, soldiers, traders, all the way back to probably the first 'gypsies'.

It is in the context of the above problems and possibilities, visibilities and invisibilities that this book seems to serve a crucial purpose. This is indicated by the fact that the papers in it cover not only writers of Indian origin who are visible in the West or in international postcolonialist contexts but also

Indian writers who have a greater significance in India than abroad. It is this intermixture of writers that requires attention today, in Indian English critical terms. Without it, Indian writing in English will inevitably continue to be largely defined elsewhere.

INTRODUCTION

From postcolonialism to the current times of globalization, India and her fiction in English have travelled a long journey. One of the crucial debates that have been at the centre of postliberalization literature is its reception, at home and abroad. As the title suggests, all essays in this volume focus on the reception of the seminal authors and their works of the postliberalization period. The watershed year for postliberalization was 1991, when economic reforms changed the urban Indian landscape. This was also the time when Indian writers of English caught the attention of the Western world like never before. My interest is particularly in such writers whose concerns are related to India in its immediacy and who came into literary prominence in postliberalized India. For this study, I attempt to analyse the perceptual shifts on the receivers (i.e. members of the English-speaking world) as a consequence of liberalization. This shift will be measured in terms of critical reception as well as reception at the university level in English-speaking countries.

Observers of Indian novels in English tell us that this is one of the best periods for the category of Indian writing in English, at least in terms of attention received. The number of successes speaks for itself: Salman Rushdie won the 'Booker of Bookers' (1993); Vikram Chandra won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* in the best first book category (1995); Arundhati Roy won the Man Booker for *The God of Small Things* and Amitav Ghosh won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1997); Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for *Interpreter of Maladies* and V. S. Naipaul was awarded the Nobel in Literature (2000); Vikram Seth got a staggering sum of £1.3 million in advance for *Two Lives* (2003); Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* remained on the bestseller list for 70 weeks (2004); Kiran Desai won the Man Booker for *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006); Amitav Ghosh was shortlisted for *The Sea of Poppies* and Aravind Adiga won the Man Booker for *The White Tiger* (2008). While the accolades keep coming, criticisms toward the celebrity status of Indian writing cannot be ignored, and this anthology attempts to map the voices of scepticism as well. It is therefore no accident that many of the essays are concerned with the nature of book trades, distribution, marketing and

circulation, along with award politics, and how these elements have a formative effect on reception of books. Excessive market play and the position of English as a global language inform the trends in reception of contemporary novels in English from India. Academics blame the publishing industry for various gimmicks and ploys to ensure sales. In this context Pankaj Mishra says, 'We don't have a critical culture in English […] we rely on celebrity endorsements to assess a piece of writing.'[1] However, the brighter side is that today all kinds of genres are explored and experimented with, including historical, thrillers, chick/lad lit, campus fiction and children's fiction.

Despite their unprecedented success, Indian novelists in English are constantly at the receiving end of salvos. Jerry Pinto summarizes the usual complaints against these authors who, according to the critics:

1. don't understand India,
2. live abroad and don't get India right,
3. get paid obscene quantities of money,
4. get all the attention in the media,
5. never translate them (critics perhaps mean that these global writers never translate Indian literature in other languages).[2]

Pinto of course debunks several myths of the above misconceptions, as does Shashi Deshpande elsewhere while debating the politics of awards and reception of certain acclaimed novels.[3] Further, if hype and star status of an author could sell a book, then Adiga's *Between the Assassinations* (2008) and Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* in the same year would have been the bestsellers. However, the fact is both these novels vanished without a trace.

While discussing the pool of talent in Indian novels in English, Khushwant Singh makes a list of writers who he regards as 'significant' and rates as 'the best in the last 60 years'.[4] The aim of the present volume is to document those Indian novelists from postliberalized India who have received acclaim at critical and university levels; for example, they receive positive reviews in eminent newspapers and magazines, are interviewed by high-profile talk-show hosts on television; their works are adapted for films and prescribed in university syllabuses; and they are invited as professors/writers-in-residence and are on distinguished committees, including the literary prize-giving ones.

The essays in this volume posit:

1. What are those cultural and critical frameworks that define literary reception?
2. Has there been a marked shift in the reception of Indian novelists in English postliberalization as compared to earlier novelists?

3. What about the attitude of the award-giving bodies? Does a freer economy c/overtly determine these awards?
4. Do marketing strategies by the big publishing companies play a significant role in making the works of some authors more visible (e.g. bidding wars between publishers, much-publicized advances/royalties, etc.)?
5. To what extent are the works of these writers driven by the dictates of the market?
6. Do our commercially/economically driven media influence critical/commercial perceptions?
7. Are there certain thematic concerns and representations that are deemed 'prize and attention worthy' and do these factors influence the critical/commercial reception of the novels?

A brief overview of the anthology is presented thus:

A. N. Dwivedi's essay on Pankaj Mishra focuses on Mishra's role as a chronicler of our times. Dwivedi notes that Mishra's rise coincides with the phenomenon of postliberalization. While Mishra's inspirations are the European masters, his sensibilities are essentially Indian and are reflected in his travelogues and nonfiction writings. Mishra is credited with bringing the small town back into literary writing, and is one writer who cannot be accused of writing books to suit Western tastes. Dwivedi argues that Mishra's steadfast refusal to play the media game could be one of the reasons for the lack of attention bestowed upon him.

Since his literary debut, Salman Rushdie has been recognized as one of the most powerful figures of postcolonial fiction. Angshuman Kar addresses the construct of decanonization pertaining to the writers of the post-Rushdie generation in 'Commodification of Post-Rushdie Indian Novels in English: Kunal Basu and the Politics of Decanonization'. Kar argues that against the forces of marketing and canonizing, a writer like Kunal Basu must bide his time before receiving his rightful attention.

One of the biggest success stories of contemporary India is Chetan Bhagat, who with five bestselling novels to his credit is decidedly a literary superstar. A self-proclaimed 'Karan Johar/Salman Khan' of literature, Bhagat positively revels in his mass appeal. Although constantly shunned by the upmarket literary critics, Bhagat's is a voice that needs more attention. My paper, 'Marketing Lad Lit, Creating Bestsellers: The Importance of Being Chetan Bhagat', attempts to address this gap, and analyses the writer's place and his voice in postliberalized India.

Chinmoy Banerjee analyses Vikas Swarup's extraordinary success in 'Vikas Swarup: Writing India in Global Times', as a consequence of synthesizing globalization and marketing forces. Swarup, through mastering certain codes

and tropes, has positioned himself as a writer of our times through *Q & A* (2005) and *Six Suspects* (2008). Banerjee traces the trajectory of Indian novels in English from Raja Rao to Amit Chaudhuri, writers who have struggled to cope with notions of authenticity and language, and situates Swarup as someone who seems indifferent to these serious literary concerns.

The God of Small Things evokes strong reactions among readers across the globe, its author's perhaps the strongest. Chinnadevi Singadi tackles the 'whys' and 'buts' of the politics of reception for the writer–activist. Singadi interrogates the West's preoccupation with India's filth, caste and superstitions, and how prestigious award bodies respond to the 'ugly' representation of the Third World.

One of the most controversial books of our times, as far as awards go, is Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. John Masterson, in 'Aravind Adiga: The White Elephant? Postliberalization, the Politics of Reception and the Globalization of Literary Prizes', explores the combined phenomenon of globalization, postcoloniality and subalterity implicit in Adiga's novel. Masterson feels that a divisive work like this indicates the effectiveness with which it opposes the erasing of difference necessary for globalization.

Laura Moss looks at Vassanji's multinational identity in 'The Multinational's Song: The Global Reception of M. G. Vassanji'. Vassanji's refusal to be pigeonholed by the expectations of nationality or genre echoes the increasing desire of global subjects to think about the constructs of identity and place. It is not surprising, therefore, that Vassanji can be marketed as an African, South Asian, Canadian writer. This perhaps, for Moss, accounts for Vassanji's global reception.

Letizia Alterno's 'Shreds of Indianness: Identity and Representation in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*' focuses on the immigration experience and forced categorization. At the core of Kapur's works are the themes of migration, cultural transition, adaptation and identity and gender across national contexts, and Alterno invites us to read how significant these issues are in the context of the postliberalization Indian scenario.

Maria Ridda, in her 'Inside 'The Temple of Modern Desire': Re-collecting and Re-locating Bombay', explores the impact of globalization and the plethora of possibilities it has launched on the urban spaces of India's largest and fastest growing city, Mumbai. Essentially a study of Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* (2004) and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006), the article investigates how the books themselves introspect the cosmopolitan character of urban Mumbai through an intertextual study of Bollywood cinema, which envisages the core of Indian sentiments, visualizing the dreams and desires of a heterogeneous multitude in a quasi-real manner that compliments the city's translucent nature.

Om Prakash Dwivedi assesses the impact of globalization on Tabish Khair and wonders why a major talent like his is not receiving the attention it deserves. Dwivedi admires Khair's felicity for sketching life and characters from rural India and underprivileged backgrounds, an atypical trait in any contemporary writer. Khair's ability to infuse fiction with history and his Rushdie-like ability to introduce magical realism into his writings is also explored in 'Tabish Khair: Marketing Compulsions and Artistic Integrity'.

Patricia Gruben discusses issues of critical reception for Rohinton Mistry and considers how his 'Parsiness' forges a unique identity for him in Canada. The writer also reflects on the perception of Mistry's work as a realist in 'Rohinton Mistry and the Can-Lit Imperative'. Mistry's humanistic impulses and depiction of family values are also discussed as contributing factors toward his popularity.

Sajal Bhattacharya considers Amitav Ghosh as 'The Indian Architect of a Postnational Utopia' and details Ghosh's preoccupation with borders and nationalities, and with institutionalized sufferings. It is seen that Ghosh's role as an anthropologist shapes his role as a fiction writer. Bhattacharya maintains that while Ghosh enjoys worldwide popularity, he retains his essential Indian flavour, which underscores his positive reception at global level.

Vikram Seth's uniqueness among contemporary Indian writers and his refusal to be bracketed within categories of nationalistic diaspora forms the central thrust of this paper. Mala Pandurang's 'Here, There and Everywhere: Vikram Seth's Literary Constituencies' discusses his literature and biography, correlating his identity as a global migrant and his diverse creative output. Seth's unique migratory subjectivity is also examined in the light of his many geo-cultural locations and his ability to be 'at home' everywhere. Locating his last two (distinctively international) works within the period of India's economic liberalization, Seth's attempts to escape the restrictive boundaries of nationalism is also examined.

Dramatic reversal of fortunes defined Kaavya Viswanathan's career, and Shaleena Koruth's provocative 'Whatever Happened to Kaavya Viswanathan?' traces the decline and fall of the young writer. Koruth unfolds the sordid saga of strategizing and plagiarizing that underpinned the *Opal Mehta* (2006) controversy. Wheeling-dealing, marketing and packaging all form an integral part of the modern publishing set-up. For Koruth, the blame lies as much as with the publicity machinery and the big publishing houses as with Viswanathan herself.

Sara-Duana Meyer, in 'Of Win and Loss: Kiran Desai's Global Storytelling', examines Kiran Desai as the celebrity novelist and Indo-American author of 'the erstwhile league of diaspora literature'. The chapter follows the major themes in her work, studying her as a storyteller oscillating between

the global and the local. The paper also proposes an analysis of the distinct cultural markers in her novels, amid accusations of her exoticization of the Indian experience. A study of her views on hybridization, globalization and migration is also attempted. The reality of a global commodification of cultural differences is seen in the light of Desai's visibility, marketability and prominence. The paper finally attempts to decode her strategy of retrieving and representing her 'Indianness'.

'Immigrant Desires: Narratives of the Indian Diaspora by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni' by Tutun Mukherjee reads Banerjee's novels as a testament to the pains and pleasures of the diaspora. Prof. Mukherjee understands the implicit contradictions in the lives of the immigrants and realizes that this category of writing cannot be completely free of romanticization of India. Her essay asks if 'being visible and reader-friendly minimizes the need for this body of literature to address economic and sociopolitical issues that immigrants face in their new environments'.

I am aware that the novelists missing in the present anthology are many and significant. Some notable absentees are: Amit Chaudhuri, Anurag Mathur, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri, I. Allan Sealy, Kiran Nagarkar, Manil Suri, Mukul Kesavan, Manjula Padmanabhan, Namita Gokhale, Shashi Deshpande, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Hari Kunzru, Anita Rau Badami, David Davidar, Anuja Chauhan, Tarun Tejpal, Abha Dawesar, Jaishree Misra, Neel Mukherjee, Rukun Advani, Shobha Narayan, Shobha De, Karan Bajaj, Ashok Mathur, Amitava Kumar … the list goes on. But perhaps there will be another book, another day.

Notes and References

1 Sheela Reddy, 'The Blurb Bubble', *Outlook*, 4 December 2006. Online: http://outlookindia.com/fullprint.asp?choice=1&fodname=20061204&fname=AWriters+(F)&sid=1 (accessed 24 July 2011).

In the same article it is further mentioned, 'Sometimes it's not just readers who get taken in; even publishers/distributors get swayed by blurbs, as debut writer Edward Luce discovered recently. Luce says he didn't realise how crucial blurbs were for sales here until his own book was launched. When his distributors in India, Penguin, discovered that the jacket of *In Spite of the Gods* carried blurbs by two heavyweights, Dalrymple and Amartya Sen, they doubled the order from 5,000 copies to 10,000, Luce Claims.'

2 Jerry Pinto, 'The Write Moment', *Outlook*, 31 December 2006, 163.

3 While discussing celebrity writers – Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga in particular – Shashi Deshpande remarks: 'There were many who admired Roy's book […]. The response to Desai's book, good or bad, was muted. Adiga's book has had a lot of adverse reactions […]. The writer's only job is not to present realities. And what the reader expects, however dark the book, is some redeeming quality.' (Shashi Deshpande, 'Debating Spaces', *Hindu*, Literary Review, 1 February 2009, 1.)

4 Khushwant Singh, 'Queen's Ransom', *Outlook*, 20 August 2007, 118. Singh lists, among others, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*, Kiran Nagarkar's *Cuckold*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jaysinh Birjepatil's *Chinnery's Hotel*, Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk*, Tabish Khair's *Filming: A Love Story* and M. G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*. He adds, 'Though more than half of them are now foreign nationals, their themes are Indian and the applause they get abroad resonates in India. They return to India periodically to be garlanded and to get fresh material, and now also earn handsome royalties in rupees.'

Chapter One

A MAVERICK SCHOLAR: THE WRITINGS OF PANKAJ MISHRA

A. N. Dwivedi

One of the relatively recent signatures in contemporary Indian English writing, Pankaj Mishra, shot into the limelight with his work in fiction and nonfiction. Not much attention has been paid to him in the academic world for very long; in this paper my attempt has been to address this gap. But for a few reviews appearing in newspapers and literary journals (as the endnotes reflect), and the critical articles of Rahul Gairola (2003), Padmaja Challakere (2004), Jill Didur (2009) and Dwivedi (2009), no sustained efforts in the form of a book have been made to throw light on Mishra's works and achievements. These reviews and articles evoke a mixed response to his writings. More critical attention is called for because Mishra happens to be an author of the postliberalization period. But for his *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India* (1985), all his works appeared after 1991 – once the process of liberalization and globalization in India had begun, the resonance of which was particularly felt in metropolitan cities.

Pankaj Mishra was born in the small town of Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh, in 1969. He did his undergraduate course at the University of Allahabad, which had been a centre of attraction for his maternal family: 'Three generations of my mother's family had gone to the University in Allahabad.'[1] Having spent three years at Allahabad (1985–88), Mishra proceeded to Benares in the winter of 1988 for an intensive self-guided reading. He describes Benares as 'the holiest city of the Hindus, where people come either ritually to dissolve their accumulated "sins" in the Ganges, or simply die and achieve liberation from the cycle of rebirths'.[2] He started attending the library of the Benares Hindu University where he discovered Edmund Wilson and his books, many of them being 'collections of reviews of books'.[3] He avidly read them along with several thought-provoking works by other authors, like Schopenhauer, Turgenev and Flaubert.

Mishra then shifted to Delhi to pursue his graduate studies at the School of Languages, Jawaharlal Nehru University. In the meantime, he began publishing insightful reviews of Indian fiction in English and Western fiction on India in *The Pioneer*, a daily from Delhi. Mishra completed his MPhil and then took up a travel writing project, which resulted in *Butter Chicken*, a travel book, mapping his journey across several North Indian small towns. Rahul Gairola posits that *Butter Chicken* is Pankaj Mishra's first novel, but the brief biography of Mishra published in *The Romantics* (1999) mentions this as his debut novel.[4] *The Romantics* is a predominantly autobiographical work and the protagonist Samar represents the author to an extent. Mishra was offered $450,000 as an advance from Random House for the novel – the second largest 'monetary nod' for an Indian writer in English, according to Robert Marquand in the *Christian Science Monitor*.[5]

Two books by Mishra came out in quick succession: first, *An End to Suffering: The Buddha in the World* (2004) – a memoir about his experience researching the life of Gautama Buddha, the Enlightened One – and second, *Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan and Beyond* (2006) – a travelogue taking him to some historically and politically significant cities in India, and later through Kashmir, to Pakistan and Afghanistan, culminating in a visit to Nepal and Tibet. Mishra's essays and reviews have been appearing at regular intervals in national and international journals as well as periodicals of repute, including the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Statesman*, *Granta*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Guardian* and *Outlook*.

The Romantics, written over a period of about nine weeks, is the only fictional work that Mishra has produced to date.[6] It narrates the story of a 20-year-old university student called Samar, who studies at the University of Allahabad and later shifts to Benares to pursue the works of Edmund Wilson and other Western philosophers. He regards Wilson as his 'own Guru, long dead but […] more real than anyone I actually knew during that winter'.[7] To him, Wilson's was 'an extraordinarily cohesive sensibility'.[8] Another great influence upon Samar is that of Gustav Flaubert and his *A Sentimental Education* (1869). According to Jill Didur, Flaubert's disaffected protagonist, Frederic Moreau, serves as 'a partial model for Mishra's narrator, Samar'.[9]

At the Benares Hindu University, Samar meets Rajesh, a politically active Brahmin student leader recommended by another student leader named Vijay of Allahabad. Samar is drawn to Rajesh because both of them are keenly interested in Wilson. The theme of the East–West encounter comes out vividly in *The Romantics*. While the ancient city of Benares struggles to cope with the modern India, Samar comes into contact with a number of people, both Indians and non-Indians: the old Panditji and his beleaguered wife living in separate rooms for the past 15 years, their son Arjun and his wife

Sitadevi, their servant Shyam, Miss West, Mark, Debbie, Sarah, Catherine and her exploitative Indian boyfriend Anand. Of these, Samar draws closer to Miss West and Catherine, especially to the latter. Whereas his relationship with Miss West is one of friendliness, his relationship with Catherine is one of infatuation. Commenting on the ending of the novel, Jill Didur observes, 'Mishra's novel concludes with Samar in a secular, exilic mode, eschewing belonging and ready to begin a contrapuntal accounting of the past and his place in the nation.'[10]

Butter Chicken focuses on small towns (not in the popular tourist destinations) like Murshidabad, Muzaffarnagar and Kottayam. In undertaking his travels, Mishra has no real itinerary or planned route. He is not so much interested in sights as in observing the transformation of Indian society under the myriad new influences affecting the country. There is much in this book about the effect of television, fast-food restaurants, rapidly expanding multistorey hotels and newer means of transportation. Though he may not be as sharp in wit as Paul Theroux or as ponderous as V. S. Naipaul in his observations, Mishra connects with the locals and he is funny and thoughtful with an ironic style.

In his itinerary, Mishra comes to Kottayam and meets, among others, Mary Roy, principal of the Corpus Christi School. He carries an introduction from a casual acquaintance, Arundhati Roy, who is Mrs Roy's daughter now living in Delhi in an illicit relationship with a Hindu man. Here it may be noted that Mishra's acquaintance with Arundhati Roy might have been 'casual' in 1985, but later it grew deep and he did his best to promote her novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), which eventually earned for her the Booker Prize in 1997. In the acknowledgement section of *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy has expressed her indebtedness to Mishra for 'flagging it off on its journey into the world.'[11] However, the unusual interest shown by him in the international promotion of the novel cost him dearly – he was fired from his position at HarperCollins in India.

Butter Chicken evoked a mixed response from readers and reviewers. Some of them consider it as a work of 'sharp insight'[12] that endeavours to discover 'the huge and diverse land that is India', but the same review also criticizes it as 'somewhat lacking in focus and direction'.[13] Mishra, too, remains queasy about his work: 'It is a fake book, a dishonest book by a dishonest writer. I completely suppressed some part of myself, the part that belongs to small town India in order to mock at it. I borrowed a voice, and maintained a constant distance between myself and the experience.'[14]

In *An End to Suffering*, Mishra agonizes over the rise of religious extremism and its offshoot, majoritarianism. He thinks that the disappointment of the postcolonial Indians is due to 'the uneven distribution of modernity's promises.'[15] To illustrate this, Mishra narrates the story of his visit to his college friend