
Of Books and Borders

Focus

Stephen Alter

This past summer, as I was crossing the border between India and Pakistan, I had to fill out innumerable customs and immigration forms, giving my passport and visa particulars. In the space provided for nationality I dutifully wrote, “American,” and for occupation, “Novelist,” but as I passed through one checkpoint after another I couldn’t help feeling that I was being somewhat deceitful. It is difficult for me to honestly identify myself as an American novelist. Each of my books is set in India and, even though some of my characters are Americans and certain chapters take place in the United States, the landscape of my fiction has always been South Asia. At the same time, it is equally difficult for me to claim that I am an Indian novelist, even though I was born in that country and have spent most of my life in the subcontinent. As the son and grandson of American missionaries I will always be an interloper in the culture.

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The truth of it is that a good many Indian writers share this sense of dislocation and displacement. Hindi novelist, Srikant Varma, has called the modern Indian writer “a stranger in his own land.” Salman Rushdie, who has become an itinerant story teller, wandering from one hiding place to another, has written eloquently about his “imaginary homelands.” As an expatriate Indian, living in self-exile, Rushdie writes about the country of his birth not so much out of experience but from fragmented memories and refracted truths. A significant proportion of India’s English language novelists now live outside the borders of their country—Vikram Chandra, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Gita Mehta, to name a few. For many of us the reasons are no doubt financial. It is far easier to make a living as a writer in America, even though this often invites accusations of betrayal from jingoistic critics. The term “Non Resident Indian,” or NRI, has acquired a certain currency suggesting the allure of foreign exchange but casting doubts of counterfeit loyalty. The Indian Tax code, an epic work of fiction in its own right, contains a wonderfully ambiguous phrase that might apply to our situation: “Resident but not Ordinarily Resident.”

One of the reasons for my journey between India and Pakistan was that I had read a number of novels and stories about Partition. The border, established just over fifty years ago in 1947, has always held a special fascination for fiction writers, particularly those from the Punjab. Saadat Hasan Manto, Bhisham Sahni, Kushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Bapsi Sidhwa, and many others have used those lines on the map to delineate the predicaments of their characters. When it comes to questions of identity, there is nothing so potent as a land divided. Taking my seat in the train, which crosses the border twice a week between the cities of Amritsar and Lahore, I couldn’t help remembering scenes from Bhisham Sahni’s short story, “We Have Arrived In Amritsar,” in which the passengers on a similar train begin to feel a growing sense of anxiety and alienation as they approach the frontier. A few weeks later, returning to India by road, I walked across the “no man’s land” between these two countries and recalled Saadat Hasan Manto’s story, “Toba Tek Singh.” Driven insane by the dislocation and uncertainty of Partition, the main character finally collapses and dies in that “no man’s land.” Both of these stories affected me deeply when I read them, and as I crossed the borders their resonant ironies came back to haunt me.

More often than not, language is the dividing line between literatures, and a great deal has been written about the problem of language in Indian writing. I have no interest in dredging up that question, except to say that there are a good many excellent writers in regional languages even though their work suffers from poor translation. A few examples: Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), U. R. Anantha Murthy (Kannada), Gopinath Mohanty (Oriya), Amrita Pritam (Punjabi). Indian writers of English enjoy a much broader audience both with-in and outside the country simply because their work is more easily accessible. On the other hand, Indian English has become a distinct vernacular. Writers such as Rushdie and, most recently, Arundhati Roy, write in a voice that is as recognizably different as Roddy Doyle's Irish English, Chinua Achebe's Nigerian English, and Alice Walker's African-American English. The Queen's language is no longer paramount and has been usurped, co-opted, and corrupted forever, which is certainly a good thing.

Books have margins but no borders. Publishers and agents assign territories and squabble over foreign rights, while most novelists distance themselves from these issues and focus on the fragile boundaries of human relationships, the intricate cartography of the soul, and universal themes like love, sex, jealousy, and betrayal.

I doubt that any self-respecting writer ever sits down at a desk with the expressed intention of writing an "Indian" short story or novel. Good fiction doesn't work that way, even though the juries for literary prizes may often believe otherwise. We choose a point of view and consciously select our characters or setting, aware that each of these will define our work. For the most part, though, an author's nationality has little bearing on the writing itself, even in those novels which might be called political fiction. "This is going to be a short story about Partition," one writer might say to herself before putting a pen to paper, or "This novel will trace the history of a family traveling from Lahore to Amritsar as refugees in 1947." Yet it is unlikely that any fiction writer worth reading will begin with the assumption that, "As an Indian, I am going to write about Partition."

Perhaps more than anything else, however, it is our audience which defines us. Every novelist has an imaginary reader perched upon his shoulder like a talking parakeet. My own particular bird repeats a few choice phrases with ear-splitting regularity. "Not Good Enough!" is one of the complaints, followed by "Shit-men-bloody!"—a boarding school curse delivered with an Anglo-Indian accent. The Greeks may have believed in a benevolent and seductive muse, but for most writers there is nothing more than a tormenting heckler in the audience who drives us insane. The parakeet on my shoulder has one annoying line that I will never forget, a rude little rhyme, which echoes from games I played in childhood. Whenever I begin to write he squawks in English, "What is this?" then answers his own question in Hindi: "*Kaan pakar ke chootar ghiss!*" (loosely translated this means "grab your ears and scrape your ass.")

But there is also an audience in the broader and more reverent sense of that word, and here I can't help feeling certain territorial instincts. Perhaps the greatest moment of satisfaction that I have experienced as a writer was to see my novels on the shelf of a bookstore in my hometown of Mussoorie. The Cambridge Book Depot lies in Kulri Bazaar; it is a cluttered, dimly lit space, so full of books that you have to walk sideways down the aisles. The entrance is draped with newspapers and magazines, hanging from strings like laundry, glossy film journals and current affairs rags, but in the depths of the store are stacks of paperbacks, rising from floor to ceiling, a windowless vault of literature. As a boy I used to find myself drawn to that shop, and after flipping through the comic books I would begin surveying the spines of Penguin classics, the orange brickwork of

English fiction. There was no real order to those books, which were simply stacked as they were received, some of them arranged on shelves, others piled up like a precarious house of cards. Aside from the Penguins there were several Indian publishers, Orient paperbacks and Jaico, less polished produc-

tions, the binding already coming unglued before the pages had even been read. It was from this bookshop that I bought my first copy of R. K. Narayan's *A Bachelor of Arts* and recognized in his fictional Malgudi the familiar experience of small towns across India, whether it be Mysore or Mussoorie. Ten years later, it was impossible to contain my excitement when I discovered two novels of mine, buried amongst that heap of books.

The Cambridge Book Depot supplied a diverse audience, including retired Indian Army Colonels, winsome school girls from Waverly Convent, European hippies, and goggle-eyed tourists from Delhi and Calcutta who come up to Mussoorie during the summer months to escape the heat. If I were asked to describe an ideal reader it would be an acquaintance of mine, who used to spend a good deal of time in the Cambridge Book Depot, squinting at the pages of novels under the faint light of a 40 watt bulb suspended from the ceiling. Soon after my first novel was published, this reader, who was a student at the degree college in Mussoorie, asked me if he could borrow my book. I was reluctant to give it to him since other copies had been filched by friends, but in the end I handed it over. He kept it for a week and then returned it promptly without a word. I have no idea whether he liked the novel or not, but I discovered that he had made a protective cover for my book, folded carefully out of a Hindi newspaper. The fact that he offered neither praise nor criticism but returned the book so carefully wrapped made me feel that he was a reader I could trust.

My travels last summer took me as far as Peshawar, a frontier town in Pakistan, tucked into the foothills near the Khyber pass. Peshawar lies at the crossroads of ancient trade routes from Afghanistan and Central Asia. Northern invaders passed through this region, brigands such as Alexander and Tamerlaine, who crossed the mountains to loot and conquer India. Their stories are now the stuff of history. The Dubai Hotel, where I stayed in Peshawar, lay in the heart of Kissa Kahani Bazaar—the Story Tellers Market. Years ago it was here that itinerant raconteurs gathered to tell their tales of far away cities like Delhi, Kabul, Samarkhand, and Kashgar. Over countless cups of tea, poured from the spigot of a bloated samovar, the story tellers spun their web of words, for anyone who cared to listen.

Though I searched about for several days there were no longer any story tellers to be found in Kissa Kahani Bazaar. Instead, the open air lobby of the Dubai Hotel boasted a large Japanese TV and video player. A motley group of thirty or forty men sat transfixed in front of the screen, watching a Bombay film, the volume turned up so loud that it sounded like an air raid siren. But even in the absence of traditional story tellers, the city of Peshawar offered plenty of romance for a wandering novelist. Instead of heckling parakeets, the bazaar was filled with caged partridges, which are kept as pets. Their pious owners translate the shrill cry of this bird into an Urdu phrase, "*Subaan Teri Kudrat !*"— an exclamation praising God's creations. Listening to the partridges calling to each other, I felt the first stirrings of a novel taking shape in my imagination. Walking through the Kissa Kahani Bazaar I couldn't help reflecting on the connection between stories and borders, that impulse to tell what lies beyond our fictional frontiers.

Stephen Alter is a novelist who teaches at MIT. His new book about growing up in India is entitled All the Way to Heaven.

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