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The National Longing for Form

What new criteria will black literature bring into play at a time when polarization of cultures thrives through instant news, instant camera and instant technology? This is why I think that fiction needs to assert its peculiar scale . . .

Wilson Harris[1]

I myself believe that the history of Ganesh is, in a way, the history of our times.

V. S. Naipaul[2]

Until the appearance of *Midnight's Children* in 1980, India's literary agents in the West were, for the most part, obscure intellectual tourists or Indian academics writing in the yellowed volumes of Delhi publishing houses. Srinivasa Iyengar has noted, for example, that at the very moment that Commonwealth fiction was finally getting attention, Indo-English literature – despite its comparative quality and volume – had no following comparable to that of Africa and the Caribbean. In the United States and in Britain, the social conflicts making news in those regions were enough to make their literatures a going issue, whereas India and the Raj (much less the Independence struggle itself) were already an old story.

The problems of Western reception, however, go beyond this apparent anachronism. For the Indo-English masterpieces have been trying to overcome larger cultural barriers than those of other post-colonial novels. Flourishing in a highly developed literary tradition of several millennia, working off of a set of standard invocations and stories from a voluminous array of epics and holy books, the novels can require an extraordinary immersion in literary and historical background: Vedic, Puranic and epic traditions with their centuries-long Sanskrit commentary; the civilisations of

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Mohenjo-Daro, the Aryans, the empires of the Mauryans, Mughals and British; an uncanny mixture of village television programmes, nationwide Hindi cinema-viewings and oral storytelling; and, on top of this, the grafting on to this intellectual legacy of the British canon itself. Added to this is the paradox that the Indian novel (unlike others in the British colonies) flourished first not in English but in Bengali and Hindi.

Occupying the British mind before the sharp clashes of the decolonisation struggles in the 1950s and 1960s, the Indo-English novel became known in the West before the image of anti-colonial 'struggle' became a selling point in Western critical circles. Thus, some of the most prominent Indo-English novelists, already with secure reputations before 1947, were noticeably indifferent to the kind of anti-colonial preoccupations of, say, Chinua Achebe in Nigeria, or Vic Reid in Jamaica, whose work followed the rhythms of the decolonisation process itself. Mulk Raj Anand, for example, active on the socialist Left in the 1930s and a contributor under George Orwell to the BBC foreign service, emerged with the early novels *Untouchable* and *Coolie* – a part of the rich Indian tradition of fictional reform that in many ways was more far-reaching than novels about the national movement; R. K. Narayan, despite his *Waiting for the Mahatma* about the impact of Gandhi on a southern village, spent his time chronicling the human comedy of Malgudi, a fictional microcosm of his own Hindu 'pan-India'; and Raja Rao, who emigrated to France rather than England precisely to avoid the suffocating colonial question inevitably raised there, shifted between the Proustian reminiscences of a Brahmin abroad in his *The Serpent and the Rope* and a chapbook of small-town Hindu social customs during the Gandhi days in *Kanthapura*.

The success of *Midnight's Children*, particularly in the English-speaking West, has to be appreciated with these obstacles in mind. It was not just the victory of the latest (modern) example of the Indo-English novel, but a quite deliberate presentation of the whole tradition to a naïve reading public. As such, the book's acclaim in India has a lot to do with its putting the Indo-English imagination on the map. The frequently ecstatic reviews of *Midnight's Children* all get their energy from this fact. But what has always been overlooked is that the book is at the same time a critique of that tradition, as well as a meticulous catalogue of the doubtful literary devices of Third-World novelists themselves, seen as collaborators in the doubtful politics of the independence