



Across Cultures and Continents: Literature of the South Asian Experience

A Let's Talk About It Book Discussion Series

Developed by Deepika Marya, Ph D

Professor of Postcolonial Theory in the English Department

University of Southern Maine.

One legacy of India's colonial past is fiction about the colonial experience, from the perspective of both the colonizer and the colonized. From the mid-nineteenth century at least until India's independence from Great Britain in 1947, the relationship between India and Britain was marked by mistrust, conflict and racism. Early English writers about India -- Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, and Joseph Conrad, to mention the most prominent -- wrote for the British, whether in the colonies or at home, and represented the colonies without explicitly acknowledging the exploitative nature of the political structure.

When India became independent in 1947, most Britains returned to their home country, which soon afterwards opened its doors to its former colonial subjects, many of whom came to work in the textile industry. After several decades, Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis from the former colony found themselves part of and shaped by two cultures -- that of their homelands and that of metropolitan Britain. The customary divisions of race, language and culture were no longer absolute. Later in the century many Indians immigrated to the United States, either directly from India or via Britain. This series will explore the phenomenon of writing across these cultures and continents.

The series will begin with a classic from the colonial era, *A Passage to India* by E.M. Forster (date) before moving to post-colonial works such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), a sobering account of the sub-continent's history through characters who were born on the day of India's independence, and Monica Ali's *Bricklane* (2002), which weaves together the histories of Bangladesh/India and England. The last two books are Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), both set in the United States. Indian immigration into the U.S. is a relatively recent phenomenon, but contemporary South Asian literature set here tells the "old" story of immigrants constructing a sense of belonging in an alien culture. At the center of all the books is an exploration of what the South Asian/Indian experience has been, both living away from home in the U.K. and the U.S.A. and under colonialism.

Across Cultures and Continents: Literature of the Indian Experience Books in the Series

A Passage to India

A Passage to India was written after E.M. Forster returned to England for good after a decade of living in India. The novel is set two decades before colonial rule came to an end, in the imaginary town of Chanderpore. (Although some of the locations do exist, e.g., Mau and Bombay, others like the Marabar Caves are entirely fictitious. Chanderpore is a common name for a town, so its authenticity as a specific town by the Ganges is hard to determine.) The central character is a Dr. Aziz, a young physician who, as an educated, cosmopolitan native able to navigate the complexities of colonialism, represents the future of India. Or so it seems; but ultimately the web of race, gender, politics and sex proves overwhelmingly intricate and intractable. The story explores the possibilities and limits of trust, friendship and common cause across cultures and lines of political power. Forster evokes natural images as symbols of the colonial divide, which thwarts assumptions of a common humanity. Although at times Forster seems to undermine colonial goals, it can also be argued that his aim is to protect the colonial status quo.

Midnight's Children

Winner of the 1982 Booker Prize, Midnight's Children was Salman Rushdie's first major work of fiction. It is also a work of contemporary Indian history in which Rushdie reflects upon the stories a nation tells about itself, punctuated by stories of individuals that both shape and undermine the nation's narratives. The central character of the novel is Saleem Sinai, born on 15 August 1947, at midnight, just as India was waking to freedom. The author takes us from images of empire to post-colonial narratives of India.

At the core of Saleem's story are questions about genealogy and communal identity, including racial, religious and national identity. Saleem is a hybrid, unsure of his lineage. When we learn he is the child of an Englishman and an Indian woman, he is revealed as heir to the epic struggle between East and West. The novel's depth lies in raising questions of identity and history without offering any means of separating out its multiple layers. This lack of clarity, Rushdie implies, is the foundation of post-colonial India. He asks, "When was there ever a choice? When options?" The past, Rushdie shows us, can never be totally detached from the present, and it continues into the future.

Bricklane

Bricklane was shortlisted for the 2003 Booker Prize, and its author, Monica Ali, has been acclaimed one of the most promising writers in Britain. It is a narrative of discovery and the unexpected.

Because it is set in both England and Bangladesh, Bricklane can be described as a transnational novel, and both the different geographical and cultural contexts inform the

identities of the characters. The lives of two sisters, living two very different lives, one in London, one in Dhaka, Bangladesh, raise the question of where is life better? The book is full of words transliterated from Bengali that not only add to the cosmopolitan flavor of the text but also recognize the changing landscape in the West.

Jasmine

Jasmine, by Bharati Mukherjee, was the 1990 New York Times Notable Book of the Year. It is the story of the pain and triumph of an illegal immigrant from India who begins her American journey in Florida and ends up in the Midwest. Jasmine's realization of herself, and her sense of belonging to a place and a people dramatize the immigrant experience in this novel by an author whose central concerns have always been diaspora and the experience of the immigrant. Diaspora is integral to Jasmine's family history, coming from a Punjabi family that never stopped mourning its forced departure from Lahore when India and Pakistan were partitioned.

The novel also looks at the significance of being an immigrant who is also a woman. Of course what it means to be a woman differs across national and cultural contexts, so Jasmine must straddle concepts of gender as well as exploitation, and empowerment, and the context in which she must survive in continually changes, bringing both new challenges and new comforts.

Interpreter of Maladies

The final book in this series is Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies, which won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 2000. This collection of short stories about Indian immigrants, expatriates and first-generation Americans living in the United States weaves together themes of alienation, connection, loss and recovery, echoing concerns we have seen in the previous readings. Lahiri's characters seek happiness in a lonely world that often undermines any sense of belonging to a community, struggling to adapt and yet to maintain their Indian identity. The difficulty if not the impossibility of global living is an overarching theme, and yet there are moments of connection, of bridging the gap between cultures and individuals.



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