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**Rosemary Marangoly George.** *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Hb. viii, 285pp. £60.00. ISBN 978-1-107-04000-7.

In her last book, the late Rosemary Marangoly George stages a stimulating, partisan and thought-provoking, if at times slightly irritating, intervention into the on-going academic debate on Indian writing in English. George's overt aim is to argue and exemplarily demonstrate how major trends and tendencies in Indian cultural and literary politics between 1935 and the turn of the century engendered a paradoxical situation: On the one hand, "Indian literary production in the English language was [...] viewed as alienated from the rest of the nation and from its regional literatures. Nevertheless, Indian 'national literature' was best presented in English" (2). Proceeding from this irony, George's study aims to reconstruct the making of a national literature in (pre-)independent India through the ambivalent deployment of the English language. Accordingly, the analysis is not restricted to literary texts alone but focuses at least as much on the discursive

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and institutional conditions through which English, though not included in the catalogue of ‘Indian languages’ as per the Constitution, yet “became representative of ‘Indian literature’” (204) and, more than that, was crucial for constructing the very idea of a *national* literature of independent India with its eighteen official languages and multiple literary traditions.

In Chapter 1, “Many a slip between the literary and the national,” George traces the ambivalent centrality that the colonizer’s language as a *lingua franca* with nation-wide scope held in the anti-colonial imagination of leading Indian politicians and intellectuals from the immediate pre-independence period onward. Assessing a range of cultural and literary initiatives that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s, George amply demonstrates how English was conceived as the necessary linguistic medium for pan-Indian communication. Moreover, the alleged ‘neutrality’ of English “rendered opaque all hints that other Indian languages provided about caste, rank and religion” (27) and thus served best as the “mouthpiece of the modern Indian national discourse, thereby rendering aspirations expressed in local/vernacular languages as parochial” (16). Not surprisingly, after 1947 English also became the definitive language for “almost all the Indian academic disciplines” (39), emphatically including literary criticism, whose major tenet has henceforth consisted in the construction and consolidation “of the national literary arena and of ‘national literature’ which thus comes into being in English or in translation from vernacular languages into English” (44). It is this diagnosis of a nexus between the English language and the political and cultural idea of the nation and ‘its’ literature that provides the leitmotif and the main object of critique of George’s study throughout.

In Chapters 2 and 3, which focus on canonical works by R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, this nexus gets rehearsed with respect to individual literary texts. The discussion of Narayan’s early publications, especially *Swami and Friends* (1935), traces how the idealized small-town setting of Malgudi gives shape to a “generic ‘Indianness’” (58) precisely because it is presented in the ‘neutral’ medium of English that allows for the figuration of a sanitized social space devoid of caste or gender asymmetries. In Narayan’s idyllic world of Brahmin domesticity, “caste is never mentioned but appears everywhere” (82); similarly the fact, astutely observed by George, that Narayan’s child protagonists form a strictly all-male cast enables a nonchalant gloss over the gender inequalities that govern the patriarchal structure of mid-twentieth century rural India. It is by virtue of this selective representation, according to George, that Narayan’s Malgudi could “become the unviolated/unviolable India of the Indian bourgeois nationalist fantasy” (76). As a sharp contrast, George follows up this analysis with a discussion of Mulk Raj Anand’s first novel, *Untouchable* (1935), in which she sees an entirely different effect of writing in English at work. Narrating the events of a

day in the life of an out-caste (Dalit) latrine cleaner, Anand's text has caste as its central subject matter. In the perspective of Anand's Dalit protagonist, Bhaka, English figures not as the 'caste-neutral' medium of a merely symbolic national equity but as a means of empowerment and partaking of modernity. This estimation is, as George convincingly demonstrates, in full agreement with the anti-Gandhian agendas of contemporary Dalit politics as most prominently articulated by B.R. Ambedkar and his "deep and consistent engagement with English as a desirable language *especially for Dalits* to acquire" (112). Not surprisingly, then, *Untouchable* ends with a severe critique of Gandhi's insistence that the emancipation of Dalits would have to occur through upper-caste Hindu benevolence. What is surprising, however, is an aspect of that novel's afterlife that George uncovers: namely that Anand began to insinuate from the 1960s onwards that the first draft of his debut novel had been read and revised by Gandhi himself, and that *Untouchable* should be read accordingly as a virtually Gandhian (read: national/ist) book. Why should Anand have reintroduced his dissident narrative retroactively into the fold of official national orthodoxy? George admits at this point that the matter can only be speculated about. Yet her subsequent chapters go a long way to reconstruct the cultural climate within which such manoeuvres became well-nigh mandatory.

Chapter 4 traces the history of the Sahitya Akademi (Indian Academy of Letters), a government-controlled national institution founded in 1952 with the function "to co-ordinate and produce a national literature out of the many disparate literary traditions in the newly formed nation" (139). Given that Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first elected Prime Minister, functioned also as the first president of the Akademi, the Nehruvian cultural doctrine of 'unity in diversity' became the subtext of the academy's institutional politics: Assuming that there *was* such a thing as a singular national literature based on some shared common 'spirit of Indianness,' "diversity was narrowed down to mean *only* linguistic diversity" (147) so that, as a result of the manifold Akademi-sponsored anthologies, translation projects, textbooks, symposiums, and award ceremonies, the image emerged of "a nation sharing the same hopes and aspirations or writing the same story in different languages" (166) – it being understood that the medium of conjuncture remains English. In her last chapter, "Partition fiction and the 'birth' of national literature," George registers a similar effect in a series of relatively recent anthologies that collect stories and poems, translated from regional languages into English, about the traumatic partition of British India in 1947. Here again, the editorial framing of these discrepant texts occurs through the paradigm of the nation while, according to George, any attentive reading will reveal how these narratives articulate a non-national but rather a "diasporic" sensibility (174) that "pays lingering attention to the pains of separation, to the sense of inappropriate

attachment to the place left behind, and to the inability to fall in line with the new regime/land/object of patriotism” (186).

It is at this point at the latest that the reader begins to feel a bit uneasy about the way George deploys the term ‘nation’ (here reduced to a “regime/land/object of patriotism”) as the recurrent *bête noir* in her narrative. Nation, in George’s account, seems to be a consistently stable ideological ploy through which a hegemonic (English-literate) elite succeeds in passing for the universal representative of the entire polity. According to George, caste, gender, or diasporic concerns appear to be rendered non-intelligible and hence non-existent within this dominant fantasy of the nation that has been implemented by the post-Independence domestic elite, and which Western academic postcolonial literary critics have unquestioningly adopted to the effect of dogmatically reading every ‘third-world text’ as national allegory (cf. 49–53). Clearly, this is a sweeping generalization based not only on a highly selective reading of postcolonial criticism but more crucially on a wholly non-dialectic understanding of the category of nation. After all, nationalism in India has been extensively and with much nuance theorized by thinkers like Partha Chatterjee or Sumit Sarkar who insist that it would be a gross simplification to think that the nation, in India, existed only in its officially proclaimed version; rather than foreclosing the articulation of caste, class and gender issues, the nation(-state) remains the most important addressee and point of reference precisely for those non-nationalistic marginalized groups in whose name George fully debunks the nation.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, *Indian English and the Fiction of National Literature* is a rewarding study: an unorthodox and provocative book that offers a rich and refreshing perspective on the complex life of (writing in) English in the subcontinent and will be of interest for anyone concerned with the cultural politics of literature in a postcolonial setting.