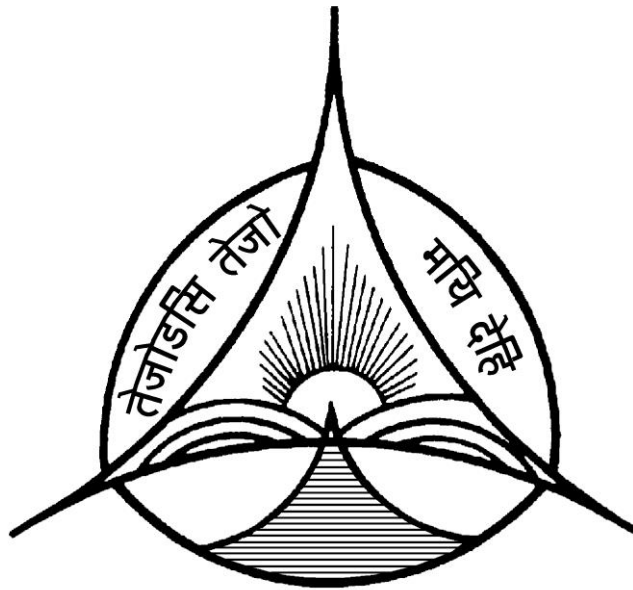


THE JMC REVIEW

*An Interdisciplinary Social Science Journal of
Criticism, Practice and Theory*



Volume 1

2017

Rewriting India: Eight Writers by Bruce King, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014 (First Edition)

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In his book *Rewriting India: Eight Writers*, Bruce King analyses the literary writings of eight Indian writers writing in English. These writers are Arun Kolatkar, K.N. Daruwalla, Amit Chaudhuri, Pankaj Mishra, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Tabish Khair, Susan Visvanathan and Jeet Thayil. Through his literary readings, King claims to go beyond the postcolonial critique of imperialism to examine the ways in which Indian writers see and describe India and the world. To go beyond this critique for King is to blur a postcolonial view of culture as opposing imperial and resisting anti-colonial polarities. Unlike the nationalist writers who opposed imperialism with a colonially constructed notion of Indian tradition, the writers King discusses focus on their familiar worlds and the discontents of urban life. There is neither nostalgia for a precolonial past, nor an uncritical empathy for rural life in these writers. King notes a shift from the older modernist poets of the nationalist period who placed an emphasis on their specific location within the Indian nation-state, to a broadening of the literary self that acknowledged the fragmentation of the nation by caste, religious, class and regional identities. He also draws attention to the significance of globalisation in establishing electronic transnational literary communities and in framing a history of empire and decolonisation and its aftermath. A reading of the eight writers under consideration reveals plural and competing imaginations of many Indias, which contradicts the Hindu nationalist allegory of an eternal and spiritual rural India that had dominated the imagination of the poets of the nationalist period.

The book comprises eight chapters beginning with Arun Kolatkar and ending with Jeet Thayil, an introduction and a coda. In the first chapter, King observes, Kolatkar's poetic imagination in Marathi and English suggested a range of literatures, languages and dialects that defied the equation of national language with culture. Kolatkar's focus lay in the sensuality of the everyday with his poems taking the form of journeys that were set in real locations. Through what King calls the domestication of language, Kolatkar tried to aestheticise the ordinary. A lot of Kolatkar's poetry had to do with the dynamism of the city life of Bombay and its cultural and religious diversity, which becomes a trope in some of the later writers King discusses. Kolatkar's poetry, King observes, endorses the possibility of attaining inter-religious peace by putting an end to a spiralling cycle of revenge and violence that has divided the nation. Many of Kolatkar's symbols drew from Sanskrit and folk literature as a way of undermining the dominance of Brahminism.

In his second chapter, King reads K.N. Daruwalla as a poet whose poetry reflected his own position as a Parsi outsider to the predominantly Hindu-Muslim northern India and as an English

speaker in Urdu- and Hindi-language schools. Like Kolatkar, Daruwalla felt the need to situate his poems in an 'Indian setting' that would bring out social tensions and cultural differences. Although Daruwalla, King quotes, emphasised clarity and the line as a semantic unit of poetry, some of his poems read like prose and occasionally used Hindi, Sanskrit or Urdu words to capture marginalised peoples, places and histories. Daruwalla also drew from cultural symbols and mythology to reveal the exclusionary practices of dominant Hindu nationalist narratives. There is a similar concern in Daruwalla to reconcile Hindu–Muslim violence, especially in the wake of Partition, through the trope of love, while feeling excluded from the religious traditions of India. Another important and related theme in Daruwalla's poetry and fiction is the historical effects of suppressed violence that have characterised the institution of modern civilisation. The fraught relationship between humans and nature as a certain imagination of the primitive (past) in its dialectical relationship with the present memory of guilt and loss is a motif in Daruwalla's later poems. The conflict between freedom, desire, responsibility and control is something that emerges from King's reading of Daruwalla.

The fourth chapter on Amit Chaudhuri analyses the affirmative possibilities of art that enables the literary imagination to overcome a pervasive sense of decay, death and defeat, which characterises his relationship to the city of Calcutta. As a writer who grew up in Bombay and then studied in England, Chaudhuri believes the beauty of the city he knew as a child has been destroyed by Marxists and rebuilt by non-Bengali businessmen with no sense of taste and refinement. There is a constant sense of uprootment and non-belonging in Chaudhuri's writings, King suggests, that belie his desire for a fixed identity as a Calcutta Bengali and classical musician. The general mood of disillusionment with the decadent city in Chaudhuri's novels manifests itself in many ways, including futile relationships and loveless marriages between characters who are nostalgic for the Calcutta of the past. There is little happening in these characters' lives by way of action or a sense of accomplishment. King points to how Chaudhuri, in a collection of essays, allies his work with a tradition of Bengali modernism beginning with Rabindranath Tagore that precedes and resists the assumptions of postcolonialism and postmodernism.

In his fifth chapter on Pankaj Mishra, King notes how Mishra's writings reveal a distaste for a newly wealthy neo-liberal India, where modernisation has benefited the rich and powerful but failed those who still need basic amenities. Caste and community have gained prominence in this new environment and those who have dared to stray from their protection have been isolated. For Mishra, rapid urbanisation and new money have created disagreements between culture and society. Although Mishra's works satirizes a class of Western educated Brahmin elites, King argues that Mishra's values or perspectives from which he judges people are Brahmin. This comes through in his vegetarianism, his refusal to drink alcohol, sexual restraint, dislike of dirt, and a validation of the domination and privilege that accompanies Brahminism. While there is an attempt to reject Indian ritualism, spirituality and irrationality that Mishra believes has impeded the nation's knowledge of its own past, there is an equal emphasis on recovering a religious and

spiritual past as a moral antidote to the liberal individualism of Western colonialism and imperialism.

Chapter six on Upamanyu Chatterjee's novels is a discussion of his satires of the corruption of the post-independent Indian state and the figure of the English-speaking Bengali Brahmin (government servant) who finds neither professional nor personal satisfaction. In all of Chatterjee's narratives, familial duty conflicts with sexual desire that disrupts social harmony even if it is never entirely satisfied. Sex, money and housing emerge as metaphors for power in a nation divided by ethnicity, education and class. Like Mishra's works, Chatterjee's novels portray a corrupt bureaucracy of a supposedly modern India that is ridden with exploitation and inefficiency, and divided along lines of language, ethnicity and religion.

King's discussion of Tabish Khair's writings in chapter seven reveals an immigrant writer who, like Chatterjee, is sensitive to the tensions between the English-speaking elite and the vernacular middle class. Even as Khair, an immigrant Indian-Danish writer, believes no one can represent all of India he, King argues, tends to assume Hindi is more natural to Indian thought. Like Amit Chaudhuri, who allies himself to a modernist Bengali tradition, Khair's novels bear affinities with earlier Progressive writers like Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai. Khair claims to draw his own influences from various vernaculars that suggests his own resistance to the Brahminisation of history and his acknowledgment of the multiculturalism and incorporation of varied influences. Khair's oeuvre, King observes, ranges from the violence of Partition to the impact of colonialism in destroying the multi-linguality of the precolonial world and the question of empire writing back through varied textual genealogies.

The next chapter on Susan Visvanathan focuses on her short stories and novels that thematise the lives of Syrian Christian women from the perspective of a writer-academic who lived away from Kerala. Her fictions are engaged with the unpredictability of life and change that is registered through nature and the separation of the female protagonist from her family and community. Her female characters share a relationship with Kerala and many of her stories are indirectly about the authority of men over women in the Syrian Christian community. Like some of the earlier writers in this book, Visvanathan's characters are often torn between their duties towards their families and communities and their illicit desires, sometimes for their own cousins that threatens their ostracisation from the community. Many of these illicit relationships are doomed to failure. Career, work, and the conflict of independence with desire, motherhood and family form the chief theme in Visvanathan's works.

The last chapter on Jeet Thayil focuses on his poetry and novels that unlike most of the preceding writers betrays scant attention to places and locations. There is little to suggest that Thayil is in any way nostalgic for India from his location as an American immigrant poet and writer. A central theme in Thayil's writings is the use of drugs as a comfort from the existential dread of life having no purpose or meaning. Drugs create fantasies where romantic illusion and sexual desire dominate but end in disillusionment. Some of Thayil later works describe the

reformation of former drug addicts and the power of language and literature to rejuvenate an otherwise purposeless human life. Jeet Thayil draws from the mythical imagery of his own religious background as a Syrian Christian to describe the metaphor of life as a journey of both body and soul. The contrast in Thayil's poetry, King notes, is between the permanence of poetic art and the void that separates feelings from the representation of feelings in language. Literature has the power to connect individual writers in a globalised network of writers.

Although King's book touches upon a wide range of writers writing in English across the 20th century, it is not always clear what conceptual linkages connect one chapter to another. These chapters could be read as individual essays and not necessarily as forming a coherent whole in a book. This would, I believe, require a more rigorous conceptual framework that relates these writers by delimiting their range of imaginative responses to the fractured post-independent Indian nation-state. Assuming this book was written for an academic readership, there are passages in it that suggest an informal and descriptive tone, which sacrifices literary analysis at the cost of expressing subjective preferences. The book would also benefit from more detailed analyses of fewer texts rather than trying to encapsulate a whole range of poems and fictional texts that do not always cohere in a chapter. More attention has to be paid to the generic and formal specificities of the poem, the short story and the novel. One also wonders if the conceptual framework of the book would change if the author had access to or discussed some of the vernacular writings of some of these writers.