

INTERVIEW

I DON'T THINK TOUGH MORAL QUESTIONS, OR ANYTHING WITH A RELIGIOUS SENSE, ARE FASHIONABLE

By Dr. Sunil Sharma

Nick Turner--- a British critic, researcher, academic and editor--- discusses literature, philosophy, postcolonialism and Indian writing in English in this e-mail interview. He teaches at the Universities of *Edge Hill* and *Salford*, UK. Nick is the author of *Post-War British Women Novelists and the Canon* (2010), and articles on Iris Murdoch and realism in contemporary fiction. He has reviewed for the *Times Literary Supplement* and is currently working on projects on the literary prize, and Barbara Pym.

He is interviewed by **Sunil Sharma**, an Indian writer, editor and academic, based in suburban Mumbai. The full text:

Q: Welcome Nick to this *tete-a-tete* on a field that unites us both - literature, especially English Literature. It evokes strong memories in non-English readers of a project called colonialism and its continuance in post-colonial countries, as a subtle way of cultural neo-colonialism introduced, sustained and perpetuated by native ruling elites that continue to resemble their departed masters in most ways. Do you agree to the overseas resonances of the complex process of cultural transformation largely effected by English/British Lit?

A: Thank you Sunil. It's very true that colonialism can be cultural, subtle and hidden, working through language and literature. Postcolonialism remains one of the most important areas of literary focus today, and it's been fascinating to see how critics, from Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak on, have undone and questioned the canon. What is still (oddly) called Commonwealth Literature continues to challenge Empire, its history and linguistic dominance. Personally, though, if writers are celebrated *simply* because they are postcolonial - and this does happen - this seems to me wrong.

Q: What are the reasons for this continued fascination with a former colony and its literary artifacts?

A: One reason is guilt, I think. There's a large body of recent fiction which could be labelled 'white guilt' novels or, as John Sutherland calls them, 'novels of moral indignation'. It's as if a culture - the liberal white middle class, through its writers - wants to expiate this guilt through fiction. We are asked to identify with the oppressed and suffer with them. There have been many examples of this over the last 25 years and more. Sometimes they are good books, but sometimes this 'guilt' seems too responsible for their success, over and above their artistry.

Q: Why do we, ex-colonies, still try to mimic the British writers, literary trends and run after awards and the UK recognition? Why this kind of inferiority among the free nations and their artists, according to you?

A: One reason I think is that the biggest literary prizes are still based in the UK and the USA, so it's self-perpetuating. Most writers would like to win the Booker, the Costa, the David Cohen or the Orange Prize (now called the Bailey's Prize) if they could. But do the ex-colonies mimic British writers in how they write? I wouldn't say they do. Certainly, what critics and reviewers are keen to identify in Indian, African or Irish fiction, for example, is its difference. The British novel was very much associated with realism in the past; isn't the Indian novel associated more with magic realism?

Q: Cannot we be ever free of such a pervasive spectral influence on our minds? Of such subliminal haunting?

A: While colonial writers use English, it's hard to escape. From a Western point of view, one problem is that we tend to know foreign writers who write in English more than those who are translated or write in their own language. And this again comes back to the dominance of English worldwide, again: I don't think we know anything over here about writers who write in Hindi or Bengali.

Q: What constitutes British post-war literature, a field where you lead as an expert? Is the notion of Britishness still relevant in a globalised culture, where trans-national, not national, emerges as the dominant?

A: In short we are talking about the fiction, poetry and drama of England, Wales and Scotland. Principally, it's been English literature which has dominated (which is an interesting but not surprising point in itself). The canon of post-war British literature: Philip Larkin, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, William Golding, Muriel Spark, Tom Stoppard and Doris Lessing are just a few important names from across the field. Yes, the trans-national is now more important than the national, but I think we all have an in-built need to categorise and narrow down. As readers we like to think of 'Indian Fiction' or 'Irish Poetry' or 'British Drama'. Globalization and trans-nationalism can make the world a richer but also a more confusing place; it's a simple question of mental 'ordering'.

Q: Does the trauma of losing an empire still persist in English psyche?

A: I'd be wary of making a claim about the English psyche: it varies too much across class and ethnicity. If we think about the establishment, though, the fascination with and guilt about Empire could be connected with loss and trauma. I don't think any writer would admit to being haunted by this loss, though. The British tabloid press is sadly full of implicit neo-imperialism.

Q: Memory, history, war, loss of colonies, migration, immigration---and nostalgia for lost glory---characterize post-war, post-Thatcherite Britain, in its self-reflexive mood. Do they find echoes in the contemporary culture, media and serious fiction---long or short?

A: Very much so. These themes often determine the kind of fiction that is published, and even more what is researched and studied. The historical novel is one of the most popular forms at the moment, and sometimes it seems nostalgic and conservative. But memory linked with trauma is apparent too, carrying with it the idea of history as a source of mystery, not

certainty. Kazuo Ishiguro's wonderful *When We Were Orphans* (2000) works in this way, as does Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001). There are many others that follow the same pattern: memory, loss, trauma, history and war interlink. They are characterised by a postmodern sense of unknowability. Migration and immigration again dominate British thinking at the moment. The worst reflections of it are the xenophobia and racism that appear in the 'gutter press' and some elements of popular culture, but I'd like to think that's not a majority view. Film, drama and literature tend to be open to their benefits, and to exploring both sides of the question, too. Rose Tremain's *The Road Home* (2007), Marina Lewycka's novels and Charlotte Mendelson's *Almost English* (2013) are works of fiction which concern 'outsiders' in Britain. They are not heavy-handed about this, and often sympathetically comic.

Q: What are the major contemporary voices that deal with the idea of Britishness in a society that clamours for an exclusive notion of pure British identity in a multi-cultural, political and urban space?

A: A lot of writers discuss Britishness, implicitly and explicitly. The most interesting ones are the ones who do it subtly, even making it seem like a minor part of their work, rather than doing it in a very overt way, as if they are writing something to be studied. Andrea Levy is good in *Small Island*: character is at the forefront, and discussion of Britishness works through this unobtrusively. It doesn't feel forced and contrived. Hanif Kureishi and Zadie Smith are also important.

Q: Apart from Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie, Patrick McCabe, Irvine Welsh, Peter Ackroyd, Alan Hollinghurst and Helen Fielding, among others, what other writers are consistently making their presence felt?

A: The writers who are most visible change from year to year. This visibility is determined by reviews, literary prize shortlists, and how media-friendly they and their books are. Of course it's the agents and publishers who control this. I'd say the most prominent British writers as of now are Hilary Mantel, Sarah Waters, McEwan, Hollinghurst, David Mitchell, Julian Barnes, Nicola Barker, Zadie Smith and Ali Smith. These writers all attract prominent

reviews, prize shortlistings and often scholarly debate: there have been conferences on Mitchell and Ali Smith, for example. They are all fashionable too, which is a blessing and a curse. Hilary Mantel has won the Booker Prize twice, which is very unusual, for her two Tudor history novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. Sarah Waters writes historical novels, but also investigates gender, sexuality and class, and in *The Night Watch* wrote a 'backwards' narrative. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is in effect a postmodern novel, each section using a different form and genre. Together, these writers tell us what's going on in contemporary British fiction.

Scottish fiction is also blossoming, though. These are turbulent times for England-Scotland relations; maybe Scotland's history has led to something angry, passionate and inventive in its fiction that can outdo the English novel. James Robertson, John Burnside, James Kelman, Louise Welsh, Zoe Strachan, Alan Warner, the late Iain Banks, Irvine Welsh, Alasdair Gray, Andrew O'Hagan and A.L. Kennedy are just some of the highly interesting Scottish writers. They often use gothic and the macabre. Then there's Ian Rankin, writing intelligent crime fiction which also has elements of state-of-the-nation. Ali Smith is actually Scottish, too.

Q: Post-Iris Murdoch and Golding, the English novel seems to have lost its direction. It is no longer philosophical in its main orientation. Why this loss of meditative vision?

A: I suspect this is due to the dominance of postmodernism, although that is a philosophy in itself, a philosophy which espouses lack of certainty, something which traditional philosophy has sought. It's interesting that you name Murdoch and Golding. They're two of my favourite writers, yet each has been seen as unfashionable. It's as if critics no longer want a central vision in fiction. I don't think tough moral questions, or anything with a religious sense, is fashionable. Good evidence of this is Samantha Harvey's novel *All is Song* (2012). It is very much a philosophical novel, and the reviews highlighted how unusual this was. I also think Ali Smith's work is philosophical, although it wears this very lightly. But did the English novel ever have a 'philosophical orientation' overall? Not strongly, I think. The dominant mode has been the comedy of manners or the social novel, I'd say.

Q: The minorities in ghettos; inherent racism; issue of colour and ethnicities; civic unrest; the unease among minorities and English society have not been explored critically in contemporary British fiction, especially by the white British writers. Reasons behind this non-engagement with changing realities and demographics of a highly diversified society?

A: All these points have been explored but, as you say, they tend to be explored by non-white writers: Zadie Smith, Monica Ali and Hanif Kureishi are three leading examples, as is Andrea Levy, although her two most famous novels are historical, so we see the issues removed from contemporary society. Maggie Gee is a white British writer who wrote of race in her novel *The White Family*, which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction. I suspect one reason it doesn't happen more is a desire for authenticity. A writer may feel that it is patronising to write about the experiences of a black community, if they don't belong to it. Ruth Rendell and Minette Walters have discussed race in their crime fiction. I'd note the work of black or mixed race writers like Bernardine Evaristo, Courttia Newland and Alex Wheatle, though.

Q: Why have British women novelists been continually undervalued? This has been your ongoing project also, focusing on mid-century women novelists. Is canon-formation still male-centered in Britain?

A: The general consensus is that there was a revolution in British fiction in the 1980s. This was the decade of Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, Peter Ackroyd and Kazuo Ishiguro. The new writers were predominantly male. If you look at the Booker Prize winners of the 1980s, in terms of British writers, the female winners were Anita Brookner and Penelope Lively. They're brilliant writers, but seen very much as 'women writers' and even implicitly middlebrow (which they aren't). They've never become part of the canon in the same way as the men. Angela Carter won, bizarrely, hardly any major prizes and Jeanette Winterson has not been on Booker shortlists. Prizes aren't everything, but it's indicative, isn't it? There are women novelists by the hundred, but few are taken as seriously as they could be. A.S. Byatt and Pat Barker have been seen as important from the 1990s on; from that decade, the Orange Prize for Fiction has done tremendous work in changing things,

and in the last few years things are better. We have Mantel, Nicola Barker, Zadie and Ali Smith and Kate Atkinson. But the older women writers suffer. I've mentioned Penelope Lively: she's a highly intelligent writer. She's written historiographic metafiction; she's postmodern and witty. Yet her books now have things like teacups and flowers on the cover, as if they are stereotypical 'women's fiction.'

Q: Gender, power, domination, family, sexual choices, although there in media, still do not find a proper articulation in the serious literature. Why this reluctance to address such issues affecting all of us?

A: I don't agree. Certainly in British and American literature, these subjects are at the forefront, sometimes to the point where it seems as if the book is being marketed *because* of one of these themes. These themes sell. Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson have written books that fit this, as has Sarah Waters. It's interesting that the themes have often been addressed in serious science fiction in the past, as well (for example, the works of Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ and Ursula LeGuin).

Q: How does American Lit influence you? Does not it overshadow British Lit globally?

A: Yes, possibly it does overshadow British literature, but the USA is a much bigger country so it's bound to. A far greater population should lead to a greater number of writers. There's a lot of talk about Great American Novels, and writers who owe their debts to Americans: Ian McEwan praises Saul Bellow; Martin Amis Nabakov. Zadie Smith wrote of the brilliance of John Updike when he died. She's one of the most feted British writers at the moment, and set her third novel there. I've recently read two American novels that were shortlisted for what is now called the Bailey's Prize (formerly the Orange) last year: Maria Semple's *Where'd You Go, Bernardette?* and A.M. Homes's *May We Be Forgiven* (which won). Both are good. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is even better. Partly because of its subject matter (how mankind may or may not survive a destroyed planet), it's becoming the classic novel of our time.

Q: Conversations are enriching. Literary conversations do that more significantly. Why have writers stopped talking? Why are there no platforms for writer-writer and writer-reader conversations?

A: In the UK and USA, for some reason, interviews do not have scholarly value when research is assessed. I'm not sure why. A further point is that structuralist and post-structuralist theory invented the idea of the 'death of the author'. I don't subscribe to this, but the thinking is that language is never fixed and only acquires meaning when interpreted: its source isn't important. Looking at writers and readers more widely, I wonder if the amount of blogs there are at the amount shows an increasing selfishness in the world? Are we more interested in making ourselves heard in an over-populated, technologically noisy world, perhaps, than in listening to the voices of others?

Q: Your view of recent writings in Indian English?

A: I need to read more to answer that properly! People are still too much in the shadow of Rushdie, perhaps, but the debt to him is enormous. I'm looking forward to reading Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, which seem fresh and inventive. I suspect though that in Europe we see Indian fiction as a monolith and don't make allowance for region and class enough. I do think that some publishers and reviewers celebrate Indian writers *because* they are Indian, which seems a little patronising: 'colonial guilt' again. I would be happy to hear your recommendations!

Q: Thanks a lot.

A: My pleasure!

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