UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

Estrangement and Return Performances in Contemporary Indian Fiction in English

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Abstract

This thesis examines contemporary Indian fiction in English which constructs identity through performative acts. Such fiction implies a definition of the self as nomadic and therefore dynamic rather than space-determined, and an evolution of narrative language towards performativity whereby the text acquires nomadic characteristics. Through a reassessment of the mythic symbiosis of performance and storytelling in Indian tradition within a cyclical pattern of estrangement from and return to the motherland and/or its traditions, myth becomes a liberating space of consciousness, where rigid categories and boundaries are transcended.

I explore the development of a pattern of performance and performativity in fiction in search of more fluid definitions of the self in Salman Rushdie's novels *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* (with *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* read as a rewriting of *The Satanic Verses* in response to the *fatwa*), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*. Through a comparison with theatrical performance – exemplified by Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* and Girish Karnad's 'theatre of roots' – I argue that in both theatrical performance and fiction the concepts of performance and performativity transform classical Indian mythic poetics.

A reading of Rushdie's 1997 story 'The Firebird's Nest' as emblematic of the hybrid condition of Indian writing in English structures my study along two major lines of investigation: narrative on the one hand, performance and performativity on the other. Both are informed by a third dimension, that of myth. Part One is a theoretical study of the changes of the novel form in contemporary Indian fiction in English as it interacts with other forms of narrative and with the Indian tradition of storytelling and performance. In Part Two I discuss the changes of storytelling in the contemporary novel form as practised by Indian novelists writing in English. Part Three is dedicated to performance and performativity as two inseparable concepts on which fictional and theatrical storytelling relies. In both parts myth brings narrative and performance together and proposes a mythic mode of thinking – which corresponds to the rhizomatic structure of the fiction considered and to the dynamic nature of performance – where meaning is shaped as an always renewable act.

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