

AT THE LBF

Approaching the London Book Fair in Earls Court some time ago, I saw an unpaid translator with a placard protesting outside a massive exhibition pavilion where tens of thousands of books were on display.

The organisers of the Fair describe it as “the global marketplace for rights negotiation and the sale and distribution of content across print, audio, TV, film and digital channels”. There are demarcated special access areas where agents, media people, and publishers have their negotiations and do the deals that make the headlines in the trade periodicals. For the most part, the Fair is a labyrinthine alphabetical array of stalls that belong to publishers and other associated services (such as shipping, paper supply, design) from around the world who display their wares and spend hours hunched over tables with potential business partners matched through online appointments diary for the registrants; there are free pens, sweet baskets, big flashy logos and props (to wit, a large fake red London Bus sitting on an orange carpet). At lunchtime and close of day, a tide of suits and blackberry devices is disgorged into the tube station across the road.

Of course, it is essentially a trade event where books are a mere commodity. As an author and academic, I spend most of my life pretending books are thoughts more than they are things, so what was I doing there? Well, as a first-time novelist I felt it would be a reality-check (and so it was!), as an innate voyeur trained partly in abstract economics, I thought it would be a good setting to observe raw market behaviour of enflashed human agents, as a writer, it was a setting (I'm meaning to get my hands on a copy of Hubert Monteilhet's *Murder at the Frankfurt Book Fair*), and finally, this year the theme at the Fair was 'Market Focus India', and though I am not British Asian in popular terminology (since I did not grow up here), I am unwillingly both British and Indian in classificatory terms, so it definitely made sense to meet some of the over 40 authors that British Council had invited from India and hear them speak in the various themed panels on 'India 09 - Through Fresh Eyes'. Here are my reflections.

Indian Writing in English (IWE) has a privileged status in terms of remuneration and readership, and has sometimes courted controversy deservedly by presenting a picture of other places and other people (read Indian for other) that caters to the real or perceived taste of western readers. This may be the cliched and unending focus on spices, Raj, arranged marriages, customs and traditions, or on dire squalid poverty. This focus isn't problematic if it is meant to portray or satirise the conditions of life elsewhere, but, when this focus alone becomes the sole identification label attached to such writing, then it becomes an issue. The number of novels with colourful 'ethnic' covers and pictures of women's feet in anklets is scary; the perceived demand for exotic otherness must be such that these covers are occasionally not even related to the content of the books. This packaging of literary expression is not mere frivolity and stereotypy, but also creates sinister expectations and herd behaviour which means that to be from somewhere else is always good and marketable, to tell stories only about that somewhere else is good and marketable, and the stories about that somewhere else must reflect a certain checklist of things that trigger the right buttons for an audience seeking a flavour of otherness on alternate weekends. Not all novels are beach holiday reads.

Most people would agree that exoticism plays a prime role in the marketing of contemporary non-Western literature. So what? It is what the market wants, isn't it? In fact, markets commodify whatever is presented to them, but what we see is the active creation of literary markets and demand, not responses to some demand that already exists. While

Indian fiction writing is expected to provide an informative account of that society in the West, a prominent international manager at the Fair saw the way ahead for the Indian publishing market in terms of non-fiction, self-help, and textbooks. Here's the circulation paradigm: The middle classes in India (bless their optimistic lot as they increase and have increased disposable income!) have a bottomless thirst for self-improvement and a commensurate obsession with drilling their kids to become successful, enter books which will teach them how to become millionaires, how to be confident, how to view their democracy ever more in economic terms. The middle classes in the West, on the other hand, have in addition to all that, an array of exotic accounts of faraway and elsewhere that can edify or admonish; a place they either helped to make through a dissemination of their methods and morals (when they still overtly could), or that they could escape to.

Somewhere in all of this, the writer's role is shifting. I am amazed and infuriated by the assertions - aplenty at the LBF - that in order to write about India, one must be living in India, and equally that those who live outside India can never write about it correctly. These claims weren't of the sort that feelings may be tied to the language of expression (to quote a literary critic, 'love always needs a cultural explanation'), but an insistence that writing on India is purer and more valuable when done by people who have a fixed address in India. It is a demand that automatically creates multiple neopatrimonialist hierarchies - which India, what skin, how long. This longing for authenticity - what does it achieve? Are all novels social realism and writers mere recorders and transcribers of what they see and hear around them? Is distance solely a geographical phenomena? The distance between an indifferent person and the human being next to them could be bigger and unbridgeable as opposed to the task of a writer that has as its aid not just travel, but also memory, imagination, observation, and research. Inaccurate writing in bad faith cannot be legislated against on the basis of nationality. As Mikhail Shishkin, a Russian author also at the Fair, commented 'Writers should write as human beings, not just Russians. People will read a good book not to find out what's happening in Russia, but what's happening inside them'. The requirement that writers be some kind of native informers is not necessary and not desirable.

The fact that writers and publishers in the non-West still have to argue in terms of geographical authenticity and claim to privileged understanding is a reflection of the structures through which writers can get attention in the metropole. This attention has brought significant rewards in the West to Indian writers in English, and to the extent that they were listened to as authentic others, now more authentic others wish to claim the stage. There is obviously an asymmetry here in the dictation of terms between the payer and the performer. Who gets published writing on what? Surely, it isn't only because of self-referentiality that Indian writers in English do not write about non-Indian themes (noting rare exceptions such as Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music* or Rana Dasgupta's novels). As a digression, consider how since the Enlightenment era in Europe at least, the other has been imperially scripted on the terms of the self - incorporated in the travelogues and responding in the fake travellers' tales. Outside postcolonial literary scholarship, what amount of non Western contemporary literatures in the regional languages ever gets attention, or get translated into English even in the country of their belonging? It is somewhat different for Hindi, Bengali and Kannada, but imagine my surprise when an Indian writer in English at the Fair asked 'why hasn't Kashmir produced any well known writers or poets?'. Ouch.

From the glass windows of the mezzanine floor in the Exhibition Hall, one could look down upon the vast marketplace of stalls in the garishly-lit mega barn. Later, I tried to find a comprehensive history of the 'Book Fair'. There are of course many catalogues and

summary reports on the different fairs, but two recent books at the British Library (*A History of the Frankfurt Book Fair*, and *Fairs, Markets and the Itinerant Book Trade*) provide a chronicle of one book fair in Frankfurt, and of the book trade in Europe. I await more comprehensive contemporary-archaeological account of the practices related to the history of the Book in the present - effects of digitising technology upon patterns of thought and engagement, prevalent notions of writer as a celebrity creative entrepreneur, creative writing courses as a signalling mechanism of worth and the incentives they set up, role of the literary agents - that also looks at the spread of these practices, brought together in a study of Book Fairs around the world.

As a child growing up in Delhi, I remember the feeling of being in a massive jungle of books in the pavilions at Pragati Maidan. The entry was free and I would buy dozens of cheap Soviet books, India had decent relations with USSR and books from Moscow were abundant, wonderful, and affordable. Going to the LBF as an adult, my paid badge barcode with the name and details (as of every individual) was scanned not only upon entry into the Fair, but upon entry *and* exit from every single session. What a lot of data traces that must be. Some people I spoke to, who worked at the Exhibition centre, told me that an exhibition on information security was going up the next week. A fair circus and a circle indeed!

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1615 words