



BOOK REVIEWS

Akshya Saxena, *Vernacular English: Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India*. Princeton University Press, 2019, 233 pp.

Akshya Saxena's book *Vernacular English: Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India* is crucial scholarship in the continuing resilience of the perspectives afforded by researching postcoloniality beyond the strict space-time of historical colonialism. Moreover, it builds on late-twentieth-century scholarship that gave shape to the literary formation that we now call Indian English, with a sense-driven inquiry into the manners in which English has come to inhabit Indian lifeworlds. In the book's coda, Saxena proposes that we rescue the "Anglophone" from necessarily having to be "Global," and study in detail more context-specific "processes of mediation, translation, and embodiment that make English heard" (178). The category of "Global Anglophone" is nothing if not a reflection of the generalist demands of a shrinking academic job market and the neoliberal economic forces transforming higher education. By way of resistance, this call therefore draws our attention back to something that scholarly commitment to postcoloniality has done extremely well all along—trouble the idols of language and power through socio-historically specialized analysis.

Vernacular is not quite a direct epithet applied to English in the book; it is more a lens through which endemic Englishnesses of English are made all the more legible. It is also helpful in cutting through what Saxena describes as the opacity, obviousness, and ubiquity of English in India as is the case at present. Commenting on the association of the Indian English novel with the nation-form, Priyamvada Gopal had stated that "English in India is simultaneously rootless (in the sense of lacking a specific region and cultural context) as well as pan-Indian ... [and that is why] anglophone fiction in India merits *situated* study" (5).¹ This is the task *Vernacular English* sets itself not for Anglophone fiction solely but for English as a multimodal and multidimensional Indian experience mediated through more than mere literacy. "If over 90 percent of Indians do not speak or understand English," Saxena asks, "how do they experience its ubiquitous presence?" (6). It is therefore imperative that we observe how English is socialized in ways for it to be accessible in ways that have nothing to do with formal acquisition.

The five chapters in the book follow five crucial ways in which English is socialized: as law, touch, text, sound, and sight. Saxena suggests in the chapter on law that as English negotiated with the mandate of other languages, it formed a

¹ Priyamvada Gopal, *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History, and Narration* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

special relationship with Hindi and became Indian. Yet she warns against reading this relationship as a homogenization. English's residual foreignness to ears and bodies, which acts in tandem with this former tendency, makes it more useful to understand it as a "part of an assemblage where language and animate and inanimate bodies act on each other" (58). This is exemplified in the following chapter, where Saxena identifies the contingent haptic solidarity between English, writing instrument, and the caste-marked body in Dalit writing. The prosthesis of English is useful beyond the remit of speaking or writing, however, as is shown in the next chapter that studies novels as different from each other as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. In both cases, English as both object of desire and conduit through which it could act "circulates, tantalizingly, through everyday experiences" (123).

Although accounting for varied points of contact between English and its contexts, Saxena's book is no magisterial survey, and perhaps all the better for it. Her keen attention to how and where English becomes *minor* (to use Deleuze and Guattari's term following her own example) provides us a glimpse into instances where the language of law and bureaucracy is inverted and made terrifying in its voicing in women's protests. In one real life event in the Indian state of Manipur in 2004, and in Mahashweta Devi's 1981 Bengali short story "Draupadi," women protesting against sexual brutalization by occupying military forces "acknowledge that the language is weaponized by the state in times of terror, and respond to that language by estranging it further" (140). If the subversive sounding of English can hollow out its normative meaning, Saxena shows in the final chapter of the book, its appearance itself can possess a visual rhetorical power that she has termed *cinematic*. Analyzing films like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Gully Boy* (2019), both hustler narratives set in Mumbai slums, reoriented pathways of signification represent the ubiquity often without literacy that English enjoys in these spaces.

The success of *Vernacular English* lies in its agility of method, which constantly reminds us of the simple truth that the vernacular, more than any other category, is never one thing. Also, the book impresses with its careful centering of the body in its stories about language: "bodies that read, write, speak, and hear English, whether they are supposed to or not, whether they can or not, whether or not we as scholars recognize them as literate in English" (8). It will remain essential reading in these uncertain times for the Indian democracy, with linguistic and cultural orthodoxy threatening pluralistic publics and public discourses.

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