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## INDIAN ENGLISH WRITERS AND THEIR SUCCESS IN THE INTERNATIONAL LITERARY MARKET

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### ABSTRACT

Indian English writers are gaining great popularity at the international level. Critiques of the works of these writers focusing on the literary aspects of the works are numerous. However, this paper focuses not on the literary qualities of these works, but on other factors that significantly influence the readership of works by contemporary Indian English writers. Aggressive publishing campaigns, beneficial connections in the literary world, the writer's location and tailor-made book covers are identified as factors that contribute to the success of a work.

**Key words:** literary market, marketing, campaigns

### INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English seems to have entered a hyper-active stage in its development now with new Indian writers and their books appearing on the literary scene every other day. It will therefore be interesting to look into some of the ways in which these writers and their works have made it to the market. Putting aside the literary prowess of the authors, this paper attempts to understand some other factors that have helped Indian English novelists become common place names in the literary market.

#### Publishing Campaigns

India has always remained a subject of interest for Western readers. The large body of work on India produced by Orientalist scholars, colonial administrators and English writers is a testimony to this fact. Indian stories continue to be in great demand even after decolonization and the appearance of a new world order. Jane Friedman, president and CEO of HarperCollins in 2006

remarked: "It is extremely important for Indian writers to spread across the world. Fine tales are popular everywhere, but that said, there is a certain curiosity, an exotic charm that intrigues the West. We are still fascinated by Indian stories and their touch of the orient, even when it is writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, who is fairly assimilated. And we are looking for more such authors!" (qtd. in Suman, n. pag.). The demand for such authors has led publishers to launch massive marketing campaigns to launch new Indian writers.

The phenomenal success of Arundhati Roy and her debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) is a much discussed instance of clever marketing. The story of how Roy was discovered is well-known today. Roy had shown a copy of her manuscript to Pankaj Mishra, the writer and Indian agent for HarperCollins. He read it on a night train to Dehra Dun and was so impressed by the work that he got off the train at a remote station early in the morning to call Roy and congratulate her. He subsequently

sold the Indian rights to the novel for the biggest advance ever paid by an Indian publisher. Mishra also couriered Roy's manuscript to David Godwin, a British literary agent. Godwin soon flew to Delhi, seeking to represent Roy. Within a week, HarperCollins and Random House had bought the British and American rights to the novel. The book was marketed extensively with an advertisement campaign. The publishing industry saw to it that the book, that was paid almost a million dollars as advance even before the author had proven her talent in the literary world, would be the talk of the town. Marketing for the book had been dominated by glossy photographs of the brown and beautiful Arundhati Roy.

*The God of Small Things* was launched with all the possible indexes for alterity: the story of a fascinating but downtrodden Indian woman, the subaltern subject, who succumbs to patriarchal oppression despite her overt agency demonstrated through her free sexual and personal choices. The novel pictures India suspended between the still unprocessed colonial past and the wave of modernization that passed women by . . . But the book was an excellent product to quench the exotic thirst of Western and international audiences for far-off places and stories, now quickly and inexpensively reachable by charter airlines. Moreover, the author herself was a perfect icon of the new commodified personality: a young, talented, good-looking rebel, and most of all capable of manipulating the media as much as the media managed to manipulate her. (77-78)

According to Pramod Nayar, with Roy began the creation of an author-brand. "Before Roy there was no author-brand in India" (Nayyar 42).

Today marketing campaigns for launching new Indian writers are no longer a novelty. Adiga, who like Roy won the Booker for his debut novel, was launched with an aggressive marketing campaign by his publisher Harper Collins. The publishing group collaborated with news channel CNN-IBN for a TV commercial that was aired 15 days prior to the release. The short animated film showed a man from the village entering Gurgaon and getting into an orange-coloured taxi that also appears on

the book's original cover. This was followed with print ads and life-size cut-outs in bookstores. Sarah Brouillette commenting on the influence of this publicity notes how Michael Portillo, chair of the 2008 Man Booker judges quoted from the official publicity for the book, claiming that it possessed the "enormous literary merit" of "originality" in its presentation of "a different aspect of India" (qtd. in Brouillette 52).

It is interesting to note that today Indian writing has become such a saleable commodity in the literary market place that publishers have changed their very approach to publishing:

The literary industry [. . .] has shifted its focus from supplying potential audiences to planning them. Rather than merely reading submitted manuscripts and discovering new talents, they now proceed as if on a hunting campaign aiming to locate authors even before they have attempted to write, and commissioning subjects, topics, and areas to reach one major goal; to create a demand for the product, a real thirst for consumption, prior to production. (Ponzanesi 77)

Omprakash Dwivedi cites the example of Somnath Bataybal, author of *The Price You Pay*, who became a sought-after writer even without writing a novel:

Bataybal had not written any story or novel, but his attendance at the 2011 Jaipur Literary Festival where he interviewed Vikram Seth paid rich dividends, and Bataybal became an accidental celebrity. Seth was highly impressed with his idea of a graphic novel, and recommended Bataybal to Harper Collins; soon after he was issued a contract to write three books for them. This was not the end as Bataybal (Mukerji, 2013, online) was pursued by many publishers and agents: "For months it seemed my life was a fairy tale ... Suddenly I was being pursued. The problem was I did not have a novel." Thus a new literary star was born without a literary product. (101)

The case of Bataybal brings to forefront another important factor that influences the publication of books by Indian writers, that of one's connection to the Western literary world.

### By the Right People/ In the Right Place at the Right Time

Batabyal received a publishing contract from Harper Collins because he was recommended to them by a writer of the stature of Vikram Seth, a well-known Indian name in the western publishing industry. Roy, too, was lucky enough to be discovered by the right people: Pankaj Mishra and David Godwin. Rochelle Almeida in "In the Right Place at the Right Time : A Tale of Two Brothers, Rohinton and Cyrus Mistry" poses an important question worth considering:

While Roy's novel is undoubtedly a masterpiece and deserving of its canonical status, it might be argued that she was very fortunate in managing to place her manuscript in the hands of powerful publishing tycoons who had the wherewithal to launch it to stardom. Would the novel have attained global fame had an indigenous Indian publisher introduced it to the world? Expectations of commercial success can never be based on the quality of a work alone. Far too many extraneous factors come into play, such as the efficacy of marketing campaigns, the impact of reviews and celebrity endorsements. (168)

Almeida makes a comparative study of two brothers, Rohinton and Cyrus Mistry to prove her point. While Rohinton Mistry migrated to Canada, Cyrus Mistry chose to remain in India. Though both took to writing short stories on the Parsi community to which they belonged, Rohinton Mistry became an internationally acclaimed writer, while Cyrus Mistry remained relatively unknown outside the country. Evaluating the writing of the two brothers, Almeida concludes:

I am not convinced that Cyrus' work remains obscure because it lacks merit. . . The disparity has much more to do with location and domicile, which, in turn, affect the thematic material with which the writer will engage and the daring with which he will treat it. Finally, opportunities for acquiring attention, press coverage and, ultimately, reader response are also affected by location – all of which contribute to the significance of being in the right place at the right time. (178-79)

### Book Covers

Some writers are lucky enough to be discovered by the right people, others are fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time. Once the publishing contracts are signed, marketing takes over. While the author may have some say in the marketing campaigns for the book, it appears that he or she has little involvement in the finalization of the book covers of their books. The book cover is one of the most important visual aspects of a book. Lisa Lau points out that the choice of the book cover is now largely in the hands of the marketing team, and not the book cover artist and the author. Lau analysed the recurrence of images like sarees and female bodies on the book covers of novels by South Asian women writers and concluded:

[I]n our case study of South Asian women's writing, book covers were intended to represent a genre in such a manner that it makes for quick and easy visual consumption. These covers clearly signal particular types of books, or genres, rather than reflecting the content of each individual book. The covers also play to the gallery and tap into stereotypes of Indians and Indian cultures. They present a flattened, generic, pan-Indian womanhood, which supposedly stands for Indianness. This kind of representation can be insidious and undermining. (*Quartz India*, n.pag.)

The book cover of Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a case in point. Padmini Mongia notes that the green cover of the novel is stereotypically evocative of the tropical. It is not much different visually from a tourist brochure or travel guide. "Roy's novel holds out the same sensual promise as those publications would. This book is an object to be desired; both the cover and the inviting author photograph beckon the reader to possess and enter the world of the book" (105).

It is interesting to note that the cover pages of Indian edition of a book are most often different from that of their foreign edition. *The Wall Street Journal* reported a notable example of this: the cover page of Manu Joseph's *Serious Men*. The American edition of the book depicted the Hindu God Shiva with Ganesh, sitting in his lap. Although Joseph was surprised when he saw what could be

called calendar art on his book cover, he did not object to it because “[t]hey seemed to be pretty sure of what they were doing” (qtd. in Lahiri, n.pag.). Editor of the book, Amy Cherry, noted that there was a reference to Ganesha in the novel and that the designer chose to work on it for the book cover to give a sense of place for the novel’s readers. The cover of the novel’s Indian edition is very different. The cover page features a beach, an allusion to Bombay, the setting of the novel and a phone and a satellite dish. According to Lipika Bhushan, head of marketing for HarperCollins Publishers India,

It’s no longer about elephants . . . The perception of what India is by publishers publishing out of India may be quite different than a publisher in the West. It’s changed a lot, especially in the last 20 years and that comes through in everything that we do..they perceive India very differently still, probably. (qtd. in Lahiri, n.pag.)

The difference in the cover images of the two editions was found in the study undertaken by Lisa Lau as well. Lau notes:

The divergences are considerable, as one might expect. (Those for the Indian market were far less traditional, conservative, and exoticised; they tended to be more contemporary, playful, and modernised.) We surmised target audiences, and social messages being conveyed by covering books with such images, and discussed what identity constructions were being offered and encouraged, and where. (*Quartz India*, n.pag.)

The book cover decides many a time whether the potential reader would pick up a book to read or buy. The book covers of Indian editions of the same work are designed in such a way that it caters to the reading interests of its target audience.

### Conclusion

It is commonly held that writers become successful because of the literary merit of their works. However, apart from the quality of writing, there are a host of other important factors related to marketing that come into play in determining how and how well a writer and his work comes to be received by his or her readers.

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