

Literature

A thousand and one tales

A nation-continent: with 22 official languages recognised by the Constitution, India's literatures are the expression of a dynamic, mixed, complex culture very unlike the mystified and exotic image held in Italy and most of the west. Yet very few tales of the real India actually get printed.

by Mara Matta

The majority of Indian literature on sale in Italian bookstores has been translated from English. Although the writers on offer are among the most celebrated and renowned at international level, such as Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy or Anita Desai, their works are only representative of small part of the rich Indian literary landscape. Publishing companies continue to ignore authors who write in the subcontinent's lesser-known languages, preferring themes they consider more bankable, such as poverty, women's rights and the exoticism of a country still cloaked in the fog of the most claustrophobic and simplistic Orientalism. In other words, portraits of India that swirl through the collective Western imagination like coloured kites unwound along a spool of stories that seem to refer to a faraway time and place.

Yet India is closer to us than we'd like to think, and more complex than the usual sensationalist stories lead us to believe, for it is a country of chiaroscuro, with numerous shades of gray, and curiously bipolar. On the one hand, it is a thriving economy headed down the 'right' political path towards democracy; on the other, it is still an unstable society, often reviewed in the foreign press for its exploitation of minors, violence on women, poverty and the area of operations for many international

NGOs. Ally or subject, concubine or slave, post-colonial India has not yet been able to shed its colonial past, at least not in the collective Western imagination. However, a literary polyphony has emerged since the fables of *A Thousand and One Nights*. A myriad of voices that often hail from the country's so-called 'outposts', from where the more dissonant, beautiful and interesting visions rise up, painting a critical and complex portrait of India today.

For instance, Aruni Kashyap's novel *The House with a Thousand Stories* (Penguin, 2013), which transports us to the lyrical, hilly tea fields of Assam, not to enchant us but to relate one of the most cruel – and hushed-up – chapters of contemporary Indian history: the extrajudicial killing spree against the United Liberation Front of Assam, which began in 1990 and continues today. Or Siddhartha Deb's *An Outline of the Republic* (HarperCollins, 2005), on the government's violence against its 'legitimate' children, whose membership in so-called 'tribal' or 'indigenous' groups (known as *adivasi*) has meant they are considered to be the offspring of bastards in the eyes of the state; more 'midnight's children' searching, like many others, for meaning in confining terms such as 'multiculturalism' and falsely reassuring phrases like 'unity in diversity'.



Sixty years after India gained its independence, its authors (some of whom choose to write in their native languages, not only in English) rail against what Manipuri poet Yumlebam Ibomcha calls "Those who speak the language of progress", who:

*call my homeland a mendicant state
not knowing its landlocked misery,
its odd splendor.
And no one knows who picks up its
bodies.*

This 'odd splendor' seeps, like poorly hidden gossip, from the pages of *The Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* (2011), edited by Tilottoma Misra. The operative word here being 'writings',



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on the river's surface, the evocative power of words is transformed into a biting aside as sharp as a sword, which, as Pasolini used to say, enables battles to be fought 'with the weapons of poetry'. The written word has often immortalised History, relegating other, smaller histories to silence; castaways in the passing of time. Jiban Narah, another poet from Manipur, thus gives voice to the subaltern who, reduced to 'unreal men',

*rise from the water and stare
transfixed
At the historian and the hero of
history.
Standing across from the shadows
of the dead
The historian opens up oddities
Theorises with condensed letters
shuffles the past*

India's literary works invite us to behold the diverse, unresolved versions of the nation's history. They urge us to look beyond the allure of myth, to discover the (at times cacophonous) polyphony that is the true wonder of Indian literature. We are invited to converse with and, more importantly, listen what which Kashyap expresses through the lightness of verse:

*Even I have words.
I can clay-mould them
I have languages, literatures,
forest songs.
[...]
Don't you see
I'm different
Even I have words
Languages, literatures
And stories to tell you
Are you eager to listen, at all? **E***

seeing as this volume only contains works by authors who have chosen to use writing as their means of communication, as opposed to the hard-to-classify oral tradition – songs, extemporaneous stories, even popular theatre – that is India's (and especially tribal India's) immense and invaluable literary, historical and artistic treasure.

The importance and *threat* of the written word has been captured by poet Mamang Dai, one of the most vibrant and controversial voices of her native state, Arunachal Pradesh. In her evocatively entitled poem "The Voice of the Mountain", Dai describes the clash with 'valley culture', with men who brought gifts of fish and stole from the bowels of the mountain sacred to the inhabitants who walked

its paths, carved out of the mountainside by ancient visionary geographies.

*The other day a young man arrived
from the village.
Because he could not speak
he brought a gift of fish
from the land of rivers.
It seems such acts are repeated:
We live in territories forever ancient
and new,
and as we speak in changing
languages.
I, also, leave my spear leaning by
the tree
and try to make a sign*

in these 'territories forever ancient and new', where people mingle like ripples