

Passages from Indian hands

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We review the best of the new Indian fiction, long and short, written in English or translated, and exploring London, Oxford, Bombay and the river Sutra's banks. Plus, overleaf, food of the Raj, and other new novels

James Wood

Afternoon Raag

by AMIT CHAUDHURI

133pp £13.99

Heinemann

HERE is the *Bildungsroman* at its dreamiest — the soft tissue of the novel of education, pulled from its usual sturdy frame, and soaked in the sweetest language. A young man with a head full of English poetry comes from India to study at Oxford; he makes two women friends; he shares his “love for the English language” with a friend, mooning over Lawrence’s *Collected Poems*. And that is our story. With most writers, such a book would be an empty cushion; in Chaudhuri’s hands, it is irresistible.

For Chaudhuri writes radiantly exact prose. His syntax may waver and curl (the prose in this book imitates the winding melodies of the Indian *raag*) but the writing is not precious, because of this stunning facility for exactitude. Those who are always acclaiming the “poetic prose” of an Ondaatje would do well to study Chaudhuri’s language. Again and again, he produces the perfect adjective, the stupendous adverb. These words sting the ordinary into strangeness; they have the unmistakability of pain. When Chaudhuri describes a kettle rising to “a steady, solipsistic bubbling” — could that word “solipsistic” be improved on? Or a toilet in Oxford “whose cistern gurgled candidly each time someone flushed it” — isn’t “candidly” witty and precise? Or a fat friend of the hero’s mother seen asleep in Bombay “snoring and shuddering malarially in her sleep”; or musical instruments in a shop “hung upside down from the ceiling like bats.”

Chaudhuri appears to carry this talent like a camel its humps, so natural and inescapable and warmly lazy it seems. It is important to begin with this talent, because this mild, quiet little book — in truth, a little too slight, a little too plotless — could not survive without it. But Chaudhuri also has a lovely tenderness, a deep loyalty towards his subjects.

The book sways between Oxford and Bombay (later the family moves to Calcutta, where Chaudhuri was born). The Oxford student recalls for us his father, who sleeps “in a most gentlemanly manner”, and enjoys the cartoon by R K Laxman in the *Times of India* every morning. Thinking of his mother, he sees “the deliberate, floral creases of her sari, the pale orange-brown glow of her skin, the mild ember-darkening of her lipsticked mouth, the patient, round fruition of her bun of hair, and the irrelevant dot on her forehead.”

Late in the day, his parents like to walk together: “Their lonely parade, their quiet ambitiousness as they walk up and down the compound.” Again, Chaudhuri’s words fall like perfect fruit into the path of his sentence: “quiet ambitiousness” — have not all of us seen this gentle, conspiratorial proximity of two parents walking together?

Chaudhuri brings an estranging eye to Oxford, that basin of Englishness. A café is recommended as “the only place in Oxford that served a strong and dark coffee, with a scorched South Indian flavour.” The young Indian, in his college rooms, finds he misses the noises of Bombay, “the background sound of old people and children.” English rain, compared to its Indian equivalent, seems a strange thing, that “fine, persistent baby-like drizzle in which no one gets wet.” Waking in Oxford, he has the feeling “of having travelled great distances, of arriving, at last, at a place that is not home.” Yet *Afternoon Raag* is only lightly about

exile or migration; or rather, its interest in such things is not political and thematic but begins and ends in the estrangement of language itself. Chaudhuri’s language itself travels great distances, and enables the reader to do so. (And the book’s *real* subject is the joy of this language).

The book begins to lose pressure, somewhat mysteriously, about halfway. Although Chaudhuri’s language remains careful and precise, some of its luxuriance falls away. There seems no reason for this, except that the book begins to give out a sense — very faint — of having got bored with itself. As the book progresses, the dreamy narrative consumes rather than extends itself, revealing its rather essayistic design. These scenes from Oxford and Bombay are exquisite; but they are tableaux, brocades. Still, the first 70 pages of this book are dazzling enough.

Here is the Bombay Gymkhana in the afternoon: “In cool, strategic corners, waiters stood in coloured waistcoats . . . dark Goan men in neat clothes, inhaling and exhaling and lightly chattering among themselves. The most invigorating fact about the club was its long corridor, an avenue of light reflected off a polished floor and protected by arches. It was frequented mainly by company executives. . . they looked to me like angels. . . these managers would sit on chairs and childishly ring little brass bells to summon the waiters. . . Food was in abundance, from the American hamburger to chop-suey to the local *bhelpuri* with its subversive smells of the narrow, spice-selling streets of west Bombay. My mother was always much amused by the sight of people eating around her, moving their mouths in a slow, moral way; human beings are the only creatures, she says, who eat habitually without hunger. . . Long-nosed Parsi lawyers stabbed their food, using knives and forks with jurisprudential elegance. Gujarati businessmen, educated in the school of life, employed fingers, holding the crispy wafer of the *bhelpuri* and biting it competitively, as if they were afraid it might bite them first.”

Not all the writing in this book is as good as this, but enough of it is. *Afternoon Raag* feels like an experiment, a way-station between the substance of his first book, *A Strange And Sublime Address*, and a third novel. Writing like this, so full of potential, is like someone shouting his great direction to us through a long valley. Chaudhuri has barely begun his march.

James Wood is the Guardian’s Chief Literary Critic

Claire Messud

Separate Journeys

edited by GEETA

DHARMARAJAN

190pp, £7.99

Daughter’s Daughter

by MRINAL PANDE

117pp, £7.99

Mantra Publishing

THIS charming collection of contemporary Indian stories consists largely of pieces translated into English for the first time from Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, and half a dozen other Indian languages. With the exception of Anita Desai, the authors of these works, while well-known in South Asia, are unfamiliar to a British audience, and both Dharmarajan and Mantra Publishing are to be commended for bringing them to wider recognition. “I’d like to