What About Shobhaa Dé?
Indian Pulp Fiction Meets Indian Writing in English

PADMINI MONGIA

ABSTRACT
Dé, often known as India’s first ‘pulp’ writer in English, has been successfully publishing her novels since the late 1980s. However, she rarely makes it into the canon of the highly visible and successful writers who define the field of Indian Writing in English (IWE). That Dé writes in English, sells in huge numbers, but remains outside the umbrella category of IWE is my essay’s concern. It offers an alternate way of imagining ‘vernacular worlds’ and ‘cosmopolitan imaginations’. In these first decades of the twenty-first century, new genres of the novel in English have appeared, which signal significant changes in IWE. Instead of being concerned with literary fiction and revisioning Empire, like earlier writers such as Salman Rushdie, the new writers have their gaze focused on lives and loves in urban Indian centres. Not since the early 1980s has there been as significant a shift as what we see now with this new pulp fiction, written entirely for consumption in a domestic market. Dé’s work may be regarded as opening up the space now occupied by best-selling writers such as Chetan Bhagat.

IN 2008, I TOOK A LEAVE OF ABSENCE from my job at Franklin and Marshall, a liberal arts college in the USA, to take up a position teaching English at the Center for English Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. Sometime during that fall (or Monsoon Semester, as it’s called in JNU), I was speaking to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who was at a workshop on translation studies at JNU. Arvind asked me to contribute an essay on Shobhaa Dé for a revised edition of the Illustrated History of Indian Writing in English, first published in 2003. I hesitated briefly, since I had only read one Dé novel. Then I accepted the invitation, because I had always meant and planned to read more of Dé than I had. Here was an opportunity to spend some sustained time on a writer it was hard to ignore even as she fell outside the official purview of Indian Writing in English (IWE), that body of
work that had so engaged and energized my world both personally and intellectually since the 1980s.

Thus began a year of reading Dé. I was shocked to discover how much she had written and how varied her oeuvre was, even as I had been dimly aware of these facts as facts. Coinciding with the reading, I started teaching a course on Indian Writing in English to MA students at JNU. I taught a course which had evolved from being a broad survey with a heavy emphasis on writing after 1980 to one that addressed and critiqued the category of Indian Writing in English. The course had developed this shape over the fifteen years in which I’d been teaching it, as my own research interests had shifted to examine the marketing of Indian fiction in the USA.

To teach this course outside of my usual liberal-arts environment and in JNU was a radically different experience. Whereas, in the USA, I could presume no prior knowledge of India or of Indian writing in English, in the JNU context my students lived and breathed the novel in English produced in India. They did so in private and academic contexts; depending on where they had done their undergraduate degrees, they were better or less well familiar with Indian fiction in English as an area of scholarly inquiry. Further, they had more than a thing or two to teach me. Thanks to their wide-ranging interests, we spent time on new genres of IWE. Some students were followers of the then booming chick-lit phenomena and others of the newly emerging graphic novel or futurist genres. We had a wonderful time exploring their readerly worlds and mine as we read the many genres which proliferated at that time.

Shortly after, in the summer of 2009, I presented a paper at the ACLALS conference in Cyprus, ‘Pulp and Other New Fictions of English India’. It brought together the work I was doing on Dé with the explorations I had undertaken along with my JNU students into some of the new genres in which young writers were publishing. I spoke at some length on chick-lit, in part because interest in it had grown greatly in those years.¹ Anuja Chauhan’s *The

---