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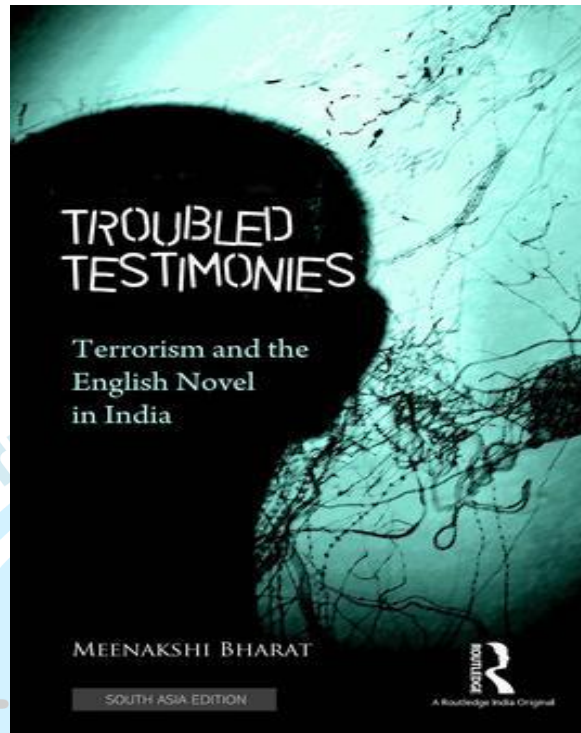
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Troubled Testimonies: Terrorism and the English Novel in India

Reviewed by: Ratna Raman



Troubled Testimonies: Terrorism and the English Novel in India

By Meenakshi Bharat

Routledge, New Delhi, London and New York, 2016,

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Troubled Testimonies analyses the role played by literature in the context of historical, political and social changes. The earliest readings of poetry and prose in dominant traditions have often been a celebration of lives and cultures, especially the lives of powerful people. It is only in the recent twentieth century, possibly towards the last decades that literature has begun to channelize not merely popular perceptions and interests, but has delved extensively into locating narratives outside of dominant literary and cultural traditions.

Somewhere, narratives have ceased to merely report on the extraordinary and have begun to examine more often, painful features of human lives especially in the context of the contradictory twentieth century and after. When the great wars of colonialism and territorial expansion came to an end, it was time for the smaller wars

wherein prevalent hierarchies and hegemonies were to be toppled. Meenakshi Bharat's book *Troubled Testimonies* looks at the engagement of modern literature, specifically the Indian novel in the context of terrorism in contemporary times.

Ever since terror established what Bharat terms a 'permeating hold on society's psyche' creative writing has needed to function as both witness and record, providing troubled testimonies through which this destabilization is revealed. Arguing that terror has become an inescapable reality of our times, Bharat attempts to examine whether contemporary literature, especially that written in the Indian subcontinent provides a catharsis to the pain and trauma that accompany terror.

Speaking of the impact of the thriving media industry, print and audio-visual, Bharat opines that it has fuelled interest in the theme of terrorism, imbuing "terrorist acts with new meaning and currency," and has also generated an element of "voyeurism." The fictional response to this, Bharat emphasises, has been varied, ranging from 'dubious pleasure to anguish, torment, trauma and horror. Drawing upon extant terms such as "postcolonialism" Bharat introduces the phrase "post terrorist", thereby initiating and establishing a context for interrogating and understanding the dynamics and motivations behind the ideology of terrorism.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the geographical ambit of the post terrorist novel and comprises of four chapters. Chapter two looks closely at Jammu and Kashmir and its fraught context. Bharat points out that despite its rich and variegated history, literary work in English in Kashmir has been noticeable only in the last twenty years or so.

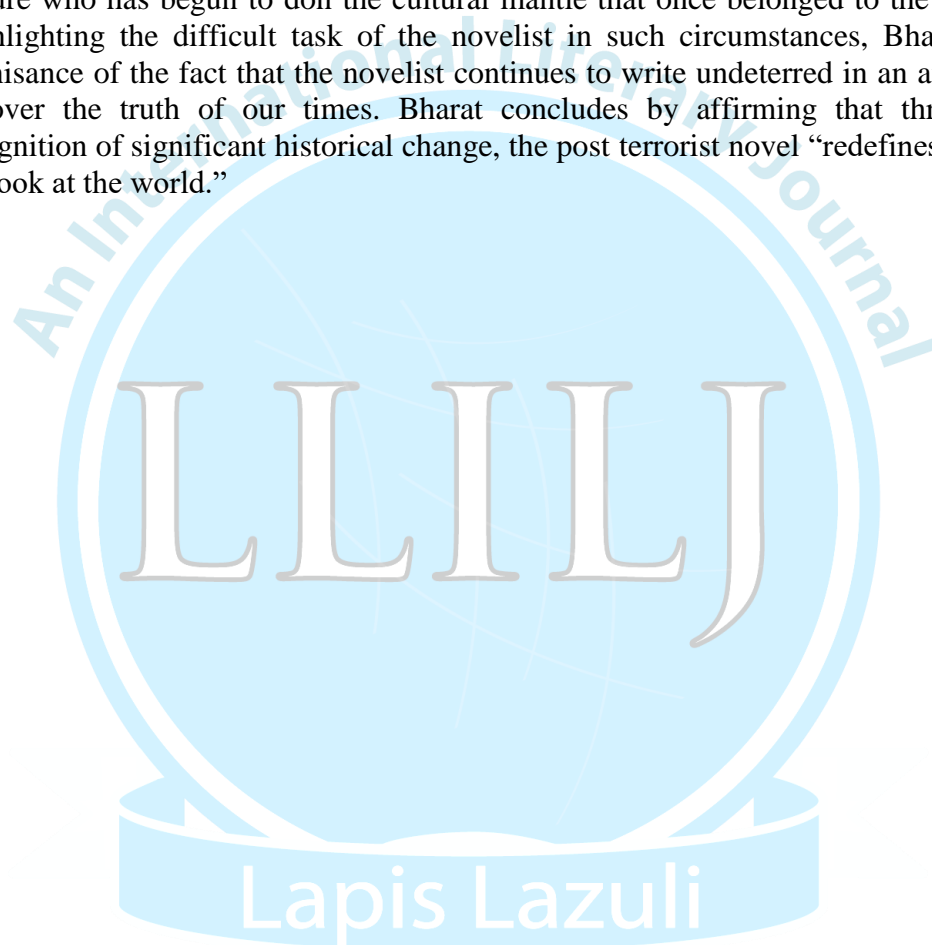
This part analyses Vikram Chandra's *The Srinagar Conspiracy* (2000), Aniruddh Bahal's *Bunker 131* (2003) and Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Chandra's book, Bharat stipulates heralds the beginnings of the theme of terrorism in the popular thriller format, while Bahal's *Bunker 131*, written in the turbulent 1990s subverts and attacks the army, exposing its corruption. Bharat terms *Shalimar the Clown*, a significant foray by Rushdie into Kashmiri territory, one that looks not merely at terrorism but at personal themes of love, betrayal and revenge. *Shalimar* who has been betrayed by love, takes to terrorism as a loftier cause. Bharat sees Rushdie as developing the early conception of Kashmiriyat, the benign, congenial Kashmiri notion of oneness, in this fictional enterprise.

Chapter three discusses Jaspreet Singh's *Chef* (2010), Basharat Singh's journalistic memoir *Curfewed Night* (2010), Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* (2010) and Siddhartha Gigoo's *The Garden of Solitude*: novels that gaze inwards into the circumstances of turbulent Kashmir, and provide complex responses to the repercussions of terrorism. Chapter four moves away from examining terrorism in Kashmir, to analyse the canker of terrorism in the heartlands through the work of novelists as diverse as Omair Ahmad, Juggi Bhasin, Kiran Nagarkar and Kiran Desai. Chapter five, the last chapter in part I, argues that in the wake of 9\11, the West was constrained to re-examine its perception of terrorism as an activity confined to the subcontinent and engage with its dangerous implications for everyone, worldwide. The chapter highlights the significant contributions of subcontinental writers such as Rushdie, Nagarkar, Mohsin Hamid, H.M. Naqvi, Kamila Shamsie and Tabish khair.

Part II explores more formal and thematic ramifications. Chapter six identifies Sarnath Banerjee's use of the graphic novel to subversively open up new visual modes of cultural engagement and criticism. It is extremely responsive to the issue of terrorism. This is followed up by discussions of Abdul Sultan's *The Believers*, illustrated by Partha Sengupta and Naseer Ahmad's *Kashmir Pending* illustrated by Saurabh Singh.

Chapter seven deals with the issue of gender, drawing attention to the lack of psychologically developed female protagonists in what remains a predominantly male space. Chapter eight devotes itself to a discussion of trauma, due to the psychological repercussions of terrorist violence that has pervaded both the country and the world. The issues of gender and trauma are also part of the trajectory of the post terrorist novels.

The concluding chapter draws attention to the figure of the terrorist in contemporary culture who has begun to don the cultural mantle that once belonged to the novelist. Highlighting the difficult task of the novelist in such circumstances, Bharat takes cognisance of the fact that the novelist continues to write undeterred in an attempt to uncover the truth of our times. Bharat concludes by affirming that through its recognition of significant historical change, the post terrorist novel "redefines the way we look at the world."



BIO-NOTE

Dr. Ratna Raman is Associate Professor of English at Sri Venkateswara College, New Delhi. Her articles on topical issues relating to education, health and women's rights appear regularly in the national newspaper **The Chandigarh Tribune**. She is a regular contributor on significant contemporary issues since February 2010 to **Hardnews**, a monthly newsmagazine distributed in over 32 countries and is featured online as well. She also writes the blog **In the Midst of Life**. She has published short stories and articles on food and culture in **Confluence**, a newsmagazine published for South East Asia at the United Kingdom. She is also an occasional reviewer for **Biblio** and **The Book Review**. Her doctoral dissertation was on Doris Lessing. Her interests include women's writing, Twentieth-century fiction and poetry and contemporary culture.

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