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Worlds in a tangle: The promotion of writing in India between the vernacular and the global

Per Ståhlberg

Koshy's Parade Café is a rare institution in the south Indian City of Bengaluru. It is located at the intersection of Saint Marks Road and Church Street, in a part of town where most roads still have colonial names. With its wood-panelled walls, sparsely decorated with old black-and-white photographs, Koshy's has an atmosphere of bygone days. This is a place where a guest can sit undisturbed with only a cup of coffee and escape the hectic life of urban India. One weekend in late February I dropped by after a long, hot day at the *Times of India* Literary Festival, organized in Bengaluru. I needed a quiet place where I could prepare for an upcoming meeting with a local author. It was not by chance that I ended up in Koshy's. The author I was about to meet had written a celebrated novel in which an establishment called 'Coffee House' figures prominently: a place which has not changed its name for a hundred years, and where the protagonist spends many hours. From a book review in a South Indian daily I had learned that Coffee House was most likely modelled on Koshy's Parade Café. When I sat down at my table waiting, things did indeed appear very much as in the literary version. Even the unobtrusive waiter had the same name as the one in the novel, displayed on a tag on his shirt. It was Vincent!

When I read the book, I found it somewhat peculiar that this place seemed to have a double significance throughout the narrative. In Coffee House the protagonist regularly escapes the narrow, suffocating world of his own family life, but it is also a textual location in which I, as the reader of the novel, feel comfortable. Coffee House represents that kind of place one often searches for when visiting a bustling city for the first time and looking for something to eat or drink; an eatery with a flavour of local authenticity – but in a familiar way that makes you feel at ease.

Another thing was odd, too. Except for the protagonist's home, Coffee House is the only location of any major importance in that novel. There are no imaginative descriptions of other sites or situations referring to the city in which the story takes place. Bengaluru is, however, fairly well known around the world as the Indian capital of information technology – though more often by its former colonial name, Bangalore. It was here, at a downtown golf course with a view from the first tee of the office buildings of Microsoft and IBM, that a *New York Times* columnist got the inspiration for a book about globalization in the twenty-first century, in which he claimed that the world was now 'flat' (Friedman 2005). From my table at Koshy's, I saw nothing reminiscent of a flat world. Neither did the novel I had read narrate a cosmopolitan hi-tech India; it closely revolved around a middle-class Bengaluru family, with very few details that related the story to the outer world in any specific scale or period of time. Still, this novel had a publishing career that could very well illuminate Franco Moretti's (2013: 45) claim that 'literature around us is now unmistakably a planetary system.' A confusing tangle of 'worlds' – local and planetary, real and literary, familiar and unfamiliar, contemporary and bygone – frame this chapter.

The next Indian novel

Since Salman Rushdie's breakthrough with *Midnight's Children* in 1981, fiction writers of Indian origin have been conspicuously present in the global arena of literature. Authors and titles appearing regularly on lists of essential reading from India are, apart from Rushdie, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* ([1996] 1995), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Kirin Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). What all these writers, as well as a number of other globally successful India-born authors – Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Pankaj Mishra, Vikram Chandra – have in common is that they write in English (several of them are also expatriate Indians) and not in any of the other twenty-two official languages spoken (and increasingly also read and written) by the overwhelming majority of Indian citizens.¹ This is of course a fact that over the years has aroused debate (I return to the subject later) but also a widely

¹ English is also an official Indian language.

spread expectation that *the next* Indian success novel will be a translation from a language such as Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam or perhaps Hindi. What could there be beyond the Indian English novel, waiting to be discovered by international publishers, critics and readers?

Thus, in a manner of speaking, Vivek Shanbhag's *Ghachar Ghochar* – the novel alluded to in the vignette above – had been anticipated. Written in the South Indian language of Kannada and first published in 2013 by Akshara Prakashana, it was translated into English two years later and published by the Indian subsidiary of HarperCollins. Domestically it was marketed under the imprint Harper Perennial, which is devoted to translations into English of writings from various languages on the Indian subcontinent. The translation was fairly well received by Indian reviewers, and in 2017 it was also published in the UK (by Faber and Faber) and in the US (by Penguin). Soon it began to travel further, as it appeared in an increasing number of editions and translations. Review after review praised the novel, and much of this enthusiasm seemed to arise precisely from the fact that the book was not originally written in English. The reviewer in *The Guardian* claimed that this book 'shows what we've been missing, and it proves the necessity of translations for a dynamic literary culture' (Smith 2017). In *The New York Times*, *Ghachar Ghochar* was heralded as 'the finest Indian novel in a decade, notable for a book in bhasha, one of India's vernacular languages' (Sehgal 2017). When the book was published in Swedish, critics were keen to note that this was an international breakthrough for literature originally written in an Indian language (Andersson 2019, Olsson 2019). Few readers could miss the point, which was furthermore emphasized by the fact that the original title of the novel was kept in all translations. There was some wittiness in this halo of authenticity: the expression 'ghachar ghochar' is a literary invention and has no meaning in the Kannada language. In the world of the novel, though, it has the meaning of something being messed up – in a tangle.

Numerous reviewers around the world framed the book as the new 'Great Indian Novel' and mentioned the author alongside such authors as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy – Shanbhag is sometimes even called an Indian Chekhov. This does not pass unnoticed in India. Boosted by its international success, *Ghachar Ghochar* was successively translated into several other Indian languages and published by regional publishers. Vivek Shanbhag became a celebrity, personifying a new generation of regional Indian writers expected by many in the Indian book industry to be on the rise. He appeared on the leading stage of Indian literature, the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), several years in

a row, and also at a number of other literary events around India and across the world. When I finally met him in Bengaluru he had just participated in a panel on 'Fiction in Indian Languages: Narratives Across Regions' at the local literature festival.

One may ask why this particular book came to fulfil the expectations of an Indian-language novel and enter the circuit of 'world literature'. Is it some literary quality of the book that made its destiny, or is it perhaps the market skills of those actors and organizations involved in creating and promoting the novel? It is never obvious if one could find an answer to this question in the book itself or in the outside world (see Hofmeyr 2004). Perhaps it is even a pointless question to ask? It may be more reasonable to ask how it all happened. This is an empirical question that is approached quite often as we follow the career of *Ghachar Ghochar* throughout this chapter. My general query, though, is somewhat larger.

The vernacular domain

What initially provoked my curiosity was neither this specific book nor the anticipation of new Indian writing among literature reviewers in the US and Europe. I mentioned that Vivek Shanbhag on several occasions had participated in the JLF, the mega-event that attracts hundreds of thousands of people to the capital of Rajasthan in late January each year. Incidentally, for a couple of those years (2017–2018) I had also attended the festival (Ståhlberg 2019). What had caught my attention was an apparent paradox concerning this event. The JLF is not just the largest Indian literary festival, it is also promoted as an arena for 'world literature', visited by authors and audiences from all over the globe, and is claimed to be the largest free literary festival in the world. Most panels are convened in English and much attention is paid to the invited international celebrities. Still, in this setting literature in regional languages seemed to be of utmost concern. In the programme, on the stages and in my conversations with publishers, authors and literary critics there was a relentless preoccupation with fiction in Indian languages and by writers from regions outside the metropolitan cities. What was this all about?

I felt confused. It seemed that this concern with regional literature was moving between contexts: sometimes it was discussed in terms of literary quality ('regional writing is more authentic'), at other times it was in terms of commerce

(‘there is a huge untapped market in the regions’) and often it was discussed as a politically topical issue (‘regional writers are discriminated against’). But one thing was clear: almost everyone was expecting a coming ‘boom’ of writing from the regions in languages other than English. As a case in point, one book was repeatedly referred to as the most phenomenal success in recent years: Vivek Shanbhag’s *Ghachar Ghochar*.

Consequently, with this novel as a recurrent reference point, I try here to understand the preoccupation with what we may call ‘vernacular writing’ (I soon qualify this concept) within the worlds of Indian literature. As hinted at above, I believe there are more dimensions to this phenomenon than just a cultural demand for more – and more authentic – Indian writers to celebrate on prestigious literary stages. How then should *Ghachar Ghochar* be contextualized within the cultural and commercial market of literature, as well as within a current and historical debate around language and politics? I approach this question with a particular interest in ‘vernacularity’ as a concern for scholarship on world literature. In view of this volume’s focus on ‘the vernacular’, the aim of this chapter is to challenge the binary of the vernacular and the cosmopolitan by looking at the worlds of Indian literature, which are largely structured on three levels: regional, national and international (Orsini 2002). These three levels have historically been rather insulated from each other and few books have moved between markets. Those books that do move usually do so from the international levels and downwards. Typically, authors of Indian origin must first be consecrated in ‘the West’ before their works are circulated within India (Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga are some well-known examples). In recent decades, however, these three levels of the Indian book worlds have become increasingly intertwined. The example of *Ghachar Ghochar* is illuminating. The novel circulates at all three levels in separate editions, but these levels are closely related. The circulation of this book on the international scale is conditioned by its previous translation from Kannada into English for a pan-Indian market, while its circulation regionally (translated into more Indian languages) is spurred by its global fame. It is not possible to reduce this structure to a binary system (the local versus the global) in which a vernacular–cosmopolitan dynamic is conveniently played out. So, in this three-level structure, what does ‘the vernacular’ mean?

The concept ‘vernacular’ needs to be used with some caution. Often it is an unproblematic term, in the sense that we can define what we mean, and it is unlikely that a scholarly definition will be confused with the widespread

colloquial use of the word (in contrast, for example, to the problematic concept of ‘world literature’). However, in India the word ‘vernacular’ has a particular history. It was used in a number of government laws that controlled and censured Indian-language newspapers from the nineteenth century, the so-called ‘Vernacular Press Act’ (Nataranjan 1955: 81–92), and has entered the Indian history of British colonialism taught in schoolbooks throughout the country. Thus it connotes oppression, even though the word to some extent is also used in academic and semi-official language to distinguish between English- and Indian-language media. It is not an uncontroversial word, specifically not in the field of literature. The vernacular is, as Shaden Tageldin (2018: 115) noted, ‘terminological quicksand’.

I was soon reminded of this problem when I started to contact people who had been involved professionally with *Ghachar Ghochar*. Before I went to visit Vivek Shanbhag in Bengaluru, I met with his literary agent, Shruti Debi, at a south Delhi café. She had been a key person in creating the international success of *Ghachar Ghochar*, and was of course very engaged in the ‘boom’ of Indian-language writing. But she was hesitant about the correct term. When speaking about her work, she suddenly stopped after having uttered the word ‘vernacular’ and tried to find a more appropriate term. ‘I don’t think it is right to say vernacular,’ she explained. ‘In India now, you are not allowed to say that anymore, it has become non-PC [not politically correct].’ Her point was that by referring to a language (and its literature) as ‘vernacular’ would be to suggest that it is inferior to English.

But the controversy is not only confined to the conflict between English and all other Indian languages. This was made clear to me by the South Indian publisher Kannan Sundaram of Kalachuvadu Publishing House, responsible for the Tamil translation of *Ghachar Ghochar*. When I contacted him, I introduced myself as a scholar interested in ‘regional/vernacular authors who have recently been recognized nationally and internationally through translations’. In response, he began immediately to explain the issue further, pointing out that ‘regional language’, too, is a problematic term:

I prefer not to use regional/vernacular since they place English and Hindi as national languages and the other languages as confined to regions. This is inaccurate. Hindi is spoken in a larger region of India and not around the country while English is spoken in limited urban pockets and not throughout the country ... Tamil in fact is an international language. It is one of the languages of the state in India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia. It is spoken by a significant

number of people across Europe, North America and Australia. For example, it is one of the languages of the city of Toronto.

(Sundaram 2019)

Tamil belongs, like Kannada, to the Dravidian family of languages (spoken mostly in South India), which are completely different from Indo-European languages, such as Hindi, spoken in the north. Thus from a South Indian perspective both Hindi and English are languages of domination, and it is therefore insulting when Tamil (or other South Indian languages) are denoted as ‘regional’ or ‘vernacular’.

The most common and probably least controversial emic (indigenous) term is *bhasha*. It means simply ‘language’ in Hindi and several other languages (a frequently used but awkward term in Indian English is therefore ‘language literature’). Not surprisingly, *bhasha* is also occasionally refuted. ‘If we are language writers, then how do other authors work – with dance?’ said a participant ironically on a session about *bhasha* literature at the JLF in which Vivek Shanbhag also took part (2016). The formally correct but rather cumbersome expression is ‘literature in Indian languages other than English’. In this chapter, however, I alternate between terms (such as *bhasha*, Indian language or regional literature) according to the situation and try to restrict the use of ‘vernacular’ to the more analytical sections. In those contexts, I discuss ‘the vernacular’ in three interrelated meanings: linguistically, referring to Indian languages other than English; culturally, where vernacularism stands for specific local or regional particularities narrated in a novel; and in terms of position, referring to the status ascribed to an author, publisher or text in a literary context. Taken together, these three meanings constitute what I call ‘the vernacular domain’ of Indian literature.

Book worlds

Some of the most important contributions to world literature research have a literary–sociological approach in common, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas about literary fields (Casanova 2004), Wallerstein’s world system theory (Moretti 2013 or, more broadly, conceptualizing literary texts as artefacts circulating in a global but unequal and competitive arena of world literature (Damrosch 2003, Warwick Research Collective 2015). Thus a focus has been on structural aspects of global circulation. In contrast, other scholars are looking more

closely at specific texts, interested in why they may be appreciated worldwide. Rebecca Walkowitz (2015), for example, argues that contemporary novels are increasingly written as texts to be circulated in many languages and for a variety of audiences. They are 'born translated'. Similarly, Debjani Ganguly (2016) discusses how contemporary novels may thematically narrate issues of universal concern, signifying a literary form that she calls 'the global novel'. Siskind (2010) makes a distinction between scholars focused on either structures or texts as a matter of two complementary models, and labels them 'the globalization of the novel' versus 'the novelization of the global'. Whether referring to structure or content, common to both these models is an understanding of 'world literature' as empirical objects, a particular literature circulating around the world, and which the scholar may study.

In this chapter I write about one such object: a novel that does circulate (almost) worldwide. I am interested in both the structural context and the literary content of this book. However, my discussion deviates in two ways from the scholarly perspectives mentioned above. First, regarding the context, my aim is to look closely at structure by maintaining a focus on agency, rather than on distant macro features of the global circulation of literature (cf. Knorr Cetina and Bruegger 2002). Second, regarding textual content, I do not study *Ghachar Ghochar* as a typical global (Indian) novel, characterized by certain qualities. Importantly, this novel is unique, and my approach is fairly ideographic. However, I believe *Ghachar Ghochar* has explanatory power and presents opportunities to highlight contradictory features within the worlds of (Indian) literature (see Mitchell 1983).

Consequently, I am interested in the immediate context in which this novel was written, produced, promoted, circulated and consumed; and in the relations between the various actors who were involved in these processes. I also deliberately blur the distinction between text, society and circulation. As Antonio Candido (2014: 142) claims, 'we can only understand the [literary] work by mixing text and context in a dialectically integrated interpretation'. Thus I am sympathetic to recent interventions among scholars in the academic field of world literature, attempting to refocus attention from circulation and macro structures towards a more ontological perspective on the text, as well as on the agency and activities of 'world-making' (Cheah 2015, Ganguly 2016, Helgesson 2018, Neumann 2018). My emphasis is on how *Ghachar Ghochar* relates to the construction and production of a genre or form (see Dimock 2006) of imaginaries of (and for) the world – that form is, then, 'the vernacular Indian novel'.

Methodologically, the model of approaching literature through interrelated scales of analyses – ranging from the level of the text to ‘the apparatus of cultural production’ – suggested by Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini (2018: 303–5) has helped my thought processes. The way I see it, this focus on agency and relations between actors of various scales resonates with an anthropological – or symbolic interactionist – approach towards the making and management of meaning as an activity going on in collaboration among various people in different roles.

In this context I have been inspired by Howard Becker’s (1982) writing on collective cooperation and conventions in art worlds. Like Becker, I am reluctant to demarcate and define a particular ‘social field’ in which actors compete over resources and recognition. The network of agents cooperating in producing and promoting a book, or a genre of writing, is in principle endless – though some actors are of course more important than others. This is an approach that stands in rather stark contrast to the structural (Bourdieuian) sociology that has dominated studies of ‘world literature’ (e.g. Casanova 2004, Sapiro 2016a, 2016b). Thus I prefer the more open and sensitizing idea of ‘book worlds’ rather than a bounded concept of ‘literary fields’.

Looking at the book

I previously mentioned Vincent, the waiter at Koshy’s Parade Café. When I saw the name tag, I could not help but point towards his shirt, asking if he had heard about a novel in which there is a waiter with his name working in a restaurant just like this. Vincent immediately turned around and went quickly back to the kitchen, without taking my order. I thought that I had somehow offended him, or that he was really tired of hearing the same question from customers. But Vincent soon returned with a book in his hands, looking very pleased. It was the Tamil translation of *Ghachar Ghochar*, he said. The author had presented it to him a few days earlier, because he was mentioned in the book and could read Tamil. Well, this was not completely accurate, Vivek Shanbhag told me the next day. He had not visited the restaurant recently, but he knew that the translator of the Tamil edition had been in the city and had probably gone to Koshy’s. The name of the waiter was, moreover, a pure coincidence; but yes, the author confessed, Coffee House in the novel is partly modelled on Koshy’s.

The story about the waiter is a reminder of the banal fact that a novel is a material object. Vincent, the real waiter, had not read his copy yet, though he

assured me that he would soon do so. Despite this, the book obviously played a role in his life. He kept it in the restaurant kitchen, and was aware that it was an object that connected him and his mundane existence to a literary world imagined by readers far away – in a kind of reversal of how I, as a European reader of the novel, experienced Vincent, the literary character. Our encounter felt like a brief moment of convergence.

It was astonishing to see the book in the hands of Vincent, but previously I had been equally surprised by not finding the book where I had expected it to be. When I arrived in Delhi from Stockholm, a couple of weeks before my visit to Bengaluru, I wanted to obtain some copies of *Ghachar Ghochar*. So I looked around, first in a few classy bookshops in the southern part of the city, close to where I was staying, but without success. Then I went to the most obvious place to go if you want to buy a best-selling book in Delhi: in the colonnades of Connaught Place, the central circular-shaped market area nowadays renamed as Rajiv Chowk, where outdoor booksellers have displayed their commodities directly on the pavement for decades. Arranged side by side, in no particular order, you find self-help books, autobiographies of famous people, international bestsellers and not least the kind of reading that would attract a foreign tourist, such as Gregory David Robert's *Shantaram*, Shashi Taroor's *Why I am a Hindu*, William Dalrymple's books on Indian history and titles by Salman Rushdie, Aravind Adiga and Arundhati Roy – with few exceptions all in English. *Ghachar Ghochar*, however, had apparently not reached this kind of stature and was nowhere to be found. Nor was it stocked by the nearby Oxford University Press bookstore, usually a reliable place with a large section of novels by Indian writers. So I had to search among several other sellers in the area until, finally, I found a few copies of the English edition at the Jain Book Agency. The books were tucked away on a shelf inside the store, not displayed among the bestsellers or reading suggestions one meets when entering the premises. Obviously, the reputation of Shanbhag's novel had not reached the market, at least not in the Indian capital. (I had already noted that it is not the kind of book one should expect to find piled up in bookstalls at international airports.) *Ghachar Ghochar* thus seemed to be more perceptible in the specialist's discourse on Indian literature than as a material object.

The copy I obtained was a paperback edition from HarperCollins (produced for the Indian market), first published in 2016. However, the first five pages were excerpts from enthusiastic reviews in Indian and international publications, and several of these were from late 2017 – so this must have been a later reprint. The

cover showed a white food plate invaded by an army of small black ants, attracted by some brown, spilled liquid. At least two other versions of covers exist of the translation published by HarperCollins. One is purely graphic, designed in line with other translated novels in the Harper Perennial imprint. Another, which is attached to the digital edition, has a watercolour painting on the cover, showing a man sitting alone at a coffee table. On all three English-language versions for the domestic market, it is clearly stated on the cover that the book is translated from an original in Kannada.

As Isabel Hofmeyr (2004: 2–3) notes in her study of the transnational circulation of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, 'When books travel they change shape.' Thus all translations of *Ghachar Ghochar*, whether domestic or international, have different covers. The edition in Hindi is brown and depicts an empty coffee cup; the American Penguin edition is black with a tangled twine placed over the title; in Italy the cover shows a black-and-white photo of a woman's face; the Swedish edition is in ochre with an army of black ants framed by a pattern composed of Indian spices; the German edition has a peacock feather; and the Hebrew shows a box of masala spices. This diversity might not be strange considering that each translation has a separate publisher with its own artistic styles.

But that is not the only reason. Shanbhag explained that even though he had insisted that all translations should have the same title, he also wanted each edition to have its own distinct cover. Through the covers one could perceive the aesthetic preferences of each country, he believed. Apparently the author enjoyed this display of cultural diversity among his audience – in a similar vein to how the foreign reader presumably picks up a copy of *Ghachar Ghochar* out of curiosity about 'other' literature.

Vivek Shanbhag showed me the latest edition of *Ghachar Ghochar* in the original Kannada language. The cover looked plain but sophisticated, with a discreet abstract painting in green, red and yellow, in no way reminiscent of any cover on other editions that I had seen. With the title in a script I could not decode, I would never have guessed it was the same book.

Looking at the different editions side by side, it is also obvious that publishers, through their cover designers, have tried to interpret the theme and world of the novel visually for their respective audiences (which seems to be somewhat tricky when the title offers little guidance). Several of the international editions signal graphically that this is an Indian novel, by the choices of illustrations (spices, peacock feather) or colours (ochre, orange) but it is perhaps more striking that

several covers are not clearly pointing towards a specific geographical origin of the book, and particularly not towards a regional Indian setting. Unlike the literature reviewer's preoccupation with vernacularity, none of the international publishers mentions the Kannada origin on the cover of their editions – nor do all publishers in the Indian-language edition. Seemingly, it is in the marketing for a domestic English-reading audience that the 'vernacular' origin is most relevant.

A joint family

The story of *Ghachar Ghochar* is about one family and its transformation from a meagre existence to a life of overabundance. The unnamed protagonist, the only voice narrating the story, introduces his family rather stoically:

Ours is a joint family. We live in the same house – my wife and I, my parents, my uncle and Malati. Malati is my older sister, back home now after having left her husband. It's natural to ask, I suppose, why the six of us should live together. What can I say – it is one of the strengths of families to pretend that they desire what is inevitable.

(Shanbhag 2016: 10)

The narrative unfolds in, or in proximity to, the family home – though occasionally distanced by the protagonist's reflections from Coffee House. The novel could easily be dramatized on a theatre stage. Thus the joint family home could be seen as the 'significant geography' (Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini 2018) of the story; conceptually and imaginatively, as well as a real geography that 'carries special meaning for individuals and groups' (ibid.: 302). The life of this family is often narrated through their engagement with certain details in their physical home. Through the story the family members are occupied with, for example, the purchase of a gas stove, annoying ants, furniture, gifts, food items (consumed or spilled) and not least the move to a new house. These details and commodities are somehow tied together with the social fabric of the family – and they form part of how everything is changing.

Originally the family was relatively poor but very closely knit together. The protagonist recounts a time when none of them would do anything without involving the other members of the family. But even when the unity of the family has started to crack, he clings to this sense of intimacy: 'Now, what can I say of

myself that is only about me and not tied up with the others' (Shanbhag 2016: 60). The incident that prompts the chain of changes is when the father loses his low-paid job as a salesman for a tea company. The father's younger brother is then entrusted with the retirement allowance to start a business in the spice trade. This firm, Sona Masala, soon becomes a source of prosperity. The family is suddenly wealthy.

However, the main transformation they experience does not concern material wealth. It is about how the family members start to relate to each other and to certain core values as they become rich. The key person in the family is, for example, no longer *appa*, the father of the house, but *chikkappa* – the Kannada term for a father's junior brother – who has become the sole earning member, whom the rest of the family must keep in a good mood. The new-found wealth also enables personal consumption – not everyone needs to be involved in each purchase now. The idea of individualism and self-reliance starts to grow – not least due to the protagonist's wife, Anita, who is uncomfortable with the fact that her husband is completely dependent on income from a family business in which he is not at all involved.

This tension between the individual and the family is a familiar theme in Indian literature as well as in public culture broadly. In her study of the emergence and growth of the novel in India from the nineteenth century, Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985: 7) notes that 'The Indian novelist had to operate in a tradition-bound society where neither a man's profession nor his marriage was his personal affair.' The essential hurdle for the novelist, she claimed, was to write in a form 'that requires individualism as a value and writing about a society that denies it'. Thus in this sense *Ghachar Ghochar* is not a particularly regional novel, as the main theme is (at least) pan-Indian. The blurb on the back cover of my Harper Perennial edition states that, 'Here is an India that is immediately recognizable to Indians, not an exotic concoction fabricated for a foreign audience.'²

Though India is recognizable in the narrative of *Ghachar Ghochar*, the name of the country is never explicitly mentioned, and the novel hardly refers to society on any larger scale.³ The city of Bangalore is introduced in Chapter 3, but, as I said previously, it never really figures as a significant geography (except, perhaps,

² The blurb is signed by the author Suketu Mehta, internationally acclaimed for his book *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*.

³ It is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's comment on the novel *Semarang Hitam* by the Indonesian communist nationalist Mas Marco Kartodikromo: 'Marco feels no need to specify this community by name: it is already there' ([1991] 2006: 32).

in the imagination of the reader). The family members rarely interact with the rest of the world and the reader does not learn about any friends of Malata, Anita or *chikkappa* – it is only the protagonist who we follow to Coffee House with its waiter, Vincent. Furthermore, the narrative is also vaguely located in time. There are a few technologies mentioned (a television, a telephone) that obviously place the unfolding drama in the last three to four decades. But there are no references to political events or public persons that would make the timeframe more specific.

The novel evokes the feeling of a very claustrophobic, family-centred world. The joint family appears as a hegemonic institution, existing for itself, independent of place and time, and as a fertile ground for all kinds of evil. The book also ends on a destructive and violent note. Thus it is hardly surprising that the novel could be read as a social critique of the Indian system of joint families – a point made by several reviewers in the Indian media.

I gave the Hindi edition of *Ghachar Ghochar* to a friend, a north Indian author and journalist, who had helped me with contacts in the Delhi book world. Initially he was rather sceptical of this kind of ‘internationally celebrated Indian writing’. But after I had returned to Sweden, I received a long email from him, explaining that he really had appreciated the book. He emphasized, in stronger words than most reviewers, that Vivek Shanbhag ‘throws light on the power structure within an average Indian family (whether Kannadiga or not)’, showing the ‘hypocrisy, dual standards, injustice and lack of free will’.

Globalizing India

There is, however, another interpretation of the novel, commonly found in reviews from outside India. When I met the author, he took up this issue himself when telling me how he had received many letters from book lovers around the world, and many people had seen the novel in ways he had never anticipated. There was, for example, an American professor of finance who thought the novel was ‘a brilliant comment on globalization in India’. Even though that was never intended, Shanbhag was pleased with the interpretation and had no objections. ‘A lot of changes have been going on in India during the last twenty-five years and I have experienced that myself’, he said. There was, for example, a time during the 1990s when the retail market for consumer goods was restructured and many people lost their jobs, like the father in the novel. ‘It was natural for

me to write about how the external world is reflected in the Indian family; any change for one member impacts the entire family' (Shanbhag 2019).

What is interesting about the interpretation of *Ghachar Ghochar* as a story of 'globalizing India' is that it is basically metaphorical. All details connecting the family to the external world, intentionally left out by the author (as he tells me), must be filled in by the reader. In that sense, the novel is open to interpretation by readers anywhere in the world. Local or regional contextualizations of the novel do not restrain the imagination. This openness of interpretation might, however, take the distant audience quite far away from a reader more familiar with the cultural setting. My friend the north Indian writer was sure about his interpretation of how *Ghachar Ghochar* was related to globalizing India: 'The new economy has not even touched the old value system, that remains intact, but the money has helped to bring out what was feudal, exploitive and the worst in it.'

I mentioned to Vivek Shanbhag that in comparison to some other recently praised *bhasha* writers I thought he was easily accessible for non-local readers. Very regional novels, full of references to unfamiliar religious and cultural practices, could be rather hard to digest, I thought, and insensitively contrasted this with his more cosmopolitan style of writing. Shanbhag intervened immediately and claimed that the theme of a novel does not need to be 'cosmopolitan' (indeed, that word was as complicated as 'vernacular'), but can come from a small place. It was rather a matter of craftsmanship, he claimed. A writer must transform the local details into a metaphor. As a case in point, Shanbhag referred to a novel he had recently read by the Brazilian writer Jorge Amado. 'It is full of details and strange practices but once you know what it is you start connecting and suddenly everything is clear.'

The author surely had a point: *Ghachar Ghochar*, too, contains many Kannada expressions and cultural practices that are never explicitly clarified (though the literary agent had asked for exactly this). Kannada terms for relatives or regional food items are, for example, not translated or explained in the English translation of the book; these kinds of details just have to be accepted by an unfamiliar reader.⁴ When the unnamed protagonist is reflecting on certain particularities, like the joint family or culinary preferences, he does so in an existential and introvert manner, not for a particular addressee. And, as many reviewers

⁴ In the Hindi edition, though, terms for relatives are translated into equivalent words in Hindi.

have noted with approval, much is left unsaid. As an instructive contrast to *Ghachar Ghochar*, one may consider the narrating technique in Aravind Adiga's international success novel *The White Tiger*. In that book the protagonist tells his story through letters addressed to a Chinese prime minister; thus almost every Indian particularity must be explained to an ignorant reader (Ståhlberg 2018).

Untangled connections

Vivek Shanbhag lives in an apartment house not very far from Koshy's Parade Café, in a centrally located but calm area of Bengaluru – no doubt an exclusive address. The house seems fairly recently built and the flat is modern and elegant. Though Shanbhag is a vernacular author in the sense that he writes in Kannada, he is apparently not the kind of rustic rural writer often idealized by proponents of *bhasha* literature. The impression one gets when meeting him is rather that of an urbanite and intellectual. He speaks fluent English and – as his literary agent had described him to me – appears very suave.

By profession Shanbhag is an engineer and was, when writing *Ghachar Ghochar*, working with Unilever, the multinational consumer goods company, as its global human resources director. This job entailed frequent travel around the world, he explained, and he had also lived abroad periodically, for example in London. Simultaneously with this professional life, he was writing short stories, novels and plays – always in the Kannada language. Furthermore, he was for several years the editor and publisher of the Kannada literary journal *Desha Kaala*, and as such a central figure in Kannada literature. When *Ghachar Ghochar* was published in Kannada in 2013, he had already published two novels and four collections of short stories. Since then he has completed a fourth novel.

Shanbhag explained that a few of his short stories had been published in English before, but he had never been satisfied with the translations. Around 2014, however, he decided to quit his job and devote his time to writing. That was also the point when he felt he could engage more in translations of his own work. The original version of *Ghachar Ghochar* had quickly become quite famous in the state of Karnataka, but Shanbhag claimed the only reason he had chosen to start with that book was purely pragmatic: it was the shortest text that could be published in English as a novel. He also insisted it was completely on his own initiative that he had looked for a translator to help him – no publisher was involved at that stage.

The person he chose to help him, Srinath Perur, was a travel writer and journalist working in English. Perur had never done any translations previously, but Shanbhag had known him for a few years and liked his sensibility and language. They started the project together; when the translation was almost finished, they heard that the British *Granta* magazine was putting together an issue on Indian literature. Someone who had read the Kannada version of *Ghachar Ghochar* suggested it to the editor, Ian Jack, so on his request they sent him part of the translation, which he liked and included in the issue. In every review of the *Granta* issue, Vivek Shanbhag claimed, his text was picked up and appreciated. This was no doubt a major impetus for both the national and international career of the book. *Granta* is not just any literary journal, particularly not in this context. Over the years the journal has published several issues on new Indian literature, and it is well known among writers that it was through *Granta* that both Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy made their entrance on to the scene of literary fame.⁵

When a section of *Ghachar Ghochar* appeared in *Granta*, the book had not yet been sold to any publisher. Shanbhag had, however, contacted a literary agent to help him place the book. The reason, he claimed, was not that he doubted he could find an English-language publisher by himself; he already knew people at several national publishing houses (because of his involvement with the literary journal) and was quite convinced they would like to have the book. To work with an agent was a new experience for him, but he wanted to relieve himself of all practical details in placing this book. The agent he contacted was Shruti Debi, who had worked with the British literary agency Aitkin Alexander Associates (that is how he knew about her) but was now running her own firm. The agent read the manuscript, which she apparently liked, and agreed to take on the book.

When I met with Shruti Debi at that Delhi café, she pointed out that the manuscript she received from Vivek Shanbhag and Srinath Perur was almost perfect. Her only reservations were about its format. It was a very short text, only around a hundred pages, and it would be difficult to market it as a novel for an English-reading audience. In the original Kannada book, *Ghachar Ghochar* had been published as a short story with several other unrelated stories, but Shanbhag did not want this format for the English version. Readers in English would be confused, he had thought. The literary agent's recommendation was

⁵ Salman Rushdie in *Granta* 3 (1980) and Arundhati Roy in *Granta* 13 (1997).

that the author should make some additions to the text to make it somewhat longer. However, she gave no suggestions about what should be added. It was a text, she thought, with so many things left unsaid that perhaps were obvious to a Kannada reader, but which were lost on everyone else. Some places could be clarified. But she also understood that Shanbhag was a strong writer, and would find places to extend by himself. She had no further instructions on how to do it.

Vivek Shanbhag hesitated about making the book longer, and thought about it for six months. Then he extended a few sections and sent it back. It was never a demand from anyone, he said. The book would have been published even without those additions. He had finally extended the manuscript by around 4,000 words. In principle, two short episodes were added. One of these narrates a shopping spree that the protagonist and his wife went on during their honeymoon in a South Indian hill station⁶ (the only part of the story that takes place outside the city). The second episode is a scene in which the protagonist's wife has left him and he opens her wardrobe and notices her smell. Apart from that, Shanbhag says, very few formulations are changed in the text: 'every sentence from the English translation is also in the Kannada book'.

But then he corrected himself: there are actually a few extra sentences in the English book that do not exist in Kannada. One example is in an episode describing how the mother of the protagonist killed annoying ants in the house. In the Kannada version the protagonist describes what his mother was doing in a slightly humorous way. Srinath, the translator, could not get this lightness in English so he added a sentence to achieve the same tone ('Amma resorted to chemical warfare'). Another example is in the description of the honeymoon. There is a formulation in Kannada referring to how the man bounces upon his wife 'like a tiger'. That sounds very harsh in English but not in Kannada, so here too Srinath added a few sentences to make it softer.

In many interviews and panel discussions Vivek Shanbhag has been asked how he feels about the translation of his work. Is it possible to bring experiences expressed in his native language into English? The answer complicates the concept of vernacularity further because the author usually emphasizes that Kannada is not his mother tongue. Like many other people in urban India, he grew up in a multilingual environment, speaking Konkani (the official language in the neighbouring state of Goa) at home, Kannada in school and

⁶ Originally vacation resorts for British civil servants, today often visited by newly wedded couples.

later English in higher education and work. Thus transposing thought and feelings between different languages was nothing new or particularly strange for him, he told me.

If linguistically not an obvious ‘vernacular writer’ – he is not writing in his mother tongue – Vivek Shanbhag is very much at the centre in the world of Kannada literature in terms of social positioning; by his own writing and journal editing, of course, but also by family connections. His father-in-law, U. R. Anantha Murthy, was the doyen of Kannada literature, often referred to as one of the major Indian literary modernists of the twentieth century (Mukherjee 1985). Before *Ghachar Ghochar* gained international fame, Anantha Murthy’s novel *Samskara* (published in 1965 and in English translation in 1976) was virtually the only translated Kannada novel with a significant circulation in India as well as internationally. Few people I met in the worlds of Indian literature failed to remark on the family predicament when Vivek Shanbhag was mentioned. In a sense, there is also a literary familiarity between the two Kannada authors. Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985: 166) argues that the importance of Anantha Murthy’s *Samskara* lies ‘in the author’s attempt to exploit the tension between two world views’ of tradition and modernity. Vivek Shanbhag, the son-in-law, is continuing to explore the same theme, though in a very different historical epoch.

To position *Ghachar Ghochar* in this present-day context I need to make a short detour.

The contemporary conjuncture

There is a story, retold many times, about how the worlds of literature in India changed drastically in the late 1990s. A completely unknown writer sends her English-language manuscript to a new young editor at HarperCollins in India. The editor reads it and is overwhelmed, but instead of telling his employer he calls a friend in London, who connects him to a British literary agent.

[The] ... climax being the spectacular moment when a British literary agent actually flew to India – did he charter a plane? Did he fly it himself? Never mind, he gave the impression that he did – to sign up an Indian author who went on to win the Booker prize. Things have never been the same since.

(Desai 2009)

The book was, of course, Arundhati Roy's (1997) *The God of Small Things*.⁷ Since then, as one editor stated just a few years later, 'everyone – scouts, agents, publishers – is looking for the next Roy' (Tejpal 1999). Several other authors were brought to international fame in the new millennium, such as Vikram Chandra and Aravind Adiga.

Almost simultaneously, something else – a completely contrasting strand – happened within the Indian world of books. A few authors started to sell extremely well in India without first having been discovered in the West; a domestic market of commercial fiction was beginning to take form. Among the most commercially successful were Chetan Bhagat, with stories about a young, modern, middle-class India, and Ashwin Sanghvi's fantasy fiction based on Hindu mythologies. Most of this 'postmillennial writing' (Varughese 2013) was written and published in the English language by pan-Indian publishers such as Rupa and Westworld, but has never circulated much outside the country except within the Indian diaspora.

Importantly, the emergence of this new Indian writing in English coincided with another noticeable development: books started to be sold in new settings. I first came across a novel by Chetan Bhagat – the icon of post-millennial Indian writing – in Hyderabad, another South Indian city that since the mid-1990s had been projected to take over the role of Bangalore as a centre for information technology. The aspiration to become a global metropolis was visible in huge new shopping malls that cropped up around the town during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Several of these malls included bookshops of a kind I had not noticed in India before. They were not impressively well stocked, but posh, with a café section and shelves with bestsellers (such as Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Center*) prominently displayed – just like in many other cities around the world. Soon this kind of bookshop-café catering to an English-speaking middle class became a common sight in wealthy areas of urban India (Sadana 2012: 97–8).

Transnational publishers paid attention to these strands of development (scouting for the next international success and the growth of a domestic market) in the Indian book worlds. The global publishing industry, dominated by a few large corporations, is increasingly present in India, and since the turn of the millennium has established offices in the main cities or bought up domestic publishers; simultaneously, domestic corporate capital from the Indian IT

⁷ The young editor was Pankaj Mishra, the friend Patrick French and the agent David Goodwin.

industry is investing in literary ‘content production’ for various media platforms, including book publishing. This development also has reverberations within the ‘the vernacular domain’ of Indian fiction writing.

A book market that only a few decades ago was fragmented in both linguistic and regional dimensions – and largely consisted of small or medium-sized family-owned and rather conservative publishers – is rapidly transforming and expanding (Ciocca and Srivastava 2017: 9). Today, publishers in languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Bengali and Malayalam are marketing their books online and looking for collaboration with pan-Indian publishers that traditionally have focused on English-language authors but are now also interested in literature from the vernacular domain (both for translations and in original languages). Publishers and authors within the vernacular domain are increasingly searching for cooperation directly with global publishing giants, for example Amazon, Penguin (owned by Bertelsmann) and HarperCollins (News Corp), or with domestic digital start-ups like Flipkart and Juggernaut. Simultaneously, the domestic mass-media industry is gradually becoming more interested in Indian-language literature, sponsoring literary festivals and prizes. From a corporate point of view, India has an enormous unexploited market for books: hundreds of millions of people, newly literate in the so-called vernacular languages. Hence an eager search for new readers and writers in the so-called regional languages has taken off.

It is in this historical context that *Ghachar Ghochar* was published. Using Stuart Hall’s term (interpolated from Althusser), we may conceptualize the contemporary era as a conjuncture, that is as ‘an ensemble of economic, social, political and ideological factors where “dissimilar currents ... heterogeneous class interests ... contrary political and social strivings” fuse’ (Hall, Massey and Rustin 2013: 15). This may seem abstract, but one place to experience this recent conjuncture of market forces, new institutions and various cultural trends forming contemporary Indian book worlds is at the Jaipur Literature Festival. As I mentioned previously, it was here that I first became curious – and confused – about the preoccupation with an upcoming ‘boom’ of *bhasha* literature; a genre that fused people with diverging expectations of literary authenticity, market profit and political emancipation. The term ‘conjuncture’ seems to capture the character of the context in which the JLF is organized and where I eventually noticed Vivek Shanbhag and his novel *Ghachar Ghochar*.

In 2016 Shanbhag had participated in a session at the JLF about *bhasha* writing in which some writers were critical of being labelled with that word, as well

as with the term ‘vernacular’. The following year Shanbhag participated in four sessions and in 2018 he was scheduled for no less than five two-hour sessions, according to the programme folders. Among the titles of the public sessions were ‘At home in the world’ (2017), ‘The writer and the world’ (2018) and ‘Litro world series: India, the power of fiction across borders and translations’ (2018). Clearly, Vivek Shanbhag was not only a *bhasha* writer; in this context he also seemed to be an author of ‘world literature’.

Though entrance for audiences is free, the JLF is a commercial event, largely funded by sponsoring companies in various businesses. At most sessions the logo of a particular sponsor is part of the stage design. Apart from the public panels, the JLF has in recent years also organized events exclusively for professionals in the business, at a side event called Jaipur BookMark. In 2018 one of these sessions was entitled ‘Bestselling: The Indian Way’. In the programme folder the session was introduced with the following paragraph:

Nielsen ratings have now arrived in the Hindi market and books across the 24 [sic] Indian languages are beginning to realize their vast potential. The numbers game has begun and Indian writers are now outperforming well-known international names. A panel that includes eminent publishers, self-publishing successes and marketing professionals speak the how and why of Indian bestsellers.

(Zee Jaipur Literature Festival 2018: 13)

The multinational Nielsen book rating company has for the last ten years been present in India, primarily auditing sales of the English-language publishing market. At this session a regional representative of the company explained that it is now increasingly trying to make numbers out of the vernacular domain; but there are still huge difficulties, because it cannot monitor sales that are not recorded using digitized billing systems, which many vendors of *bhasha* books lack.

Vivek Shanbhag was not listed at that session, but participated the same year at another BookMark event concerned with the constraints and challenges of marketing literature from Indian languages, nationally and internationally. The topic, ‘Translating India’, was discussed by a number of writers, publishers and translators in a session sponsored and organized by Vani Prakashan, a major Hindi-language book publisher. Incidentally, this was the publishing house that would soon publish the Hindi translation of *Ghachar Ghochar*.

Tangled generations

In Delhi a year later, I decided to visit Vani Prakashan to purchase a copy of its Hindi edition of *Ghachar Ghochar* directly from the publisher (I had failed to find it in the bookshops) and perhaps meet with someone on the staff. The office is in Daryaganj, an area close to the old part of Delhi, and for decades has been famous as a hub for North Indian publishers and book distributors. This is a place where one may still get a glimpse of how the worlds of Indian book publishing appeared at a very different conjuncture – during the decades after Independence when the production and circulation of books in *bhasha* was a subsidized political concern of government departments such as Sahitya Academy (The National Academy of Letters) and the National Book Trust (the government publisher of low-cost books); or was pursued as an idealistic mission, promoted by progressive writers associations. As Rashmi Sadana (2013: 78) remarks in her monograph on the Delhi book world, following Independence ‘the notion of making “good books” was tied up with doing “good for the nation”’.

Not much of the atmosphere in Daryaganj seems to have changed recently. The main thoroughfare, Ansari Road, is lined with dilapidated office buildings of publishers and jammed with people, cycle rickshaws, overloaded lorries and streetside food stalls. The scene offers a striking contrast to those posh book-café in south Delhi and other upper-middle-class areas of urban India. At least that is how it looks on the surface. I find the Vani Prakashan office in a narrow side road. Entering the building I am met with stacks of books wrapped for distribution to bookstores in the Hindi-speaking belt. At the end of a dark corridor there is a store in which I can get my copy of *Ghachar Ghochar* in Hindi. (I notice that it is very cheap, priced at 125 rupees only, compared to the English translation selling for 299 rupees.)

The team of editors is on the first floor and I meet Aditi Maheshwari-Goyal, executive director of Vani Prakashan, in one of the conference rooms. Maheshwari-Goyal is the third generation of publishers in a family business that was established in the 1950s. Both the location and the premises of Vani Prakashan may appear as remnants of that time, but the current director is a woman in her thirties, part of a new generation of Hindi publishers (see Vater 2016).

Aditi Maheshwari-Goyal talks keenly about the importance of the digital boom – ‘we have to be part of that’. And she complains about the market characteristics of Hindi publishing – ‘you can hardly ever sell a Hindi book for more than 100 rupees’. The high-brow seriousness and intellectualism of Hindi publishing is declining these days, she claims: Vani Prakashan are now producing fun books in Hindi, books that a college student can read in the metro without feeling embarrassed. ‘And we have Amazon bestsellers coming out.’ Much to my surprise, the executive director reveals that her company is pitching their Hindi books for streaming audio with Storytel, and as TV serials with Netflix – and they are in the process of recruiting a new employee for that purpose. Though highly respectful towards the older generation (her father still keeps an office downstairs), Maheshwari-Goyal is enthusiastic about how Hindi publishing has changed in the last decade. For the better, she believes, not least regarding the role of women in an industry that formerly had been very patriarchal.

Aditi Maheshwari-Goyal recalls the 2018 ‘Translating India’ session at the JLF. The panel was discussing possibilities for books to travel between Indian-language markets, and the Vani Prakashan editor realized that she was having similar thoughts as another participant, an editor from HarperCollins India. From that meeting came the idea of a long-term association between the two publishers. Vani Prakashan would get access to HarperCollins publications for translation into Hindi while supplying Hindi books for translation into English under the Harper Perennial imprint.

One might have thought that this cooperation also resulted in Vani Praksahan’s translation of *Ghachar Ghochar*, which found its success through its HarperCollins English edition. But that does not seem to have been the case at all. Neither did Vani Praksahan acquire the copyright for the translation through the literary agent, Shruti Debi. ‘We dealt directly with the author,’ Aditi Maheshwari-Goyal claims. As Vivek Shanbhag had earlier told me, he had made use of his personal network and selected all *bhasha* publishers himself, and had apparently gone for the most respected and at the same time up-to-date publisher in each language. These kinds of personal relations, engagements and initiatives among actors in the Indian book world frequently surprised me when meeting people who had been involved with *Ghachar Ghochar*. Occasionally, personal relations and engagements also seemed to characterize the international career of the novel.

Back in Stockholm I paid a visit to Appell Förlag, which in late 2018 published the Swedish edition of *Ghachar Ghochar*. It is a small and recently established

publisher with a non-fiction profile, run by a single editor. It is not an obvious choice for a translation of an Indian novel, particularly not for a book that has attracted considerable worldwide attention. How come it ended up here and not with one of the major Swedish publishers of international fiction?

When I met the editor of Appell Förlag, Helena Hegardt du Rées, at her office in central Stockholm, I was already aware of the story. While Vivek Shanbhag was himself responsible for the various editions in Indian languages, the international editions were taken care of by his literary agent, Shruti Debi. She (or one of her business partners) had promoted *Ghachar Ghochar* at the usual market fairs in the international book world, such as the Frankfurter Buchmesse in Germany. The response had, according to Shruti Debi, been very good and she handled requests from European publishers interested in securing translation rights for many languages. From Sweden she had received bids from two publishers: a major Swedish publishing house, and a new and miniscule publisher.

When the editor from the small publisher in Stockholm emailed her, Shruti Debi recalled, 'she was so passionate' about the novel, very eager to publish it, and said she already had an excellent translator in mind. Furthermore, the Indian agent realized she was acquainted with the Swedish editor. They had both been working with translations of a Chinese writer and had on some occasions been in contact; both expressed profound appreciation of each other. Appell Förlag won the bid for *Ghachar Ghochar* and money was not a decisive issue. The editor of Appell had, furthermore, not encountered the novel through promotion at a book fair. It was a close friend, she told me, who had recommended it to her.

Closure

Initially I was curious about the confusing preoccupation with 'regional writing' at a festival in India. I then stumbled on Vivek Shanbhag's book and its remarkable success all over the world. I have used the novel *Ghachar Ghochar* methodologically, for constructing an ethnographic narrative allowing me to explore Indian book worlds. In this chapter I have tried to unravel how this novel, written in the South Indian language Kannada, entered the international arena of literature, and how it then continued its circulation in other Indian languages. My strategy has been to look closely at actors contributing to this journey, rather than at the macro structures of the publishing industry.

Still, I do not dispute the structuring capacity of a global market. Thus while most fiction authors, in India as well as around the world, may write for vernacular audiences and publish with local publishers, the relentless search for new writers and readers is gradually producing an increasingly integrated global market for books. Franco Moretti's (2013) claim about literature as a planetary system does have perceivable substance when looking closely at Indian book worlds. I believe this short ethnography makes clear that both structures and imaginaries of a global scale form an essential horizon for understanding the phenomenon of which *Ghachar Ghochar* is a concrete instance.

But, importantly, this horizon of a global structure does not necessarily translate into processes following a simple top-down logic, assuming that a particular book has been produced and entered the circuit of 'world literature' because the global industry has harvested a vernacular domain. Rather, as the career of *Ghachar Ghochar* illustrates, agents in various positions (on the regional, national and international levels of Indian book worlds) in the production and circulation of books may actively contribute with very personal desires, social networks and efforts – not always following a market logic. By looking at this novel and its publication career, we may understand a tangled context at a particular historical period, though ultimately belonging within a global market of literature.

Before closing this story, there is a thread which needs to be untangled. It has to do with the strange circumstance that although *Ghachar Ghochar* has been described as a success and an example of a 'boom' for Indian-language writing, it was still hard for me to find the novel in Indian bookshops. Thus let me return to where I started this chapter, with Vincent at Koshy's Parade Café, or rather with the 'Coffee House' episodes in Shanbhag's novel. When I met the author, I told him that this literary location had an immediate appeal to me because it reminded me of establishments I have patronized on visits to India for a long time – it was no coincidence that I had eagerly looked for the real place in Bengaluru. What puzzled me was that these old-time coffee houses are quite rare, and – a point in the novel – very different from regular places for a drink or a meal in Indian cities. Does the common Kannada reader relate to 'Coffee House'? No, of course not, Shanbhag explained. Indian coffee houses are establishments frequented and romanticized by intellectuals with cultural capital, not by the common person. It is exactly among intellectuals that the author finds his vernacular readers. Aditi Maheshwari-Goyal, the publisher of the Hindi translation of *Ghachar Ghochar*, confirmed the same impression.

Shanbhag's novel will not be a bestseller in Hindi, she claimed, but it will sell for a long time in specific circles.

Ironically, a rather exclusive status of a novel in vernacular domains may change into a more mundane existence elsewhere. In that sense, a novel might change when it moves and finds readers in new places. The further career of *Ghachar Ghochar* in Sweden is a telling example. While writing this chapter in spring 2020 (working at home, disconnected from most personal encounters in the world because of a global pandemic), I could simultaneously listen to the drama about the Bengaluru family in an audio version of the novel serialized by the public broadcasting company Sveriges Radio. Worlds are indeed tangled.

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