

Case of the changing jacket

In a world of marketing-driven ideas, the book cover is shrugging off stereotypes to be on point with sales and multiple platforms

SUNALINI MATHEW

If you were to put Jhumpa Lahiri's latest book, *The Clothing of Books*, to a literary criticism class, they'd pick out irony and paradox without difficulty. Lahiri begins by declaring that all she wants is a naked book, sans its cover, so that the content emerges the hero. Somewhere towards the end of the work, she is also perfectly comfortable with her own picture appearing upfront.

"My first reaction to the idea of having my picture on the cover was negative. I was afraid that it would be judged as an act of vanity, a brazen way to market a niche book. I later reconsidered... In the end, the author is the book and represents the work directly, also sincerely. Better a photo of me than an annoying, irrelevant image," she states.

In an age when authors are far more involved in the creation of the book cover, we take a look at other factors that are ensuring it is changing, slowly but surely.

Sharpened marketing tools

When Penguin, UK, released the cover of Arundhati Roy's new book, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, in February, they published a detailed interview with the designer. Art directors, previously background people who seemingly stayed in a creative cocoon, were never celebrities. Today, both David Eldridge and Mayank Austen Soofi, the photographer who provided the image of the marble gravestone, are in the news (Roy herself only gave an interview about a week ago). By giving readers a behind-the-scenes look at the cover production they encouraged involvement, and eventually, a purchase.

Anuj Bahri, who runs Delhi's 64-year-old Bahrisons bookstore, which now offers literary publishing services, is sure that Roy's Booker-winning *The God of Small Things* will come back with a new cover soon. "People will buy it just for the cover, even though they've read it," he says. The perfect way to re-create a market.

Art director in focus

Traditionally, the editor would send a brief to the cover designer on receiving the manuscript. Today, a brief may be sent out even before the manuscript has arrived, because a quicker turnaround time is needed and experienced art directors instinctively know what works.

Fussy fonts don't, perhaps because people simply haven't the

time to figure them out. "Colours do. There's a myth in the UK that green covers don't work, so you may find publishers steering clear of it. Purely type-led covers again aren't a big draw when it comes to fiction in India. People like to see a strong visual," says Gavin Morris, art director at Juggernaut Books, who has worked across the US, the UK and India.

In fact, the strong visual almost gives the cover a gender, says British author Jeffrey Archer, who publishes in 38 countries. "Covers used to be just beautiful lettering, but now we have a scene to suggest what the story is going to be. I think 60% of people who read my books are women. This has softened covers considerably," he says. So while the first of the Clifton Chronicles series, *Only Time Will Tell*, seemed a man's read, the course was corrected in the following books.

Team synergies

Today, sales and marketing is a part of the process, though Morris admits they're much more involved in markets outside India. Often, there is a dialogue between the designer and the writer, breaking the traditional approach of the editor being the one-point contact.

Anjali Joseph, who is published both in India and the UK, interacts frequently with her cover designer and often gives feedback that will tweak the cover ever so slightly - like the little red pom pom on the Kolhapuri chappal in *The Living*.

An expanded India visual

Most covers, even internationally, steer clear of Indian stereotypes, because the lexicon of visuals related to India has grown. "We're less likely to use *bindis*, *mehndi* and veiled women to symbolise the East. Really everyone who uses veiled women as shorthand for "the Muslim world" should be put in book jail now," says Faiza Khan, Editorial Director, Bloomsbury India.

Authors mean business

Somewhere around the mid-2000s, there was the rise of a new kind of professional: someone who had gone through the 9-to-5 grind, and was now looking to write. Their trades seamlessly blended with what they were doing now - selling books, not just writing them. Anuja Chauhan, for instance, was an advertising pro. She worked on her first book, *The Zoya Factor*, alongside her job.

"Publishers trusted me with more than just what was inside

Colours are key, though there is a myth in the UK that green covers fail

Fussy fonts do not work - people don't have the time to figure them out

Most covers steer clear of Indian stereotypes, in the country and abroad

Strong visuals that reflect the plot are replacing type-led covers

At face value: (Top) Standout covers; (above) *The Lowland* gets three versions - in India, the UK and the US

lishing house had had its way).

The internet way

Has online reading changed the book cover? A study done in Hyderabad (albeit with a small sample size of 80), showed that 47% preferred e-reading. But online book shopping still came in at no. 2, with buyers preferring a brick-and-mortar store to looking at thumbnails.

It's not just the shrunk cover, though. "My cover has to work across multiple platforms: online retail, where it is a thumbnail; websites and social media, where it could be a low resolution image; events and festivals, where it may be used on a poster or backdrop; and the bookstore, where it jostles with hundreds of other

the book because of my training. I'm manic about my covers, and I believe they shouldn't give everything away - they must tease," she says. Initially, her books were bold graphics. Later, as she found greater commercial success, budgets grew. "We could then do a shoot." But a sense of economy was also appreciated. "For *Those Pricey Thakur Girls*, I got my daughter (who was doing her board exams then) to pose, and we shot it on a balcony of a Vasant Kunj house!"

There's no shame to adding a website, and standing firm on the book's name (*Those Pricey Thakur Girls* may have just been "Those Thakur Girls", if the pub-

lishing house had had its way).

titles," says Ashwin Sanghi, author of *Private Delhi*, co-authored with James Patterson.

Namita Gokhale, author and festival director, who has been on the jury of the Oxford Book Cover Prize, feels that evolved design technology software can do so much more for a cover, "because it is much easier to play around with images".

Reader goes beyond reading Amish Tripathi looks to symbolism to engage the involved reader. He put the photograph of a recreated Pashupati Seal - one of the earliest discovered representations of Shiva, where he filled in the missing part with his own interpretation - on the spine. It is one of the most important aspects of a book, as they are often stacked rather than sold face-forward. Today, Tripathi has people tattooing the symbol on their bodies!

Seeing this reader involvement, the writer threw open a book cover contest with his next book, *Sita - Warrior of Mithila*. Through a YouTube video, he gave out three clues, and readers sent in designs. Five people will have their covers unveiled at the launch event that's being planned.

Gokhale feels that social media, like Instagram, has also contributed to the way the cover is evolving. "We are returning to a visual culture again, a culture that is more democratic in terms of an appreciation of the visual art, because of the sheer volume and quality of images available to everyone," she concludes.

Of tales of mice and women

From making ceramic sinks to illustrating children's books, Malavika PC has done it all

PREETI ZACHARIAH

Illustrator Malavika PC, who calls herself a "paper junkie", guffaws when asked about her undergraduate degree at the Government College of Fine Arts, Chennai. "I was doing a BFA in Ceramics there, and it was an industrial course in ceramics at that. I learnt how to make sinks and tiles and pots."

But it did teach her to bring three-dimensionality into her drawings, says Malavika, who also illustrated the Karadi Tales' Mouse Series. It started as a single story titled *Kutti and the*

Mouse that segued into three other stories, which made the mouse the central character of the books.

"Once we had four stories, we commissioned Malavika for the series," recalls Shonha Viswanath, co-founder and publishing director of Karadi Tales, adding that Malavika's quirky illustrations were not just funny, but also highly detailed and visually appealing.

"The mouse series was a foundation for me artistically," believes Malavika, who photographed textures of things from around the house (curtains, doormats,



Artist and more: Malavika PC and her work. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

bubble wrap) for the series. A lot of the mouse is created out of bubble wrap, she claims. "But I bet you won't

notice that," laughs Malavika, who has also illustrated for Chennai-based Blaft Publications, Australian author Ken



Spillman's *The Magic Bird* and Samit Basu's *Inter-galactic Idol*.

Always an artist

"I knew I wanted to be an artist by the time I was five or six years old," says Malavika, who spent long happy hours drawing, "on walls, the fridge, even my parents' notes." It helped that both her parents came from artistic backgrounds: her mother, Pritham Chakrav-

arthy, is a theatre artist, while her father, Venkatesh Chakravathy, is a filmmaker and regional director of the LV Prasad Film & TV Academy.

"I grew up hanging around Cholamandal and Lalit Kala all the time," says the Pudukcherry-based artist and theatre performer.

She applied for her first job two months before graduating. A former classmate put her in touch with

Standard Press, the printing division of the Sivakasi-based firecracker company.

"They were looking for an illustrator, so I joined them and began drawing colouring books for children there," she says.

Then Karadi Tales happened. The first book was a popular spin on *The Monkeys and the Capseller*, she says. Her style has evolved considerably since then though. She is now working on her own picture book, tentatively titled *Krr Krr*.

"I got a grant from the India Foundation for the Arts for this book," she says, adding that it is an experimental, almost abstract book rooted in environment and biodiversity.

She plans to work with children to generate an onomatopoeic script for it.

"I hope that by this time next year, it will be ready," she smiles.

SHORT TAKE



Film on INA trials

Director Tigmanshu Dhulia's forthcoming film *Raag Desh* based on the Indian National Army trials is slated for release in July and features Kunal Kapoor, Amit Sadh and Mohit Marwah in the lead. Produced by Rajya Sabha TV, it captures the euphoria of INA, its travails and struggles. The story focuses on three officers of the INA - Col. Prem Sehgal, Col. Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon and Major General Shah Nawaz Khan, who were captured and imprisoned at Red Fort and tried by British Government.

5 EVENTS WORTH-YOUR-WHILE



FESTIVAL

Indradhanush-2017

Association for Learning Performing Arts & Normative Action will be presenting their annual event which will feature Chhotta Khayal based on Patdeep raga by students followed by a Tagore song by students, with the last item being a folk song, Bengali baul. There will also be a dance based on a popular Hindi song.
VENUE: Azad Bhavan Auditorium, ICCR, ITO
TIME: 6.30 p.m.



EXHIBITION

Mukhosh

The exhibition will display a collection of masks from various cultures, including tribal, spread across the country. These include Bhuta mask, Chhau mask, wooden mask from West Bengal, masks of Bastar tribes, Odisha, Himachal Pradesh, Banaras, Karnataka and Maharashtra and one from Nepal among others.
VENUE: Art Konsult, Hauz Khas Village
TIME: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.



DANCE

Retrospection

Dhwani presents "Retrospection" in which two of Vaswati Mishra's acclaimed choreographic compositions "Taateel", presented by the students of Pandit Shambhu Maharaj Kathak Academy, first choreographed in 1993 and "Kanupriya" which was conceived in 1997 will be presented.
VENUE: Kamani Auditorium, Mandi House
TIME: 7 p.m.



GROUP SHOW

Saga Dawa

Art Life Gallery is holding a group art exhibition "Saga Dawa" which presents art works by four artists. These are Prem Nayar, Vivek Singh, Ashok Kumar and Anjana Birla. Saga Dawa is a festival in Tibet celebrated on the full moon day. It is on this day that Buddha attained enlightenment.
VENUE: C97, Sector 44, Noida
TIME: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.



MUSIC

Surjo

Piano Jazz Club will present a performance by Surjo, a singer-songwriter based out of Kolkata. He has been playing guitar for more than 20 years and has been singing for more than 25 years. He will be presenting music which is sure to drive away the Monday blues.
VENUE: B 6, Comm. Complex, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi
TIME: 9 p.m.