



## Book Reviews

### Tradition and Modernity, the Local and the Global

**Kapila Vatsyayan, *Plural Cultures and Monolithic Structures: Comprehending India*. Delhi: Primus Books, 2013; xiii + 231 pages, Rs 850.**

Indian society has throughout recorded history been a multi-cultural, multi-linguistic, multi-ethnic and pluralistic society. It has remained a riddle for the Orientalists just how India has been able to maintain a synthesis between its diverse and at times contrary components: between the modern and the traditional, between the *laukika* and the *daivika* (the material and the spiritual), between *shastra* and *prayoga* (theory and practice), between *artha* (wealth) and *kama* (desire) on the one hand and *dharma* (moral and regulative principles) and *moksha* (liberation) on the other. This diversity, or contradiction, can be seen in the daily lives of Indians, where the latest models of motor vehicles share the road with ancient bullock carts, jumbo jets and real jumbos are both used to carry cargo and passengers and our top experts in computer or space sciences can be seen performing bare-bodied “irrational” rituals in temples and bowing to the authority of sadhus and swamis. Neither the melting-pot model nor the bouquet model used for explaining unity in diversity in some Western countries seems applicable to India where perhaps the metaphor of the Indian *thali* is more apt: there is neither a specific order in which the *katoris* containing different delicacies are arranged nor is there a particular order in which they have to be eaten, yet it is one *thali* or platter.

Kapila Vatsyayan, the foremost living Indologist and profound scholar, attempts to “comprehend” this Indian reality in the present book. It comprises ten lectures she has delivered over the last quarter century, each endowed in the memory of “important figures who have shaped lives, and built character and commitment, even when questions and doubts have risen in our minds” (p.vii). Dr Vatsyayan has also had the advantage of working, as an Advisor for over four decades, to all the Education Ministers of India from Maulana Abul Kalam Azad through Humayun Kabir, M.C. Chagla, V.K.R.V. Rao and Nurul Hasan right up to Arjun Singh. In particular, she had a role in formulating the language policy, especially with regard to the teaching of classical Indian languages as also art and dance forms as part of our education system. She was privy to discussions regarding the possible inclusion of the teaching of comparative religions, a proposal that “was given up because a secular state could not encourage it” (p.12). As she pointedly adds, “The irony is that in the same country all kinds of religious sectarianism, caste and subcaste identities are harnessed for votes in the name of democratic process” (p.12).

The central theme of these lectures is understanding India. The book in the main addresses two questions. The first is: “did ‘India’, at the level of perception, ever see itself as a ‘whole’, geographically, culturally and civilizationally or merely as a collection of micro-spatio-temporal units with divergent perceptions and commitments?” The second and “more important” question is: “did India evolve its own systems of thought, and knowledge of

comprehending Man, his environment and society, or was there no such concern or consciousness” (p. 56). Though these lectures are on different themes, the undercurrent in each of them is the Indian tradition, and its interpretation and reinterpretation. Vatsyayan believes that tradition is not static but dynamic; it knows what has to continue to remain, and what has to disappear. She argues that “tradition itself implies a passing down and change and allows for multiple standpoints as does postmodernism today” (p.5). She feels that now may be the most appropriate moment for a reassessment of the age-old Indian tradition: “We are now situated in a time where not only can we assess and evaluate the past but we can also rejuvenate ourselves from the very sources which lie closest to us. Only then will fresh spring of insight and experience emerge” (p. 14).

During the first few decades of the twentieth century India saw the emergence of thinkers like Acharya Narendra Dev, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Achyut Patwardhan, Jayaprakash Narayan, and of course Gandhi and Nehru and many other national leaders who because of their deep insight brought about a kind of renaissance. Gandhi realized as early as 1908, much before anyone else, that *swarajya* “could be gained only by discarding the previous structures” (p.48). The impact of this reawakening was felt in all parts of India and was reflected not only in literature but also in other arenas of creativity such as painting, music, dance and drama. India’s political freedom “provided the space for resurrecting, reconstructing and reinterpreting tradition in all its hues and shades. Political freedom released new energies for rehabilitating these arts long ostracized” (p.33).

Such a re-examination of the sources and practices of Indian culture, tradition and values exploded the myth that they were monolithic. It showed that there is as much “civilizational plurality” in India as “geographical diversity”; as Vatsyayan puts it, “The consciousness of the connection between the mountains and the oceans, the forests and the rivers, the deserts and the marshlands has been responsible for a large body of literature which looks at land as a large coherent unit with plurality and interdependence” (p. 37). This interconnectivity extends to all art and creative forms of expression. The inbuilt flexibility in the Indian tradition is aptly illustrated by the author through the example of folk artists like dancers of Saraikela who become “Brahmins for the month of *Vaisakh*” (p. 44). That even the caste system is not static or rigid can be seen from the fact that the folk artists are “given a higher status on certain occasions” (p. 44).

The harmony of various cultures and traditions over a period of time can be understood by examining the archaeological remains of that period and age—whether Harappan from the Indus Valley or from other sites in the Ganga or the Saraswati valleys. Each one of them represents the prevalent culture, religious, political and social values or what Wittgenstein calls “form of life”. From an analysis of the diversity of archaeological remains, Vatsyayan concludes:

Each period and each political and religious movement has created monuments—Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, Islamic and others. Each stands for itself and is at the same time autonomous, as well as a symbol of dialogue, concurrency and simultaneity of different faiths and religions. Together they convey the common message of tolerance and coexistence, despite political invasions, social conflicts and strife (p. 99).

The coming together of apparently different streams of Indian culture and tradition is also illustrated by the “qualities of concurrency, simultaneity and ‘synergy’” (p. 105) to be found in the variety of Indian art forms. The identity of cultures and traditions, man and nature, the oneness of truth which is variously interpreted by the scholars, are all aptly demonstrated by Indian art “in all its diversity and multiplicity—verbal; visual; kinetic; frozen or fluid; ancient and medieval, classical or folk, urban or rural or tribal, Buddhist, Jaina, Hindu, Islamic, and even Christian—attempts in part or whole to recreate the principle of one and the many” (p. 113).

The riddle of the one and the many, of the same reality manifesting itself differently at multiple levels of existence, is taken up by Vatsyayan in expounding the relation between culture and science. She builds here on the insights of “my guru Professor D. S. Kothari” (p. 173), especially with regard to the distinction between “science and anti-reason or irrationality” (p. 147). She offers an inclusive vision through explicating the apt metaphors of the Lotus, the *Vriksha* (tree), Ecology and Astronomy as they have been understood in India both in classical texts such as the *Natyashastra* and in popular wisdom including tribal practices. She sums up her view of the whole by aptly invoking the metaphor from the *Kathopanishad* of two birds sitting on the same branch of a tree, one eating the fruit and the other just watching him eat. The first one is *bhokta*—the experiencer, and the second one is *drashta*—the seer. Culture and Science are like these birds; “one cannot live without the other” (pp. 165–74).

Vatsyayan’s larger purpose in the book is “to draw attention to some very explicit and obvious features of (Indian) culture, which have often been overlooked either by concentrating on political history, or social formations, or only looking at the textual traditions, or viewing cultural expressions as ancillary or as adornment, and at best concentrating on monumental architecture” (p. 196). In this she has been completely successful. She has been able to show that the “fluidity of cultural expression” in all its forms—literary, audio-visual, performing traditions and above all the lived life of the people of India—has essentially continued despite some “significant discontinuities” (p.196). All the traditional art forms are really an expression of the philosophical thesis that despite the plurality of selves, essentially all are one. She is absolutely right when she says: “instead of tension between tradition and modernity, there’s a tension between the local and the global” (p. 213).

Kapila Vatsyayan’s book is mandatory reading for all those who are interested in modern India, its foundations and its future. She has a style which is as lucid as it is engaged, and like a teacher she explains issues with illustrations from her vast and deep repository of classical texts as well as oral traditions. However, one feels that with her involvement in and direct knowledge and experience of the decision making processes, she could have taken on the crucial question of our present state being what it is in almost all fields but most of all in education. The bottom-line question is: Why, despite the efforts of “collective minds”, several Education Commissions, many Akademies, a plethora of institutions of higher learning, the Knowledge Commission and the availability of liberal funding, are we not able to evolve our own system of education and are facing the “danger of being splintered and boxed into inflexible frozen structures”? (p. 215). Is it an individual failure, a collective failure, or an institutional failure? These questions are relevant and Kapila Vatsyayan is as competent to answer them as anyone, especially as she has here successfully given a detailed “trajectory of developments in the fields of education and the arts in the context of socio-political-economic history of India” (p. 152). If we do not take up the challenge and address the future, we shall not be able to harmonize philosophy, arts, culture and traditional learning with modern science and technology—the local with the global.

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## Genius and Psychoanalysis

**Sudhir Kakar, *Young Tagore: The Makings of a Genius*. New Delhi: Viking/Penguin, 2013; 238 pages, Rs 499.**

The year 2013 witnessed the rewriting of the younger days of two of India's most iconic figures in the twentieth century. *Gandhi Before India*, Ramachandra Guha's monumental effort to retrieve Gandhi's budding years as a lawyer in South Africa, is both biography and social history. Kakar's more modest book is a new attempt at uncovering how the environs, influences and preoccupations of Tagore's early life continued to impinge on his life and work into his autumnal years.

Anticipating a response that the subject of the poet's childhood and adolescence has been done to death, Kakar justifies yet another book on the young Tagore on the strength of his professional credentials. He distinguishes between a historical biography with its chronological account of a life and the psychobiography that he has undertaken to write, tracing the "psychological truths" of his subject as "an outcome of his or her early relationships" (p.4). He is not a psychoanalyst who sees his patient over a period, but a psychobiographer who investigates the workings of Tagore's mind long after his death. Confessing how he dismissed Tagore's poetry as "verses of stereotyped sentimentality and sachharine spirituality" (p.9) he relates how this early scepticism got transformed into curiosity till he got sufficiently intrigued by his Bengali friends' unequivocal adulation for Tagore to want to read and write about him.

None of Kakar's findings, however, are unknown and unresearched, and given the corpus of documented work on Tagore, there is nothing in the psychobiography that a lay person could not have read and analysed. But for a person uninitiated into Tagore, the slim volume is a charming read that charts his most important "psychological" milestones. Kakar ascribes some of the depression during Tagore's declining years to his love for his mother, cruelly thwarted in his childhood, first by his exile to the servants' quarters and then by her death. He highlights autobiographical verses in *Shishu (The Crescent Moon)* in which the protagonist feels deprived at not being his mother's principal focus, but there is much more to the mother-son interaction portrayed in the collection than this privation that is at the centre of Kakar's formulations. Having access only to translations from Tagore, he is obviously unaware of the more complex variations of this relationship in Tagore's larger oeuvre that could contribute to a more nuanced reading. He even elides similarly autobiographical poems in *Shishu* in which the child shares a more layered bonding with his mother. Intimacy between a mother and son predicated on both of them feeling abandoned by a husband/father who works far away from home or conveyed through the son resenting her relationship with his father are overlooked. What about the sundry poems in which the son betrays to the mother a wish for an Oedipal appropriation of his father's role: "In the silence of the night/Burying my face in your chest/My eyes will shut with drowsiness/ Do not, at that time/Go away to Father, please!" ('Duorani', *Shishu Bholanath*)? Kakar's inadequate reading has not located the autobiographical resonances of such pieces.

At the age of five, Rabi and his cousins were relegated to the children's and servants' quarters. While emphasizing the cruelty and neglect that they were subjected to, Kakar, however, also notes that being of an impressionable age, the children were enthralled by the fantastic stories that their servants told them about the wonders of a life far removed from their immediate environs. The portrayal of servants as attractive surrogate parents who let children be, in fact, is a recurrent motif in Bengali children's fiction.

Of course, a psychobiographical exploration of Tagore's life cannot exclude his much speculated relationship with his sister-in-law Kadambari, the soreness of which hurt him until his last years. In the chapter on Kadambari, Kakar reads into Tagore's writings some adolescent agonizing, attributing it to his outrage during puberty at the grossly physical taking precedence over one's finer feelings. Predictably, the Bengali, middle class sensibility, already suspicious of someone other than a Bengali having the temerity to write about the revered Gurudev, is likely to be offended by Kakar's graphic description of pubertal sexual arousal caused by the "chafe of underwear against the genitals" (p.116) in this context. But Kakar also offers an involved and sensitive reading of the boy Rabi's veneration of his brother Jyotirindra and sister-in-law Kadambari seen as a happy couple, underlining Tagore's later metonymic description of a "warm, buttered toast" (p.119) to represent the conjugal felicity between the two that excluded him from their private domain.

Most of the book is about how Tagore's fretful hours of loneliness became a fount of inspiration for him, evolving into a creative solitude that became his main asset as a poet. Ostensibly writing about the "young" Tagore, Kakar constantly cross-refers to the depression that hounded him in his later years, unearthing its roots and charting its trajectory through the adversities, bereavements and guilt of his early life. Curiously, while quoting some evocative passages from *My Boyhood Days* about Rabi's identifying himself with the *andarmahal* of their house, Kakar gets sufficiently carried away to express his own nostalgia about similar scenes that he partook of as a child.

A chapter that does not demonstrate any new research or analysis details Rabi's isolation in school, where he was an object of derision among his peer group because he was effeminate. In turn, he too was scathingly critical of school, studies, the alienating experience of having to learn everything in English and the regimented curriculum that compelled him to live in exile each day from 10 to 4. Reacting against formal schooling, he let his imagination flower and gave free play to his creative impulses instead. His reformist Brahmo father as well as his anglophile, cosmopolitan grandfather shaped his persona as a poet. Another phase of Tagore's evolution as a thinker that is overworked is Kakar's chronicling of Tagore's interactions with England, Europe and the West that contributed to what Tagore called "the dialogue of civilizations" (p.134) towards the creation of a universal man. However, there is an interesting substantiation through letters of Tagore's self-confessed differences with Gandhi that made it stifling for him to be in the midst of a sweeping movement that he did not wholly subscribe to, and his consequent longing to get away to Europe. But what has all this to do with the "young" Tagore?

Kakar does not burden the text with technical terms from psychoanalysis. However, he certainly deploys his experience of clinical practice and does resort to a psychoanalyst's vocabulary in the case of his interpretation of Kadambari's suicide and how it haunted the poet all his life, especially during his later years as a painter. Arguing that perhaps painting was more therapeutic than poetry, Kakar admits to being "hopelessly subjective" (p.179) in his construal of the poet's old age as an attempt to bring to a closure all "the un-lived and unresolved issues of earlier stages of life" (p.187). The effort to reconcile the oppositions and dualities of his life, to "ease his unconscious disquiets, ...re-integrat[ing] the cut-off parts of the self from his early life that rose to the surface in his old age" (p.192), all find creative expression in his female portraits. No matter how amorously, art does reveal the artist, Kakar infers.

As a psychoanalyst, Kakar's narrative of Tagore's life probes the rationale of all he expressed through writing and painting. Yet he sutures together the intertwining agonies and traumas of his youth and old age with an empathy that oversteps the domain of an analyst or theoretician. The title, therefore, is somewhat skewed in mentioning only the "young" Tagore. It could have been more suggestive of an attempt to understand the poet's more

mature years through a journey back in time, salvaging reminiscences, letters and creative works that document his tormented mindscapes as a child and at the threshold of adulthood.

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## Indian Sexualities

**Sanjay Srivastava (ed.), *Sexuality Studies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013. 320 pages, Rs 825 (hardback).**

Mary E. John and Janaki Nair in their anthology published in 1998 noted the “conspiracy of silence” regarding sexuality in India. Since then, sexuality studies have come into their own with a flowering of critical anthologies and monographs. Thus, Nivedita Menon’s collection on sexualities went beyond arenas of sexual violence to focus instead on transgressive and marginalized sexualities; Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharya in their edited volume blurred the lines dividing heterosexual and homosexual, normative and alternative, erotic and phobic, moral and titillating; Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai persuasively traced same-sex love in India from about 1500 BC to the present; and Joseph Alter sketched the linkages between sex and masculinity from Gandhi to *akhara* wrestlers.<sup>1</sup>

The present volume, edited by Sanjay Srivastava, adds another leaf, and brings further richness, to sexuality studies in India. Its continuities, differences and uniqueness from other works on the subject are marked by its moving beyond simplistic frameworks that begin with the instructions of the *Kama Sutra* and end with Gandhian narratives of erasing desire (p. 1). In his engaging introduction, Srivastava points to the limitations of viewing sexuality only from psychoanalytic frameworks, or in the Eurocentric Foucauldian perspectives of discipline, surveillance and power, or as purely an ‘indigenous’ product. Arguing against any universal expressions of sexualities, he draws on historical and social contexts to highlight the “porous zones” (p. 6), the in-between, through which sexual cultures are produced, controlled and contested. Through such local and different milieus, the editor explores meanings of desire, pleasure, eroticism and sexual practices, which produce messy and unstable social worlds of colonial and contemporary modernities. Cultures of sexuality emerge here as complex social processes, influenced deeply by, and embedded in, politics, economics and religion.

The first two essays of the volume show fragmented imprints of colonial modernities on histories of sexualities. The fascinating essay by Sanjam Ahluwalia imaginatively peeps into the writings of Indian sexologist A. P. Pillai (1889–1956), particularly in the *International Journal of Sexology*, to retrieve ideas circulating in the early twentieth century around sex and desire, with a particular focus on male sexual anxieties, female orgasm and same-sex relations. Ahluwalia trenchantly critiques the apathetic reaction to, and marginalization of, the work of Indian sexologists like Pillai in the international arena. She shows how ‘scientific’ understandings of sexuality were marked by not only a flow of Anglo-European thinking towards India, but also traffic in the other direction. Sexology in the early twentieth century was a global enterprise, with an international cast of sex specialists. The

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<sup>1</sup>Mary E. John and Janaki Nair (eds), *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (Delhi: Kali, 1998); Nivedita Menon (ed.), *Sexualities* (Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007); Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharya (eds), *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India* (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2008); Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (eds), *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000); Joseph Alter, *Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in Modern India* (Delhi: Penguin, 2011).

essay thus captures “the very historicization of the construction of sexual subjectivities as global phenomena” (p. 42).

Moving from the global to the local, Hardik Biswas brings out the erotic print cultures of colonial Calcutta. Cheaply produced pornographic booklets and prints in the *Battala* genre impacted indigenous ideas around gender and sexuality, and reinforced patriarchies, as they reflected masculinist and reformist anxieties around the sexually uncontrollable modern woman. They also exposed the contradictory pulls of the time, as attempts at regulation of this literature went hand in hand with a thriving market for it. Punishment of an uncontrollable woman was accompanied by her redemption, while she was seen as both seductive and puritanical and sensationalism was complemented by moralism.

In the next two essays we move on to the rubrics of the post-colonial state and nation. Family has been an important site for the reproduction of dominant sexualities. In a deeply perceptive piece, Shrimati Basu undertakes an ethnographic analysis of two Family Courts in Kolkata and Dhaka, and reveals how these courts make—attempts to translate the sexed, married body through legal records. Intermeshing the private and the public, the family courts publically discuss intimate matters of sex and marriage and foreground mediation to achieve resolution. Normative notions of body, sexuality, desire, gender behaviour, shame and silence are brought into play by the state through such courts. In these courts “bodies are shored up as evidence and constructed as readable in particular ways” (p. 73). At the same time, Basu tracks some of the limits of these legal procedures in capturing quotidian acts and sensations of intimacy. She thus points to the failures of such translations, “including the untranslatability of desire or pain through structures of compensation” (p. 74). J. Devika’s essay too continues with the notions of normative sexuality as defined by statist discourses. She points to the obscuring of sexuality in dominant developmental paradigms and discourses in Kerala, where the female body has been medically normalized within the framework of “maternal health” (p. 94). This reveals deep anxieties around non-productive female sexualities and ‘excessive’ sexualization of the female body. Social development in Kerala has been intertwined with procreative female sexuality, where constructions of gender rely on consumerist modernity.

Discourses around the state and nation would be incomplete without engaging with Hindu nationalism. Paola Bacchetta fills the blank here as she engages with the paradoxical insertion of queerness in right-wing nationalism. Feminist critiques of nationalist sexual politics assume an invariable heterosexual underpinning in the making of the “national family” (p. 12). However, Bacchetta complicates the “binary in which queer acceptance is systematically associated with the left, and queer repression with the right” (p. 137), by showing how the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) implicitly engages with non-heterosexual discourses by constructing and circulating images of an idealized hyper-valorized and masculinized Hindu queer from within. Hegdewar, the deceased RSS founder, is thus bi-gendered as symbolizing both the hybrid characteristics of “mother’s love” and “father’s diligence” (p. 135). Conversely, the ‘Other’, the Muslim, comes to embody in this discourse an “improper gendering, sexuality, and nationalization” (p. 130).

Jyoti Puri and Svati Shah in different ways turn to the realm of the law and challenge private-public distinctions by reading various implications of the decriminalization of sodomy law under Section 377 by the Delhi High Court in 2009. However, given the horrifying re-institutionalization of homophobia through the Supreme Court’s revocation recently of the High Court order, these essays in many ways leave one with a feeling of incompleteness, with a sense of *déjà-vu*, with many unanswered questions. At the same time, some of the tensions and problems brought out by them can be productive in taking the struggle forward. Jyoti Puri reads the two documents relating to the writ filed against 377 by the Naz Foundation in 2001, and the subsequent 2009 judgment, as cultural-legal texts, in

which were embedded certain limits and unintended biases. Notions of private and public, as described in these documents, often obscure matters of class and actual discrimination, and marginalize other multiple sites where same-sex sexualities are governed and regulated. She also points out how decriminalization is not the same thing as deregulation of same-sex sexuality. Svati Shah uses the rubric of “sexual minoritization” (p. 162), by simultaneously looking at the reading down of Section 377 in July 2009 and the “defeat” of proposed reforms to the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act in December 2008 (p 161). Here too, private-public distinctions instantiate sexual hierarchies between homosexuals and sex workers, between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sexualities. Though both homosexuals and sex workers are targets of state regulation and discrimination, and have various grounds for collaboration, the 2009 judgment through its emphasis on consent, dignity and privacy, argues Shah, treats ‘private’ homosexuality as in effect natural and normal, while ironically further stigmatizing and criminalizing ‘public’ sex work. Thus, it implicitly positions them as mutually opposed categories. Court statements continue to produce life and dignity as incommensurate with sexual commerce.

There are two essays in this volume which focus on public spheres and civic life. Through ethnographic vignettes from Odisha, Paul Boyce compellingly describes same-sex sexualities in small towns, where these are usually located within a number of interconnected contexts that include kinship ties and sexual modernity (p. 191). Here there is very little space for anonymity, and people with same-sex sexualities have to “daily navigate complexities attendant to being recognized and discarded, noticed and ignored” (p. 202). Similarly, Diepiriya Kuku adopts a life-history method to show how queer subjectivities are subject to tensions and associations between gender, race, caste and class. Through this he locates desire within existing structures of power and sociality.

Popular culture has been a significant arena for expressions of sexuality. Sanjay Srivastava has done some path-breaking work on this, and his earlier book (*Passionate Modernity: Sexuality, Class and Consumption in India*, 2007) focused on footpath pornography. In his own essay here he extends this to probe the relationship between urban spaces and sexual narratives of contemporary pornography among the middle classes. He uses a pornographic comic, *Savita Bhabhi*, on the internet to mark the key differences in the manner in which notions of the ‘erotic’ play out across different registers of class. According to Srivastava, *Savita Bhabhi* is an upper-middle-class married woman, who is traditional and yet able to express her sexuality; desirable and yet the cause of some anxiety. She is a manifestation of a woman of the gated community, which is located within its consumerist modernity and neo-liberal contemporary erotics of tradition. Contemporary family is ‘opened’ up here to the forces of modernity in order to secure its traditional moorings.

The volume in the end tracks the relay between romantic love, sexuality and cultures of urban modernity that appear to provide new possibilities of self-expression, while also articulating old concerns about ‘morality’ and ‘Indianness’. Valentine’s Day is the spotlight for Christiane Brosius, which she views as symbolizing non-marital relationships and non-reproductive sexualities. She locates its growing popularity among the urban youth, and the opposition to it, to new configurations of public spaces and processes whereby fresh cultures of ephemeral relationalities are produced. And lastly Shilpa Phadke talks of how search for fun and sexual pleasure among urban girls and women is often overshadowed by spectres of virtue, and entanglements of personal autonomy with anxieties about ‘reputation’.

Taken together, the twelve essays in this volume expand the analytical horizons of sexuality studies in new directions as they unravel the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality through interconnected dimensions of history, legality, sexual cultures, power politics, religion, race and class. They explore the constructions of sexual cultures by colonial sexologists, Hindu nationalists and the middle classes; in pulp literature, family courts and

development discourses; and through laws, prostitution, romance and the Indian media. This rich tapestry could have been further enhanced with some focus on how sexuality takes on different contours in Dalit politics, as the intermeshing of caste and gender brings to the fore questions of sexuality and the body per se. At the same time, the volume is a vital addition to sexuality studies in India.

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## Transitory Post-Millennial

**E. Dawson Varughese, *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 189 pages, Rs 799.**

In *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English*, E. Dawson Varughese contends that India has witnessed immense changes since the turn of the millennium, and her book explores this new landscape through Indian fiction in English published between 2000 and 2012. Varughese states that with increased economic prosperity, India has become an important player in the global economy and is facing new complexities and challenges which are mirrored in contemporary fiction. She also claims, as a corollary, that Indian fiction in English is now vastly different from earlier Indian fiction in English.

The introductory chapter titled 'From Postcolonial India to New India' gives a brief overview of Indian writing in English from pre-independence writers (Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Sri Aurobindo), and the canonical writers of Indian post-colonial literature (R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Khushwant Singh, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, G.V. Desani) to the new wave of writers in the 1980s and 1990s (Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Arundhati Roy). It also surveys major socio-political developments in India from independence in 1947 to the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Bombay riots, the 'India Shining' campaign, the Commonwealth Games and Anna Hazare's campaign against corruption.

Using E. Boehmer's and H. Gilbert's definitions of the post-colonial, Varughese contends that post-millennial Indian fiction in English "is not recognizable by the tropes and guises of Indian postcolonial texts" (p.145). She asserts that "fiction from the turn of the millennium demonstrates new departures in writing in English, often in genre, form and voice" (p.15) and "epitomizes New India" (p.15), comprising "Young India" or the youth, and "the growing middle-class(es) of India's urban populations" (p.16). She engages in a sociological analysis of the interface between literature and society, to seek to "offer insight and understanding into new Indian society" (p.19) and to examine notions of Indianness.

In the 'Acknowledgements', Varughese describes the deep impression made on her by the music and cinematography of a Hindi film, Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se*. Her fascination with Bollywood is evident throughout the book as she constantly traces thematic parallels between post-millennial Indian fiction in English and Bollywood cinema. For her, new developments in Indian fiction in English are mirrored in recent Bollywood films, which now mostly eschew predictable and clichéd formulae for more realistic and contemporary narratives, and she cites the film *Delhi Belly* (2011) as an example. In her chapter on 'Young India' she refers to *Rang de Basanti* (2006) and *No One Killed Jessica* (2011) as films that depict the politicization of the youth. While analysing "crick lit" she refers to the spate of cricket-oriented Hindi films, and her analysis of narratives about homosexuality includes a brief overview of the depiction of "yaraana" or "dostana" (male bonding) in Hindi cinema.

Varughese's procedure in each chapter is to first give a brief overview of the theme/sub-genre and then follow this with a reading of two texts representative of that genre. For instance, chapter 2 titled 'Urban Scapes' looks at the theme of the city in contemporary Indian writing in English, and offers readings of Anjum Hasan's *Neti, Neti, Not This, Not This* (2009) and Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* (2011). Chapter 3 titled 'Chick lit to crick lit' defines chick lit, and examines Advaita Kala's *Almost Single* (2007) and Anuja Chauhan's *Battle for Bittora* (2010). She contrasts Indian chick lit with earlier women-centred narratives by writers such as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande and concludes that though there are thematic overlaps, recent chick lit narratives foreground their protagonists' independence in decision making.

The textual readings, however, are flawed by lengthy narrative expositions and very little critical analysis. For instance, an important departure in these narratives (especially in Chauhan's) is the use of colloquial Hinglish, replicating the conversational style of the urban youth, but this goes unremarked by Varughese. The language deployed contributes to their irreverent, tongue-in-cheek take on various aspects of contemporary Indian society. Varughese describes how the inauguration of Twenty20 cricket in India changed the face of Indian cricket and coins the term "crick lit" for recent fiction that revolves around cricket. She offers readings of Geeta Sundar's *The Premier Murder League* (2010) and Anuja Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor* (2008) which is also chick lit.

Chapter 4 titled 'Young India' (!) looks at call centre and corporate narratives (Anish Trivedi, Chetan Bhagat, Sidin Vadukut) along with narratives of MSM (R. Raj Rao, Anjali Joseph). Chapter 5 examines crime writing in English from India, and includes detailed readings of fiction by Kalpana Swaminathan and Smita Jain. Surprisingly it also includes readings of two texts—Esther David's *The Man with Enormous Wings* (2010) and Aatish Taseer's *The Temple-Goers* (2010)—which hardly conform to Varughese's own definition of crime writing: "detective fiction such as hardboiled, noir, locked room, mystery fiction or whodunit" (p.101).

The inclusion of David's novella and Taseer's novel in this chapter is baffling, for neither can be described as crime writing. David's novella is actually a series of vignettes about life in Ahmedabad, which are linked by the theme of the 2002 communal riots. A patchwork narrative which incorporates ruminations, observations, historical reconstruction, political comment and fantasy, it does include crimes such as rape and murder, but is not crime fiction. Similarly, Taseer's novel includes a murder towards the end of the narrative, a murder for which the police find a scapegoat but which is not satisfactorily solved. However, this does not form the crux of the novel, which does not merit the tag of "crime writing". In fact, if one were to stretch the genre like Varughese to include all texts that mention rape or murder, then Partition literature or holocaust literature too would become crime fiction, and so would innumerable other texts such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Chapter 6 traces the rise of fantasy and epic narratives in the works of Samit Basu, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Ashok Banker and Nilanjan P. Choudhury. Varughese rightly observes that these works which draw on Hindu epics and legends promote an idea of "Indianness" which is rooted in a predominantly Hindu nation, an India of Hindu cultural and religious beliefs. She engages with issues of definition and taxonomy, and suggests that the term "historical fiction" might be better employed to describe these narratives rather than faasy .

Chapter 7 on the graphic novel is especially disappointing as its survey of the Indian graphic novel scene is quite inadequate. It begins with a brief history of the graphic novel, then goes on to the first recognized Indian graphic novel, Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994), and the subsequent rise of the genre in India in the 2000s. Varughese offers a reading

of Sarnath Banerjee's *The Harappa Files* (2011) and Ahmed and Singh's *Kashmir Pending* (2007), and mentions Parismita Singh, Appupen and Viswajyoti Ghosh. But there is no mention of several other important Indian graphic novelists such as Amruta Patil (*Kari* and more recently *Adi Parva: The Churning of the Ocean*), Gautam Bhatia (*Lie: A Traditional Tale of Modern India*), Sumit Kumar (*The Itch You Can't Scratch*), Abdul Sultan p.p. (*The Believers*), Durgabai Vyam and Subhash Vyam (*Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability*), Bhagwati Prasad and Amitabh Kumar (*Tinker. Solder. Tap*), Srividya Natarajan and A. Ninan (*A Gardener in the Wasteland*) and the Indo-Swedish collaborative anthology (*When Kulbhushan Met StockLi*). Most of these graphic novels explore and interrogate notions of Indianness which is the focus of Varughese's book, so these omissions are indeed puzzling.

The book is flawed by a number of typos, such as "he Ramu" (p.37) for "her Ramu", "asheel" (p.48) for "ashleel", "pire" (p.56) for "pyre", "Amitabh Bachan" (p.87) for "Amitabh Bachchan", "Sharukh Khan" (p.115) for "Shahrukh Khan", "literary ascetics" (p.128) for "literary aesthetics" and "Sringar" (p.142) for "Srinagar". Somewhat more unsettling are "Mani Ratman" (Acknowledgements) for "Mani Ratnam" and "jivansati" (Glossary) for "jivansathi." Many notable writers of recent Indian fiction in English such as Manu Joseph, Jerry Pinto, Jeet Thayil, Rahul Bhattacharya, Amitabha Bagchi, Namita Devidayal, Siddharth Chowdhury and Mitra Phukan, to name a few, have not been mentioned at all in this book, probably because their works elude the generic categories described by Varughese. *Reading New India* primarily charts the emergence of certain popular genres in recent Indian fiction in English and correlates them with trends in popular culture (films, television, the media). While Varughese mentions the "Metro Reads" series of fiction launched by Penguin India, she could have included an analysis of the publishing and marketing dynamics behind the sudden spike in the production and consumption of these popular genres in Indian writing in English.

While this book is a commendable effort to map the hitherto uncharted terrain of recent Indian popular fiction, it does not contrary to the claim made in its sub-title, cover the entire range of "post-millennial Indian fiction in English", which often defies generic labels. The term "post-millennial" for this body of writing is also problematic, for it assumes that this fiction constitutes a radical departure from the fiction of preceding years. The themes of class, caste, religious identity and Indianness identified by Varughese as characterizing this fiction were also dominant themes in earlier Indian writing in English. Varughese herself acknowledges "the transitory nature of this body of post-millennial writing in English from India" (p.151) and admits that "the observation of trends in the fiction requires more time to see exactly how the genres, themes and forms outlined here in this book, actually play out and develop over time" (p.150). She has nevertheless, come up with a hasty book which may need updating post haste.

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