

Review of *South Asian Literature, Culture and Society: A Critical Ruminations*

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South Asia and its literary wealth had never left the periphery of canonical English literature due to the late introduction of the English language in these clusters. The richness of the vernaculars has recently begun to be captured through translation, transcreation, and inspiration. The unique cultures and subcultures were used as a base for constructing an array of refreshing literary masterpieces using the medium of English, holding true to the flavours of South Asian lifestyles. However, South Asian identity could never be boxed up within a monolithic body of expressions, resulting in a certain lack of compositeness that forced the South Asian literature written in English to remain one step behind World Literatures in terms of exposure and scholarly recognition. In such a situation, it has become a necessity for the academic world to find a solution to overcome the ‘obscurity’ that shrouds the valuable literary compositions produced in the South Asian nations. The intrusions of the vernacular tongues have oftentimes proven to be a blessing in disguise to create a unique essence of these new kinds of literature. One has to look at the ways these literary productions break away from their colonial traditions to understand how works of literature in South Asia make a difference in the contemporary literary rubric.

In this context, the editor, Goutam Karmakar’s ‘Preface’ in his book *South Asian Literature, Culture and Society: A Critical Ruminations* notes that the chapters in the book have in mind the general and demanding interest of graduate and postgraduate students of English literature for the most part. This is particularly true for the first section of the book, in which twenty-nine chapters are grouped under the title “Mapping South Asian Literature”. This section would further be of interest to research scholars who seek to explore these terrains. These chapters not only present the works of the already familiar authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Ashapurna Devi, Vijay Tendulkar, Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das and others in a fresh and innovative light—as is the case with the chapters by Pankaj Luchan Gogoi, Basudhara Roy, Durga Patva, Anamika Ghosh, and some others but also they familiarize us with writers and poets like Rashid Jahan, B.K.S. Ray, K.V. Dominic, and others who have as yet not received the adequate degree of recognition, as is the case with the authors discussed in the chapters by Guni Vats and V.P. Singh, Madhu Kamra, S. Barathi, and some others. The eight chapters belonging to the second section of the book— “Glimpses of South Asian Culture and Society”—extend the book’s range further into interdisciplinary terrains, to the effect that it becomes of interest to scholars and students of the humanities alike. The sociological focus of Anna Lynn Tom and Hemanga Dutta’s study on religious folklores and their adaptations, a cultural study of childhood obesity in South Asia by Chaitali Bose and Alak Kumar Syamal, or the historical study of the contributions of Sister Nivedita by Subhajeet Singha, for instance, certainly introduce insights from

different disciplines into this book, thus allowing the book to provide its readers with a rounded-up view of the cultural, literary, historiographic, epistemological, geographical, anthropological, sociological, mythographic, and spiritual aspects of South Asia.

Given the fact that most scholarly and academic frameworks that are available to a modern scholar are European in terms of origin, especially an Indian or Asian scholar researching South Asian literature and society is likely to feel the necessity to either reconfigure these theoretical approaches to the degree that they more authentically suit and effectively address the non-Western contexts or to independently develop a non-western academic epistemology that may or may not draw upon the legacy left by scholastic practices growing out of those regions. We see the writers in this book, in their own manners, quite consciously and responsibly tackling this question of an authentic theoretical framework and methodology for South Asian literature and culture. To this effect, S. Barathi's chapter explores the possibility of implementing the narratological theory of William Labov in case of an Asian text like *Sanchita Karma and Other Tales of Ethics and Choice from India* by K.V. Dominic, while Pratibha Patel, through the analysis of *The Book of Shadows* by Namita Gokhale, answers how existential feminism can be a part of the third-wave without being a derivative of the Western variant. Anamika Ghosh's introspection of motherhood and daughterhood through the medium of Indian poetry in English brings in several fresh perspectives into the readers' minds. Deepayan Das views Indian nationalism from a gendered perspective and concludes with how woman poets like Kamala Das managed to decolonise herself through the medium of language and creative force alone.

Paulomi Banerjee and Sucheta Kapoor's piece brings the readers' attention to the fact that even in the world of critics and intellectuals, gender bias reigns supreme till date. The authors contend that the challenges that Taslima Nasrin faces due to her bold critique of Islamic taboos against women's expression of sexuality largely takes place because of the fact that Nasrin herself is a woman. The authors judiciously point out that when similar critiques or protests have been made by male authors, critics and activists, they are vastly applauded and considered "pragmatic, protective, and unassailable" by academia in general. Guni Vats and V.P. Singh discuss Rashid Jahan by exploring the duality of surface and depth from a poststructuralist perspective. Writers like Jahan have enabled the strategic reestablishment of the centrality of the female subject in a social setting where men otherwise control the social discourses through the illusion of their superior subjective depth.

Comparative studies, especially ones juxtaposing eastern and western texts, are particularly helpful in highlighting the requirements of a difference in approach as well as the points of sameness, and by studying those we can effectively build certain methodologies for the intensive study of South Asian literature and culture. To that effect, multiple chapters of this collection utilize the strategies of comparative literature, as particularly observable in case of Debojit Paul's paper "A Comparative Perspective: A Case Study of Bengali and English Novels of Indian Writers", Ritushree Sengupta's paper "Interrogating the Female Poetic Voice: A Comparative Study of Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das", and Anirban Kahali's paper "Motherhood and Profession: A Comparative Study of Mahasweta Devi's *Breast-Giver* and Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*".

Often, the South Asian subject himself or herself is the product of the comparative influences of the East and the West which cannot be any more easily told apart from each other, since in a globalised era the two sections are in a state of the continuous transaction. Hence, diaspora studies become relevant contributions to the study of South Asia, informing, for instance, the opening chapter of the book in which Pankaj Luchan Gogoi studies the liminal identities of second-generation emigrants as represented in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Nobody's Business*. K.B.S. Krishna's chapter on M.M. Kaye's *Death in the Andamans* illustrates how diasporic nostalgia can be creatively utilized to

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introduce hybridity and thereby transform the set parameters of the sub-genre of Country House Mystery. Malini Chongder's chapter on Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* explores the possibilities of turning around the disadvantageous position of the diasporic individual towards more assertive possibilities.

The Deleuzian concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization are particularly pertinent for the explanation of the shifting standpoints of not just diasporic identities but of any subject position in this globalized era. Consequently, art forms in the contemporary world manifest heteroglossic characteristics. This explains the rhizomatic dialectical structure of graphic novels that amalgamate images and narratives, like Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* which has been the focus of Ramaprasad Datta's study. Among the virtues of the book is the fact that certain chapters can be juxtaposed against each other to generate complementary view-points; for instance, the chapters often provide a balance of tradition with modernity. As a counterpart to Datta's chapter, the reader can, in this manner, read Nabanita Dhali's study of the indigenous art of "Pat" paintings, and its present condition. Basudhara Roy's study of Ashapura Devi's *Oishorjo (Wealth)* would disuse us of the impression that the liminality induced by the conflicts between the East and the West is exclusively a feature of the late-twentieth-century or the twenty-first-century world since Devi's story conveys that the nineteenth century's engagement with the Women Question occurred through the tensions between traditions and the modernity induced by the West. Both Roy's and Basu Gupta's chapters convey that fact that Ashapura Devi has for the most part not been able to reach beyond a localized set of readers is not because of some restrictive attribute intrinsic to her work, but because of the inadequacy of the scholarly efforts that could make Devi's work communicate to a wider audience.

Colonization no doubt plays a key role in causing the hybridity of eastern and western cultures, while also making that hybrid a result of asymmetrical relations, given the position of power the colonizers enjoy. The consequent hierarchical relation fosters a culture of abuse and oppression for the native, and this hierarchical relation as manifested between, for instance, the Goan Nationalist and the Portuguese Administrator is a key concern of Asif Currimbhoy's works, which are discussed by Indrani Chakraborty. Sayani Nayak's chapter discusses the postcolonial consequence of these problematic relations especially with reference to the nature and role of boundaries and how they configure the nation-states. Rimpa Roy's chapter on Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* conveys how the nature and essence of the national and ideological boundaries affect individual fates, and especially refugees are at the mercy of the forces that carve those borders.

Madhu Kamra proposes a thorough stylistic analysis of B.K.S. Ray's *Terror Must Die!* and adds a commentary on the author's stern critique of the Naxalite movement pervading this poetry collection, discussing the abuse of political power. Another aspect of hierarchical power relation in especially the Indian subcontinent is provided by the caste system, and Anindita Chowdhury decides to explore this dimension of social relation through the non-fictional biographical works of Dalit writers like Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and Bama Faustina, rather than through works of fiction. Vishali Sharma focuses on the gradual transformations undergone by the figure of the 'hero' in South Asian Literature, choosing to focus upon the 'Dogra Peasant Hero' in Ramnath Shastri's *Bawa Jitto*.

Shamaila Amir, in her chapter, presents a somewhat concentrated opinion on "mysticism" by terming it "the only way if a person wants a garden which is full of spring of love and where peace and serenity prevails." The modern trials and trepidations of the Islamic communities become the focus of Soma Mandal's take on Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Mahamadul Hassan Dhabak focuses on particularly the Woman Question in the Middle Asian regions in the chapter on Nadia



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Hashimi's *The Pearl that Broke its Shell*. Kauser Tasneem explores women and their relation with patriarchy from a more conceptual viewpoint.

The subtitle of the book under review promises a cultural orientation—"A Cultural Remuneration"—and the interdisciplinary nature of the book conveys that by "culture" in this case is perceived in a broader sense. Thus, under this umbrella approach, we have S. Chitra and Dechhen Dolma's chapter which analyse folklores from a literary perspective, which is followed by Anna Lynn Tom and Hemanga Dutta's sociological study of the sacred. Amidst the multitude of issues concerning South Asia, it can, at times, be hard to handle an ecological conscience, although the ecological consciousness is the need of the hour here as well as in the rest of the world. Prakash C. Balikai's and Pragnya Parimita Chayani's chapters touch upon this vital issue, the former by highlighting the spiritual and practical significance of the river Tunga, and the latter by incorporating an eco-feminist angle in context of Orissa. K. Subapriya offers an excellent study of the Narikuravar Tribes in the Perambalur District of Tamil Nadu.

The reader can select his or her own way around the book as per his or her own fashion, interests and needs, either by scanning through the chapters according to the given chronology, or selectively reading those chapters that concerns him or her, or making his or own chronology of chapters to follow through the book, or use it the form of an anthology to look particular things up. He or she can enter the book from any chapter since they all stand independently, none of the chapters requiring a knowledge of the prior ones. But, reading the entirety of the book has its own gifts, especially for someone intending to build a knowledge-base in this particular field. While it is very difficult to provide exhaustive coverage of the entirety of the vast arena of South Asian literature and culture inside a single volume, for example, the impact of Jainism, Buddhism, and deeper coverage of cuisines, flora, fauna, and technology remains indistinct, making readers wonder whether there will be other volumes coming up as a follow-up of this book. *South Asian Literature, Culture and Society: A Critical Ruminantion* successfully inspires inquisitive spirit in the minds of the readers and should also succeed in inducing further research in the area covered. As a result, this volume shall indeed be instrumental in bringing about a revision, or at the very least, in making fresher additions to the literature representing South Asia at present.