

Diana Dimitrova and Thomas de Bruijn, eds. *Imagining Indianness: Cultural Identity and Literature*. Basingstoke, UK and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 166 pp. ISBN 978-3-319-41014-2.

In the introduction to *Imagining Indianness: Cultural Identity and Literature*, Diana Dimitrova reminds us of the fluid nature of Indianness, shaped and defined by culture(s), history and society. As she presents ideas of “*bhāratīyā* (Indianness), *Hindutva* (Hindudom/Hinduness)” in this opening chapter, Dimitrova invites the reader to consider Indianness in a “non-essentializing sense, as pluralistic, open-ended and dynamic concept that is inclusive of all religions, cultural and socio-political traditions and currents in South Asia and beyond” (4). Following the introduction, the edited collection is divided into two sections: “Indianness, Literature and Culture: A Critical Perspective” and “Indian Cultural Identity and the Crisis of Modernity: Reworking of Myth and Tradition.” Both sections are comprehensive, covering poetry, drama and literature and in turn, they discuss Sanskrit aesthetics, poetics, languages, style, negative or challenging representations of “Indianness,” folk and *desi* theatrical traditions, all through the overarching theme of “Imagining Indianness.”

Through his analysis of Indian poets Dhumi, Kedarnath Singh, Lankesh, Ravivarma, Malika Amar Sheikh, Pravin Gadhi and Raghuvir Sahay, K. Satchidanandan explores how the poets he argues “problematize the concept of India in order to fight its oppressive implications and to re-contextualize poetry in order to build a free democratic society in the country” (19). The plurality of Indianness manifest not only in the Indian languages in which these works of poetry are crafted but also in the *experiences* recounted in these works is foregrounded in Satchidanandan’s chapter as he argues against the idea of “a standard Indian literature, Indian culture or Indian character” (33). Hans Harder begins his chapter by taking up the idea of the “standard” by his examination of the adjective “Indian.” Writing on the *Nayī Kabānī* author Nirmal Varma and his critic Jaidev, Harder deftly weaves his way between the two, foregrounding the ideas of Indianness in both Varma’s fiction and Jaidev’s reading of Varma’s writing (and of Varma as an “Indian”). Through this discussion Harder draws conclusions about both men’s positions on the idea(s) of “Indianness” and finishes by arguing for aesthetic accommodation over normative exclusion.

De Bruijn’s chapter “Indianness as a Category in Literary Criticism on *Nayī Kabānī*” is a wonderful exposition of the post-independence genre and its embracing of “the darker sides of Indian society” wherein we read of “the characters being uprooted and alienated from established cultural values...” (59). De Bruijn expertly situates the *Nayī Kabānī* movement both historically and socio-culturally and his reading of Kamleshvar, Rajendra Yadav and associated criticism provide a clear and yet nuanced reading of the body of work, valuable to

established scholars as well as those new to the field. De Bruijn's chapter is complemented by chapter 9 in the volume wherein Mariola Offredi discusses two short stories by Nirmal Verma. Offredi's foregrounding of Verma's "worlds" both real and imagined, highlight Verma's particular ideas of Indianness, shaped through his living in both India and Europe.

Chapter 5 is the only chapter that focusses uniquely on modern Hindi drama. Here, Dimitrova studies two works of Hindi playwright Lakshminaryan Mishra, exploring how he "promotes an ideology and cultural identity that is consistent with neo-Sanskritism" (82) whilst he concurrently "expresses his ideas by using the medium of Western dramatics" (82). Through her analysis of the plays, Dimitrova demonstrates the complexity and plurality of "Indianness" alongside ideas of cultural identity in modern Hindi drama, highlighting where and how Western dramaturgy is most evident, and importantly, how it dovetails with a neo-Sanskritised ideology. In her analysis of Mishra's *Sanyāsī* (1929) which deals with "religious tradition and women's issues" (89), Dimitrova reveals how Mishra's approach is significant given that "he employed a Western idiom to argue for neo-Sanskritic values and ideals" (89). In Krishna Baldev Vaid's chapter, he reflects on his body of work as a fiction writer and playwright. In reviewing some of his major works, he considers how the notion of "Indianness" is reflected in them, whether that be consciously or subconsciously. The chapter argues that literature should look to transcend the conditions out of which it is created and he discusses key tropes and characters in his work, such as the topic of poverty, unfulfilled and helpless characters, and the recurring motif of an old woman carrying a bundle. Vaid writes: "I take it as my *dharma* as a writer to portray poverty to the best of insight and experience and capacity" (98).

In Schokker's chapter, we are invited into Kishorilal Gosvami's love story of *Indumatī* from 1902. Although Schokker offers interesting insights into characterisation, structure, time and localisation, the conclusions lack in detail and thus the chapter's contribution to the volume on representations of "imagining Indianness" is somewhat limited. Christof-Fuechsle's chapter which explores absurdism/existentialism in Vinod Kumar Shukla's *Nauhar kī kamīz* (1979) is an interesting exploration of how the text might be conceived as an existential novel. Christof-Fuechsle writes that *Nauhar kī kamīz* might be considered an existential novel because "This category is characterized by the acceptance of the absurd situation of man in the universe and of the rule of chance and absurdity over human action, reality being another name for chaos" (141). In reading the work in translation and moreover, as "a reader of Indian literature influenced by Western norms and models" (132), Christof-Fuechsle raises interesting questions around reception and cultural translation.

This edited collection by Diana Dimitrova and Thomas de Bruijn is an important addition to the field since it brings debates and ideas of "Indianness" expressed in Hindi (and other Indian languages) to the table, a welcome and

necessary addition to a growing body of research. Importantly, *Imagining Indianness: Cultural Identity and Literature* is a timely publication as once again, we are called to consider more recent, post-millennial literary and cultural production and its interface with an ever-changing sense of “Indianness.”

E. Dawson Varughese
Independent Scholar, UK and India
Email: worldlits@googlemail.com