

Jasbir Jain, *Subcontinental Histories: Literary Reflections on the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Jaipur and Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2018. 283 pp. ISBN 978-81-316-0928-6.

There is a very close relationship between history and literature; both are narratives concerned with past events and both trace traditions of cultures and countries as well as of relationships. In addition, both are acts of connection and of reflection. As the title of the present volume under review suggests, this work is concerned with several interconnected narratives – first, the relationship of literature and history and literature’s role in shaping the nation, reflecting on it and projecting intercultural relationships; second, it is concerned with time. “Today” immediately transforms itself into time past and yet leaves live embers to be blown into the future. The third concern is with the rise of nationalism, leading to the fourth which is a fallout of the present’s relationship with past – the intellectual’s burden. Thus *Subcontinental Histories* is an exploration of the historical events of the last two centuries, interpreted here through literary texts – fiction, poetry and drama – works which move away from the immediacy of history to analyse it in retrospect. They represent the individual voices, the restlessness and discontent as well as the fissures in the idea of a nation. Documents such as letters, speeches and newspaper articles, similarly offer a different view of reality when freed from the immediacy of the expression.

Divided into six sections, the sixteen individual essays explore the different dimensions of this idea. The first section reflects the pre-nineteenth century choices the nation had – through Dara Shikoh and Tipu Sultan – and is in the nature of a prologue. By discussing several plays, all of them written at times of political crisis, the author focuses on the attempts of dramatists at intervening in history through a recall of the past. Through three individual chapters, the second section traces the rise of nationalism, the shift from feudalism – through the peasant revolutions – towards resistance, the renaissance then and now. Talking about “the *mai-baap* syndrome,” the author also informs us that we should be aware that in the subcontinent nationalisms of several kinds surfaced, parallel and contrary movements developed, and opposing ideologies came to the forefront. The third section records political change first towards a coming together and then a growing apart leading to the Partition that no one ever wanted. The chapter entitled “Mass Exodus: Mourning Together or Alone?” is very interesting and it focuses on issues of homelessness, desolation and the mourning that came to inhabit the human mind and explore the different dimensions of home and belonging. The author also seeks to widen the meaning of the word refugee to take it beyond mere political immediacy and relate it to the existential sense of belonging, estrangement and exile as these terms come to express the

psychological states of the dislocated, and to include within this, the word *muhajir* (the outsider).

The fourth section titled “Shared Histories: Separate Territories” consists of three articles again which tell us how difficult it is to compartmentalise historical events according to individual countries – the 1930s Khudai Khidmatgar massacre in the Street of the Storytellers that belongs to both India and Pakistan as do the two World Wars. The histories of dissent are also pre-1947 as well as after. But often the materials that go to make the substance are shared histories. “Violence and its Continuities” with its three essays comprise the fifth section. A present reality is the rise of terror which needs to be confronted and deconstructed within a larger time-frame and which needs to take into account both the histories of psychological fear and insecurity as well as different generators of terror, which incidentally are not always an outside agency. The politics of law and its enforcement come in for their own share in the creation of terror – the midnight knock, the arrest, the encounters fake or real. The chapter on terror, with its many subsections also looks into the loneliness of the people involved – the victims and the perpetrators alike. Ideologies travel and in the process are transformed, muted or absorbed in other ideologies as they encounter other contexts. “The Travels of Maoism” tells this story and the voiceless existence it forced on millions as well as the way it holds people to ransom.

The sixth and final section deals with issues of nuclear weapons, development and environment. The main concern is with violence, its long-term impact on human beings and environment alike, as well as the erosion of human and moral values. The author shows us how violence brutalises everybody. Again, the myth of development and the parallel concern with environment work at odds. Development in terms of nuclear power, the callousness accompanying its use, the generational effects of radiation, the construction of dams, the easy homemade manufacture of bombs, the deforestation everywhere get reflected in many novels and plays. There is also the rural-urban divide. In the last essay the author discusses in details Badal Sircar’s plays produced by the Third Theatre experiment, especially the play *Bhoma*, which offers a running commentary on the different concerns of city dwellers and rural populations – concerns that need to come together but do not. *Bhoma*’s death and his continued resurrection is a political and an economic necessity – the poor have to stay poor, the illiterate, illiterate, and knowledge is to be packaged and standardised.

In order to enable a dialogue between the past and the present, several writers and thinkers of this period have been discussed – Jotiba Phule, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Rabindranath Tagore, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Mahatma Gandhi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Pash, Kamila Shamsie, Girish Karnad, Shahid Nadeem, Badal Sircar, Intizar Hussain, Sadat Hasan Manto, Attia Hosain, I. Allan Sealy, Nadeem Aslam, Githa Hariharan and

Mumtaz Shahnawaz. From this list, the range and extent of the essays included in the book becomes clear.

To sum up, the Indian subcontinent has a shared past, both of the colonial experience and the resistance movements it generated, and of the many efforts to imagine and construct a nation. Beginning with India's past and the many causalities of ideas and ideologies on the way to freedom, the present volume goes on to look at the aftermath of divisive nationalisms leading to the partition of the country, before moving to the many manifestations of terror in India and its neighbouring countries, the race for nuclear weapons and environmental concerns. The author, an erudite scholar no doubt, should be congratulated for being able to make us rethink and revisit several issues that lay behind the construction of our subcontinental history and literature. The past in itself, points towards a compulsion for a more composite formation with more room for human values. History, according to her, is always a fresh reckoning with all that is past and present, a time to think afresh. The detailed bibliography and filmography at the end of the book is an added bonus.

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