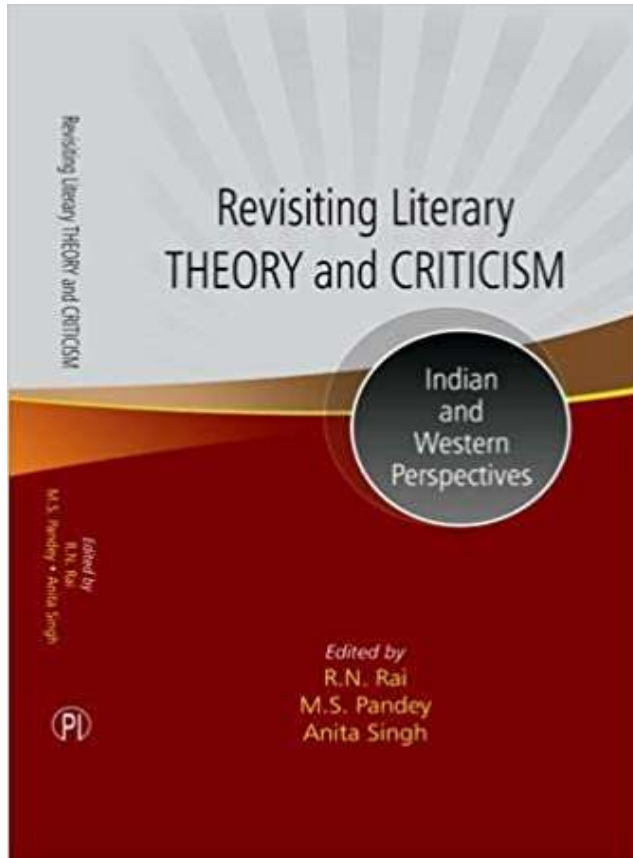


R.N. Rai, M.S. Pandey and Anita Singh, eds. *Revisiting Literary Theory and Criticism: Indian and Western Perspectives*. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2018. 271 pp. ISBN 978-93-82178-22-4.



This collection of essays attempts to build up a broad pedagogic and theoretical synergy between various dimensions of literary theory as developed in the West and its translation/transmission in the Indian disciplinary practices. This project primarily takes Indian traditions as the “ground” on which such synergies could be sustained. For example, the possibilities of a theoretical synergy through a fleshing out of Indian *rasa* theory in the light of various methodological approaches (like reader-centric, author-centric and text-centric, which create a “fusion of horizons”) could be explored. Such a fusion does not blur the differences between “traditions” but initiates a contextual dialogue. This is how this volume of essays makes an innovative re-description of fragments of theories from the West and India, keeping in sight a broad possibility of pedagogic

engagement and dialogic response to it. Especially, the way Western theories are received in practice in Indian pedagogic contexts becomes an important subtext for most of the essays in the volume.

A strong critique of the use of Western theories is reflected in Sanjoy Saksena's "Nation, Fanon and the Politics of Colonialism/Postcolonialism," which describes the postcolonial framework as "manufactured truths about themselves" believed by "gullible natives"(131). In a zealous affirmation of nationalism's potential capacity to defeat postcolonialism, the essay pits Fanon's thesis about decolonisation as an antidote to Tagore's Internationalism. Needless to say, Tagore's notion of human freedom and creativity superseding narrow nationalism stood much beyond Fanon's critique, as Fanon's decolonisation was an attempt only to overcome continued neocolonial repression of African culture and identity. However, in the context of India, mere subscription to Western theories in pedagogical practices cannot be labelled as neocolonial repression or borrowing of "manufactured truths" about the Orient and India, as many of the essays claim, albeit uncritically. Another extremely blustering positioning of contemporary Indian critics vis-a-vis the so-called West, could be read in Avadesh Kumar Singh's "Rethinking Literary Theory in India." This article compares the West and India to mythical *Jarasandha's* bifurcated two-part body in theoretical terms and pronounces a verdict, "Indian academic critics pronounce a text postmodern or postcolonial on the basis of symptoms without caring for their philosophical connotations and conditions that produced them and discourses that they critiqued" (92). Now *Jarasandha* was joined together in the presence of a *rakshashi* (witch) as Singh retells the myth. Myth of *Jarasandha* also shows what D. Venkat Rao states in his essay titled "Deconstruction: Reading Otherwise" as an instance of "conservative" and "essentialist" reading (155) of Indian myths that resist the framework of critical reasoning available in Western theories only to regurgitate and fall back on the terms of the same Western theories. This, without being able to do a *Jarasandha* trick of joining or a Krishna trick of separating the Western and the Indian, fails to create much of a synergy between the two. The chimera of "Rethinking" ends up so thoughtlessly that the reader cannot even take it as "comparatist" or as "deconstructive of the West" except making a gaffe at redundant non-positioning of a critical subjectivity that does not know where to go from this *Jarasandhian* act. Such is the banality of a sentimental resistance to the West which constitutes the major voice of this volume of essays.

It may be mentioned in this context that R.N. Rai's very "Introduction" to the volume ultimately realises the inadequacy of the so-called Indian theories, when he says, "Indian theory needs to be updated and contextualized, as in contemporary era Indian poetics is inadequate to cope with the changing requirements of Indian literature" (26-27). But the same critical tenor evaporates when he draws a comparison between the reader-response theory and the *Rasa*

theory of India by stating “In Indian poetics *sahṛdaya* or *rasika* or *bhāvak* (responsive reader) occupies the same important position that is occupied by reader in Poststructuralist Western theories”(25) as if there exists such a direct comparison between *rasa* or received taste and role of the reader. What is theoretically important is to note that critics who claim a specificity of Indian theories attempt to do a misplaced comparison through similarities and dissimilarities, while a comparison must be based on a historically shared understanding between different traditions which would resist any blurring of the hermeneutic differences. The promise of this “fusion” is a straightforward methodology of reading texts by saying, as R.N. Rai pronounces, “There are basically three things – image, subtext, ‘gaps’, ‘indeterminacies’ which motivate the reader to produce the meaning of the text” (22) and then goes onto affirm, “Contemporary Western theoretical trends have to be imbibed and integrated into our Indian theory...” (26). So do Indian critics who simplify Western theories for their Indian audience deprive them of the philosophical connotations and conditions that produce such theories? Indeed, indeterminacy and gaps, being one of the foremost conceptual apparatus of Poststructuralist reading strategies, gets a rather inchoate and tenuous treatment in this volume. Pronouncements like “The question of literary or critical theory becomes redundant, for reading is the precondition for the survival of literary and critical pursuits” (104), or “Despite some very bright and positive strands of feminism, Marxism, Lesbianism et al. the critic while practising criticism must widen his pursuit and see ‘literariness’ of the text in toto,” or even worse, “Theory’s complicity in the decline of criticism will continue to be subjected to attack by conservatives once they see the operation of power relations in literary studies” (53), bring out a subtext of discrediting the critical traditions with which these essayists engage with, but only as a *Purvapakṣa* or a given opponent. The subtext remains gappy and indeterminate as it cannot fill up the gap of understanding Western theories in a more engaged endeavour.

Such an enterprise is not without an ideological basis indeed, best expressed by noted Indian critic Kapil Kapoor. Towards the end of his essay entitled, “Theorising Theory,” he argues, “synthesisizing transcendental frameworks of thought cannot operate with divisive, ethnographic and conflict-oriented theories without damaging its harmonious unity” (61). He obviously implies an Advaita-like framing of literary and critical theories in terms of *abhedā* or nondifference. Such a positioning ontologically determines goals of theorising culture and literature, within which critics face no dichotomy with the West. This mode and method of theorising theories bring back the role of a “native informant” who looks for a “synthesis,” (Spivak 5-6) instead of what Balchandra Mungekar calls “the primacy of native culture.” This also shows the privileging of an apparent higher-order system of illumination of essences, which itself is a metaphysical framework to subsume the possibility of differences. Literary critics rather

explore significant cultural differences to engage in a mutually profitable dialogue of enrichment and shared knowledge that Kapoor seems to find deferred in the hermeneutical deferral of the signified in acts of reading.

In sharp contrast to such autotelic assertion of an assumed position of being lower or higher, a pedagogically rich and insightful reading of Deconstruction is carried out by D. Venkat Rao in his essay. By an affable reading of an anthropocentric tale of turning a rescued rat into the daughter of a sage who later marries her off to another male rat and reconverts her into a she rat, he attempts to establish a pedagogic link between the deconstructive reading of a text and the analogical, metaphoric and similar other methods of reading the structure of undermining the name of the father in the *Panchatantra* stories. This reminds one of how deconstruction itself is a combination of several displacements and overturnings of textual and linguistic hierarchies that “desist” from prefiguring any closure, while Venkat Rao offers an almost symmetric juxtaposition between deconstructive reading and the textual events in a particular *Panchatantra* text. However, the question is, whether deconstruction proper cannot but leave a remainder that is incalculable and that which is *not* contaminated by an impropriety of chance or threat, which a story in its scheme might fail to warrant. Similarly, Rajesh Babu Sharma’s reading of Paul de Man’s interpretation of language of poetry in terms of “potentiality of presence” instead of “non-presence” lacks what de Man in his *metanoia* suggested as transformation of one’s way of thinking and being that never allows for “unmediated presence” (de Man 93- 123). Derrida would have called it as “hetroaffectation” of the “parergon” (Derrida 35-36), created by the impossibility of reading from the perspective of “native informant.”

Damodar Thakur’s essay, “The Language of Mysticism: A Linguistic Study” conflates the temporal and the experiential in bringing language to pure presence and yet calls the playfulness of the mystic language as a logical impossibility. He analyses a mystic’s language to be supra-logical and supra-sensuous and comes to terms with mystic’s affirmation of Otherness of the Real. Without even a shred of analytical evidence of the real (*vyāvahārika*), a realist understanding of mystic’s language fails to capture the element of play, poetry and fiction. What is rather significant here is a tendentious blurring of the so-called line between West and East/Indian in analysing mystic’s language, which is a typically Orientalist strand of “sacralization” of language in transference and nondifferentiation with the expressivist-emotivist form of language of the mystics (Gerard 153-54). A Realist analysis that is responsible for projecting incoherence between presence and absence that oscillates between void and indiscernibility in the language of the mystic ultimately creates a continuum between West and India, that sustains Orientalist predispositions.

The essay by A.K. Awasti depicts the aporetic structure of Indian aesthetic theories of *rasa* which simultaneously emphasises the processual nature of *rasa*

without a definite objective correlative (218), while M.S. Pandey portrays the alienation of minorities who immigrate to multicultural Western societies and call for breaking down of the Manichean binary between West and the rest in a project of opening up spaces for diversity. Anita Singh's essay on Feminist theoretical models in the Indian context advocates pluralism as a way out of fixation with received models of feminism. Once again, this substantially enfeebles the need for retrieval of embodied voices of women in Indian contexts of patriarchy and such other forms of social and cultural dominance. P. Dalai's essay on Queerdom brings out misrepresentation of queer relations in media and academia but lacks a proper theoretical frame that can intervene in the contexts of exclusion and stigmatisation. Namrata Rathore Mahanta's positing of the feminine and the maternal praxis as an alternative to feminist outlook cannot resolve severe dichotomies and differences within feminist theories and the understanding of feminine practices.

The volume, therefore, serves as a platform of India's emergent pedagogical and theoretical explorations into a self-conscious positioning. In the process, essays in the volume often get squeamish about the theoretical challenge arising from the Western theories, without being able to map the spread, depth and historicity of contemporary advances in Western theory. By putting together a comprehensive collection, the editors did a good job of an inward-looking interrogation of Indians trying to come to terms with Western theories, while the world lay ahead with its variety and openness. As a result, a deliberate analytical deficit is created by often blurring cultural and political differences on the promise of being different, which reproduces the structure of division between the theoretical refinements and received wisdom. The value for which the volume stands could thus be appropriated only in a critical reexamination of its intellectual claims.

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