

Cynthia vanden Driesen and Ian vanden Driesen, ed. *Change – Conflict and Convergence: Austral-Asian Scenarios*. Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2011. 396 pp. ISBN 978-81-250-4219-8.

The fourth volume of ASAA, the Australian Asian Studies Association, gathers thirty-three papers read at its conference in Kandy, Sri Lanka, towards the end of 2008, at a time when peace negotiations between the warring parties in the country had not yet been brought to an end. The more courageous proved the presence of participants from about ten foreign countries to meet local scholars and discuss a conference theme the Sri Lankan organisers had proposed, a theme that aptly related to the political situation in the country. Perhaps understandably, the dozen Sri Lankan academics preferred to address cultural rather than political issues whereas several of their Australian colleagues did not shirk from looking at recent changes in the Australian political sphere, in particular the long hoped-for government apology to the “Stolen Generations” by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in February 2008. This change in attitude may not have been shared by each and every white Australian but was a promising sign, as Keith Truscott, himself a “second-generation child of the ‘stolen generation’” (372) put it in the opening article of the collection.

Several more contributions in the first of seven sections of the book underline the aspect of political change in Australia while the following half a dozen essays discuss future paths the country will hopefully follow, in particular the one of acknowledging its multicultural set-up, as Baden Offord argues, who puts his finger on Australia-Asian relations (45), thereby highlighting the geographical aspect of the conference title. In his most interesting essay, “Postcolonial Legacies and the ‘Small Country Syndrome,’” Stephen Alomes returns to A.A. Phillips’s famous phrase of 1958 of the “cultural cringe,” which he feels does not only persist in Australia but can be extended to New Zealand, Canada and Sri Lanka (74), one proof of which he locates in postcolonial scholars’ inclination – and practice – to prefer working in the so-called metropolitan centres instead of at “the periphery”: a state of the art, Bill Ashcroft’s negotiation about “Australian Literature and Alternative Modernities” cannot really put aside.

While the number of papers by Australian scholars in this collection is the same as in previous ASAA conference publications, their host country’s colleagues play, laudably, a more visible role than Indian voices had done in the two previous conferences held in the subcontinent. And it is not just linguistic, literary, art, ethno-religious, demographic or sport issues in their own country they reflect upon in the fourth section of the book, “Change in the Sri Lankan Context: Some Reflections,” but they also engage with “The International

Scene” in the following section, namely the political, ethnic and cultural struggle against creating homogeneous spaces at home as well as in the Balkans, Kashmir, Malaysia or Australia. Here – as well as in the book’s very last article, Arni Hinrikkson’s brief survey of Haldor Kiljan Laxness’s work seen from a postcolonial point of view – the reader is offered a number of very wide-ranging interpretations of the conference theme that cross the borderlines of Australian-Asian scenarios and lead to the final section “Cultural Change: European and Canadian Perspectives,” a slightly mixed bag of contributions. Perhaps the criterion of assembling here scholarly voices from outside Asia and Australia determined the editors’ decision, with Sue Ballyn’s and Isabel Alonso-Breto’s presentations, thereby pointing at the important role of Australian Studies in Europe and in particular at the University of Barcelona in Spain.

The interdisciplinary character of the present collection – which compares with that of the previous volumes – confirms the Association’s important role in bringing together Australian and Asian scholars across the boundaries of their respective disciplines, with literature not necessarily playing first fiddle. Indeed, only every third essay turns to mainly Australian or hyphenated Australian-Sri-Lankan, respectively Canadian-Sri Lankan novels. On a more theoretical level Vijayasree Chaganti asks whether Salman Rushdie has broken new ideological ground in his post-2001 novels and the Sri Lankan-Canadian scholar Chelva Kanaganayakam questions the general neglect aesthetic inquiries have suffered under the postcolonial aegis of the last two or three decades. Though presenting his argument with no ready-made answer as to how such postcolonial concerns as “politics, gender, psychology, and the subaltern experience” may be balanced against questions of “how writers construct their worlds, what they draw on, and how they shape their material to the demands of different influences” (346), Kanaganayakam lays his finger perhaps not on a wound but on a neglected yet central agenda of literary studies. His anxiety to reconsider the practice of postcolonial studies may be taken as an invitation to the ASAA to voice more clearly its interest in this aspect of Austral-Asian studies in its forthcoming conferences.

The two editors are to be congratulated for again having done a great job in promoting the scholarly community’s concern about and understating of international cultural relations between Australia and Asia, and have been wonderfully supported by the Sri Lankan organising committee. Personally, I am looking forward to the next volume of essays based on the Hyderabad conference in December 2011.

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