

**Ruth Vanita, ed. *India and the World: Postcolonialism, Translation and Indian Literature* (Essays in Honour of Professor Harish Trivedi). New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2014. 275 pp. ISBN 978-93-82178-02-6.**

On the retirement of Professor Harish Trivedi, the noted Indian scholar of Indian and English literatures and cultures, a festschrift volume has been brought out comprising eighteen essays by scholars from across the world along with an appendix containing a biographical note on Harish Trivedi and a detailed year-wise list of his publications. Though well known for his academic diversity, Professor Trivedi has been particularly associated by his friends and colleagues with three fields, Postcolonial Studies, Comparative Literature and Translation Studies and Indian literature criticism – areas that are by no means independent of each other. The titular emphasis of the volume is as much on the transnational character of Professor Trivedi's engagement with the humanities in general and *sabhyta* (a disciplinary nomenclature which is etymologically rooted in the idea of cooperation and dialogic exchange) in particular, as on his cultural rootedness. It is this "postcolonial" passion for retaining one's subjective moorings and simultaneously reaching out, by ceaselessly translating the self, back and forth – a perennially incomplete project that has been the driving force of Professor Trivedi's academic life – that spills over the dyad of "India and the World," and approaches the more inclusive paradigm of "India in the World" and "World in India." Indeed, the last of the four sections (into which the eighteen articles have been organised) is titled "East in West, West in East."

The four sections comprise essays which are diverse in methodology and content, but aptly find their point of convergence in the areas close to Professor Trivedi's heart. Perhaps equally appropriately, quite a few articles deal with the first-hand experience of classroom teaching and problems and experimentations in the pedagogic domain. The first section, titled "Ways of Reading," consists of four essays by renowned scholars. "Reading Literature as a Critical Problem" by Zhang Longxi begins with the axiom that "Literature as the art of language is meant to be read and enjoyed" (7), laments the "disappearance of reading" (8) and claims, without sufficiently arguing for his case, and following Robert Alter's *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, that "the influential currents in criticism and literary theory since the 1960s first 'seemed to many full of promise and intellectual excitement,' but eventually all the great promise 'has turned to bitter ashes'" and that "critics and professors of literature have even developed 'an attitude sometimes approaching disdain for literature'" (8). Longxi, of course, concedes that "Returning to literature" means not a simple nostalgic return to some good old paradise without the corrupting influence of the theoretical and ideological god that failed, but "to rethink what has been

learned before and what has been found invalid and inadequate” (14). Isn't this one of the things that theory seeks to do? More importantly, the author here rather simplistically argues that “whatever [this return] is, it will certainly focus on the rereading of important literary works” and hopes that “by returning to great works of world literature we may achieve a revitalisation of literary studies ...” (15). Now, to raise the most obvious of several possible points, who decides what constitutes “important” or “great” “works of world literature?” Are there any universal criteria available for such judgements outside the much maligned realms of ideology, power and politics? Such questions, of course, are dangerously “theoretical.”

In fact, the second essay of the volume, “Teaching Literature Today,” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, raises precisely this point by drawing attention to “the premise that settled ways of dividing up the human sciences must today be thoroughly questioned” (17), which foregrounds an idea apparently discordant with the idea of simple pleasures of reading. Spivak contemplates on the present state of humanistic studies across the world at a time marked by a rapid movement towards commodification and corporatisation of everything human. The worst victims of this process are clearly not the urban academia, but the real producers of resources, the “subaltern.” And hence Spivak’s argument that “We must teach the children of the controllers of resources to think of it as epistemological and ethical healthcare for the society at large.... Without it the critical edge of culture slowly atrophies...” (17-18). She invokes Rabindranath Tagore’s celebrated essay on comparative literature, “Visvasahitya” (in her rendering “viswa sahitya” [28]) to show how the discourse of the “useless” in literature and other arts can act as a tool to counter the marauding politics of the “profitable.” Such a notion of the function of literature and criticism points towards a different way of reading from the one proposed in the first essay. The next essay, Tabish Khair’s “Myths of Storytelling: Transcendence and Exoticism,” takes issue with a certain orthodox strand of postcolonialism that simplistically valorises non-cerebral storytelling, “because it is seen as oral and subaltern, quite unconscious of the fact that it is also highly hegemonic” (41). Khair’s astute reading of this storytelling-as-postcolonial phenomenon, which is promoted and sustained by the politics of the global literature market, offers a criticism of this reality from generic and ideological points of view. On the first count, he asks: how would this passion for storytelling possibly deal with the experimental narrative spirit of the likes of “Proust, Joyce or Camus?” (37) The ideological objection against this phenomenon takes critical issue with the “exoticising,” and therefore otherising, politics of the global English literature market, dominated by the West. Khair invokes Emmanuel Levinas’s idea of “transcendence” of the self of its own limits, towards acknowledging the radical alterity of the “other” – which is fundamentally different from “exoticising” the other – to suggest a way out of this stereotype of the postcolonial for the

dominant Anglophone literary readership. The last essay of this section, Susan Bassnett's "In Praise of Rereading and Rewriting" has many qualities of the personal essay. Not only does it take off from a mention of her mutually enriching friendship with Professor Trivedi, it also deals substantially with an autobiographical enumeration of the history of her reading from childhood to the present, to prepare ground for a delightful exploration of the benefits of rereading and rewriting. Gradually it takes us into the enticing world of endless re-readings and revisioning of any particular text, that might remind us of Michel Foucault's idea of modern textuality that foregrounds the complex ways a text exists in the public domain, through its participation in a network of "rereadings" and "rewritings," through circulation, receptions, adaptations, translations and so on. Bassnett fittingly concludes her essay briefly reflecting upon the idea of translation as rereading.

The editor at this point moves on to the next section of the book, which is titled "Ways of Translating." Three of the four essays in this section deal with translation of poetry and one with "translation" of fiction into film. In the first of these four, "On Translating Bihāri's *Satsai*," Rupert Snell deals in some detail with his experience of going through the daunting task of translating the seventeenth century poet Bihari poet Bihārīlāl or Bihāridās's *Satsai*, a "Braj Bhāsā poetic text in the venerable *Saptasati* tradition of Sanskrit and Prakrit: a collection of some 700 independent couplets [*dohās*] on interrelated themes" (58). In the process, the author also talks about the strengths and weaknesses of the existing translations of the text. Acknowledging that the project of translation of such a culturally loaded and structurally rich text is a "doomed process" (72), he seeks to draw "consolation" from the wealth of "rereading" that the translator discovers in the process, for "the doomed process of 'taking across' offers new ways of appreciating the poem itself" (72). David Damrosch's "What Could a Message Mean to a Cloud?: Kalidasa Travels West" offers a wonderful debate between two sides of the coin that translation is, particularly translation into English of texts originating in a postcolonial culture. On the one hand, there is an assertion of "the value of studying the circulation of works around the world in [primarily English] translation," and on the other, the inevitable corollary of the process "of subsuming of the world's linguistic and cultural variety under the pallid imperial banner of global English" that emphasises the need to bypass cultural homogenisation through recourse to the original (75). The debate is familiar, and unending, and translation theorists, including Harish Trivedi, have extensively pondered over the pros and cons on both sides of the debate. Damrosch also contests the commonplace that an indigenous critical framework is the ideal – or, at any rate, the most suitable – grid through which one should approach a literary text belonging to that culture, for even critical and theoretical tools are products of specific historical contexts, and thus have their own ideological black spots. The necessity of

textualisation and contextualisation of theoretical and critical texts and concepts is often ignored today, when one revels in either blind valorisation or vilification of such tools. So Damrosch is for shedding light on a particular text from as many different critical, cultural and ideological angles as possible. For him, thus, “the *Meghaduta* can actually gain in translation through a creative interplay of different structural frame of reference” (77).

In the third essay of this section, “*Gitanjali* 100 Years on: A Reconfirmation,” William Radice demonstrates, through examples, a novel way of translating Tagore’s poems/song-texts of *Gitanjali*, one which he has already practised in a book earlier. Since these poems were meant by the poet to be set to music and sung, and not only to be read as poems, Radice argues, the best way to translate them would be to reproduce in them the structure of the song, including the refrains, formulaic patterns, the division into four parts and so on. In the process, he deals with three versions of the same “poem” – the available translation, Tagore’s own translation in the original manuscript, and his own translation in the “song”-mould. Apart from the fact that there are scopes for disagreement with Radice’s reading of the poems, there is a methodological problem. One cannot agree more with his contention that “once a poem is a song it is as difficult to imagine it not being a song as it is to imagine someone who is married as being unmarried again” (97). But you are then essentially aiming at translating the “married” version, of poetry and music, which is always problematic in the printed form, which tends to exclude the “language” of the performative art called music. Radice does not address this contentious aspect of inter-generic translation in his essay. Richard Allen’s essay on another form of cross-generic translation – from fiction to film – “Translating Transgression: Audiences and Endings in Books and Movies,” takes up the problem at the very outset. For apart from “accuracy and authenticity” of translation, what also interests him is to compare the two forms “in terms of the way the different mediums – like different languages – work within different socially formed conventions to create meaning” (118). Allen draws his conceptual grid from Frank Kermode’s *Sense of an Ending* and applies it to four “almost accidental individual film experiences,” and thus desists from constructing any “grand narrative” (121). However, the ending of an otherwise very interesting essay fails to live up to the promises it starts with.

The third section – “The Text and the World” – begins with Anannya Dasgupta’s article “Teaching the *Ghazal* in an American Classroom: Lessons in Creative Pedagogy” where the author shows how a creatively informed approach to the text in the classroom can generate a stronger discursive engagement with it. What is equally interesting is her self-critical positioning of even pedagogy in its context, for “nothing moves untransformed between cultures and geographies” (147). A pedagogic experiment which proved fruitful with her American class of twenty students, may not be equally productive in an

Indian group comprising, in any modest estimate, fifty-odd students. Frances W. Pritchett approaches *Ghazal* from a very different perspective in “‘The Straw that I Took in my Teeth’: Of Lovers, Beloveds, and Charges of Sexism in the Urdu *Ghazal*” where he makes a close reading of the generic conventions of the *Ghazal* form and offers to defend it against the familiar charges of sexism. While the first part of the project is beautifully carried out, Pritchett’s endeavour vis-à-vis the second part is not very convincing. The strongest argument she makes for her case is that the *Ghazal* “contains no real men and women, but only the lovers and beloveds and rivals and advisors and other stylized characters who are needed for the great ‘passion-play’ of the *ghazal* world” (157). Now, no artistic work, or genre, contains “real men and women,” as it re-produces reality in an overdetermined fashion, and yet locates itself firmly within the available ideological milieu, by way of endorsement, contestation or subversion. Walter Goebel quite admirably problematizes Franco Moretti’s notion of the novel as a “planetary genre” in his “Planetary Novels and Literary Evolution” through his theoretically nuanced arguments. His close reading of two “postcolonial” novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *The White Tiger* helps him further bolster his position by arguing for a replacement of Moretti’s Eurocentric grand narrative with a more pluralistic vision of “various kinds of world narratives and dialogic exchanges between cultures, languages and world views” (173). Evelyne Hanquart-Turner’s exploration of the politics of space and territoriality in the postcolonial agenda and the postcolonial novel in her close reading of Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot* is interesting, as is the editor’s own contribution to the collection, “Hymn to the Intellect: A Reading of the *Hanuman Chalisa*.” In fact, this is the only article in the volume on a “popular” cultural text without which the postcolonial engagement with the indigenous remains incomplete. Vanita treats Hanuman in this text as “a symbol of intellect” and proposes to read the text at a symbolic plane to counter some of its existing pejorative readings.

The fourth and final discursive section of the volume comprises five contributions. Loredana Polezzi’s treatment of two Indian travelogues in her essay “A Double Test of India: The Parallel Travels of Alberto Moravia and Pier Paolo Pasolini” posits these works within the long history of orientalist travelogues in Italy, and goes on to show, in a beautifully structured endeavour, how, “In their different yet parallel ways, Pasolini and Moravia sought answers to [some perceived] contradictions [about Indian culture]. And in different though also parallel ways, they both failed to find them, eventually declaring their intellectual and emotional defeat in the face of ‘India’” (205). India, and then Africa, Polezzi argues, was reduced by these great artists to mere prototypes of the “Third World” (216-17). “Return to Memphis” is a small personal essay where Robert J.C. Young revisits his personal history to excavate the moment of his unconscious initiation into “the postcolonial” (222). Gerhard

Stilz introduces his ten beautiful Indian sketches, used between articles in this volume, in “My Indian Sketches.” The self-conscious apologia in the last paragraph provides us with an interesting angle to his contribution: “Some of [the sketches] might be interpreted as clear instances of a late colonial gaze, but I would like to assure readers that they are guided by a life-long sympathy and respect for India’s civilizations” (231). The sketches, thus, add more than an aesthetic appeal to the volume. Stephanos Stephanides’s poetic tribute “for Harish and Susan,” “sublime teachers” (233, 235), also enhances this pleasing quality of the book. In the last article of the volume, David Dabydeen produces a brilliant critical-historical sketch of the “West Indian Writers in Britain.” This brings the circle to its full, with a book that started with Longxi’s argument for return to apolitical, pleasurable reading, ending with these sentences from Dabydeen that echoes Theodor Adorno:

And yet the question persists: is what remains of the dreadful history its beautiful expression? Can the Holocaust ever be a resource for art? A few centuries hence will we have forgotten the tragedy as just another disaster and marvel instead at the aesthetics of the poem? Or to put it in a different context, when Ozymandias topples into the oblivion of desert sands, is all that remains the sculptor’s gift in shaping the tyrant’s cruel face? (252)

An added advantage of the book is the penultimate section which makes available to the reader a detailed publication list of Professor Trivedi. From a brief but useful Introduction to a thoughtful arrangement of articles, the editor can be congratulated for a job well done. However, she would have done better to mind a few small things. For example, some articles carry a “Works Cited” list, while most others do not. Unlike any other article in the volume, Walter Goebel’s one starts with a long italicised passage that in all probability is a synopsis of his article, retained by mistake (160). In the same essay, Michael Denning turns into “Dennis” in the same paragraph (161). A comma has been replaced by a full stop (“At farewells” [28]) and the initial “r” of “remember” is missing (29) in Spivak’s article. Lord Byron seems to have died only recently, in 1941 (53). Since one of Professor Trivedi’s areas of interest has been Modern British and American Literature, one or two articles pertaining to this field could have added to the festschrift quality of the volume. But all in all, the volume succeeds in bringing together a series of interesting contributions from established as well as younger scholars who address variegated issues from within diverse frameworks, with a warm academic comradeship with Professor Harish Trivedi serving as the common intellectual impetus.

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