

Dieter Riemenschneider, *Essays on Indian Writing in English: Twice-Born or Cosmopolitan Literature?* Foreword by Harish Trivedi. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2016. 199 pp. ISBN 978-81-316-0814-2.¹

Professor Dieter Riemenschneider has already established his reputation as a bibliographer with *The Reception of the Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934-2004* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2005) and *Postcolonial Theory: The Emergence of a Critical Discourse: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography* (Jaipur: Rawat, 2004). He came to India for the first time to teach German at Panjab University, Chandigarh, and Delhi University, 1963-1966. After completing his Ph.D. on “The Modern Indian Novel in English” (1971), he served as Professor of Commonwealth Literature/English Language Literatures at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University, Frankfurt, Germany from 1971 to 1999, where he set up a research and teaching centre, New Literatures and Cultures in English (NELK) in 1993. He is the author of one of the earliest studies of Mulk Raj Anand – his monograph, *An Idea of Man in Mulk Raj Anand*, was published in 1967. In the last fifty years, he has published more than a hundred papers on Indian Writing in English, its reception in Germany, and Postcolonial Literature; he has selected fifteen of them in *Essays on Indian Writing in English*.

The range of topics is remarkable. The first essay, “Early Critics of Indo-English Novelists: Meenakshi Mukherjee and M.K. Naik” which appeared in 1974, is the first of three essays which “criticize the critic.” Though Riemenschneider refers to it (in his preface) as “almost slap-dash remarks on early Indian critical studies of the novel,” it is a landmark in Indian English literary criticism, as it was published at a time when there were very few critical studies, and no evaluations of the secondary material. “Marginalizing the Centre – Centring the Periphery: The Critical Debate on ‘Indian’ Literature in English” examines the various approaches to Indian English Literature twenty years later. The width of Riemenschneider’s reading is remarkable – from K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar to Makarand Paranjape and Feroza F. Jussawalla, including P. Lal, David McCutcheon, and C.D. Narasimhaiah-led critics like C.N. Ramachandra who laid stress on the importance of Sanskrit poetics. Critics from outside India – John Oliver Perry, Klaus Börner, Syd Harrex, Guy Amirthanayagam and the *Empire Writes Back* Australian team (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin) – are also taken into account. “‘The Train has Moved On’: R.K. Narayan’s *The Guide* and Literary History” traces the critical responses to R.K. Narayan’s work; there are more studies of this Sahitya Akademi Award winning novel than of all his other works put together. *The Reception of the Indian Novel in English: Its Critical Discourse 1934-2004* lists about 600 authors writing about R.K. Narayan’s work;

¹ German edition: *Gentle Round the Curves: Selected Essays on Indian Writing in English*. Foreword by Harish Trivedi. Kronberg im Taunus: tranzlit, 2016. ISBN 978-3-9815116-1-1.

this article reveals how younger critics, writing in the 1990's and later, devote more attention to problems of identity and postcolonialism. It is a pity that Ranga Rao's *R.K. Narayan* (published in the Sahitya Akademi's "Makers of Indian Literature Series" in 2004) is not included (probably it appeared too late), because he has an entirely new approach to Narayan's work – he analyses it in terms of the three *gunas* (*sattva, rajas and tamas*) of Hindu philosophy.

Some essays are devoted to individual works and authors. "Human Labour and Alienation: Mulk Raj Anand's Novels" reveals how the worker's loss of control over his labour leads to self-alienation in novels like *Coolie, Untouchable, Two Leaves a Bud* and *The Village*. Most studies of Raja Rao focus on his philosophy; "Nature and Landscape: An Evolutionary Psychological Analysis of Raja Rao's Writing" shows how the novelist has moved from the simple nature descriptions of his first novel *Kanthapura* to representations of landscape involving his philosophical perspective. Riemenschneider's essay on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is based on extensive reading of books about Kerala, like Meena Alexander's autobiography *Fault Lines*, the first part of Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a translation of Thakazhi's Malayalam novel *Chemmeen* and Kamala Das's stories and poems. He concludes that "it does not seem far-fetched to suggest that independent-minded women writers... have been concerned with the fate especially of the young woman, and her relationship to society – or to return to Roy's phrase, to the 'love laws' decreed in the past" (77).

One of the most enlightening papers in the collection is "History and the Individual," a study of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, two novels which are seldom brought together. "Both writers do not confine themselves to a retelling of history through the portrayal of individual characters; rather, by interrelating character and event they reveal their deep interest in the central epistemological category of recollection, the category which constitutes on the one hand the aesthetic genres of the autobiography and the biography, and on the other hand the academic discipline of history" (38). The article "Retrieving Human Rights: Indra Sinha's Novel *Animal's People* and Critical Cosmopolitanism" introduces a new concept – critical cosmopolitanism. Riemenschneider places this novel about the Bhopal gas tragedy of 3 December 1984 in the tradition of novels about the dispossessed. He draws attention to a neglected work, Meher Pestonji's *Sadak Chhap*, which presents the plight of street children.

Some essays are devoted to broad trends in Indian English Literature. "The *New Poets' Manifesto*" (1977) is about P. Lal and Indian English poetry of the period 1950-1975. Many short stories by women were published in the nineteen-seventies, most of them by P. Lal's Writers Workshop. "Indian Women Writing in English: A Brief Look at the Short Stories of the 1970s and Early 1980s" examines short story collections by Padma Hejmadi, Shashi Deshpande, Sunita Jain, Raji Narasimhan, Jai Nimbkar, Malathi Rao, Vasantha Ravindran, Vera

Sharma and Indu Suryanarayan. The short stories show that “Woman now insists on her right to reject a life which is prescribed by a male-dominated, anti-individual society” (53). The main themes are “the man-woman relationship, the experiences of a young girl or a young woman, the assertion of the older woman, her loneliness and isolation and the ostracism woman is forced to accept in a caste-and class-ridden society” (54). Another essay, “Crossing National Borders: The Indian English Novel since the 1990s” argues that “both events and characters in these works are to be placed within a larger than an Indian referential frame” (108), by analysing works like Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown*, Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music* and Kiran Nagarkar’s *God’s Little Soldier*.

The book is not confined to Indian Writing in English, it takes into account other texts of New Literatures in English. “Global Fantasy – Glocal Imagination: The New Literatures in English and their Fantastic Imaginations” (2005) shows how many writers like Boman Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Mistress of Spices*), Amitav Ghose (*The Calcutta Chromosome*), Wilson Harris (*Palace of the Peacocks*), Witi Ihimaera, Mukul Kesavan and Robert Sullivan use fantasy. He asks, “Is it through fantasy writing, then, that *the tangible glocality of culture* [sic] is given more adequate literary representation than the realist literary discourse can achieve?” (98). “Glocality and Its (Dis)Contents: The Future of English Language Literatures Studies” (2009) discusses the importance of English Language Literatures as an academic discipline in the twenty-first century. “The Persistence and Creation of Internal Borders: India in Aotearoa New Zealand” is about Indians settled there. He points out that “the historical, social, linguistic, generational, educational, gender and religious diversity as well as the differing geographical/national backgrounds of Indians in New Zealand necessitates reflections on the understanding of the terms ‘diaspora’ and ‘community’ since Indian people in New Zealand are closely linked with these variables” (158). The article also presents an analysis of the novel *Six Yards* and a collection of plays by Indian immigrants.

“Translating Cultures: Pictorial and Literary Representations of India in William Hodges’ Paintings and Travel Book” looks at issues of colonisation from an entirely different angle. Riemenschneider and his wife, the poet Jan Kemp, lived for many years in New Zealand. The spectacular scenery led to his interest in the genre of landscape painting, and he was particularly fascinated by the work of William Hodges (1744-97), a painter commissioned to accompany James Cook on his second voyage to New Zealand. After Hodges returned to England, Warren Hastings, the Governor-General, asked him to come to India, and he was here from 1779 to 1785. Riemenschneider argues that “Hodges’s writings and paintings testify to a genuine eagerness to acquire knowledge of the unknown” (171). His work is not in the spirit of Edward Said’s “Orientalism”; Hodges was “motivated by discovering India for himself and his countrymen” (171). The article has reproductions of six of his paintings, four of them of Indian scenes.

As Harish Trivedi points out in his “Foreword,” Dieter Riemenschneider “is as assiduous a close reader of the texts as he is a bibliographer, and there is a quiet, undemonstrative firmness about his literary judgement” (viii). The clarity of his writing – he never takes recourse to jargon adds to the value of the book. Riemenschneider has clearly mentioned the “sources” – where and when these articles were first published. This provides a kind of map of the important developments in Indian English literature. Every article makes one marvel at his wide reading, which is not confined to literary texts: books as diverse as the British geographer Jay Appleton (*The Symbolism of Habitat*), Roda Ahluwalia’s *Rajput Painting*, Suroopa Mukherjee’s *Surviving Bhopal* and Robert Cohen’s anthology *Theories of Migration* contribute to the richness of his critical writing. The reproductions of photographs – many of them taken by Riemenschneider himself – make the book more interesting and lively. It would be good if he publishes one more such collection – his literary criticism is too valuable to remain scattered in journals and out-of-print books.

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