

**Srideep Mukherjee, ed. *Living the Postcolonial: Indian Literature in Perspective*. Kolkata: Gangchil, 2016. 487 pp. ISBN 978-93-84002-93-0.**

Since the Bandung Conference of 1955, when, according to Robert J.C. Young, twenty-nine newly independent countries of Asia and Africa united to initiate a “non-aligned movement,” postcolonialism began its journey as a “self-conscious political philosophy” (17). The journey of postcolonialism, since its inception, has been highly uneven, with most of the intellectuals showing complete faith in its philosophy, while some have expressed their dissent. Among the many intellectual dissenters, Rumina Sethi in her book *The Politics of Postcolonialism: Empire, Nation and Resistance* (2011), urges the postcolonial critics to make “postcolonial studies” more relevant to the contemporary scenario by linking it with “the voice of the people” and theorising “about movements against globalization, rather than becoming part of its grand design” (26). In the light of such complex debates regarding the negotiations of postcolonial theory with different varieties of literature, Srideep Mukherjee’s edited book, *Living the Postcolonial: Indian Literature in Perspective* (2016) is a useful addition to the existing corpus of postcolonial studies. Mukherjee’s concern is limited to the area of Indian literature and he has quite intelligently dealt with the different factors that have changed the course of Indian literature in post-colonial India. In the introductory section of the book, he refers to a post of Chetan Bhagat which, as he states, had motivated him to take up a project on Indian literature:

I crossed my street, they asked my caste  
Crossed my district, they asked my religion  
Crossed my state, they asked my native language  
And I became an Indian only after I crossed my country!!!  
(qtd. in Mukerjee 15)

This post of Chetan Bhagat which foregrounds the idea of “multiple and conflicting identities” captures the spirit of Indianness, which is “pervasive to the core of our community” (16). Mukherjee claims that this post of Bhagat has provided him the necessary inspiration for editing this book.

In the first section of the “Introduction,” Mukherjee has dealt with the idea of nation building, which he believes is integrally connected to the making of Indian literature. The anti-colonial struggle in the pre-independence period, Nehru’s famous speech “Tryst with Destiny” on the day of Independence and then the Partition which split the whole nation into two – all these events/phases related to the Indian history prove that “nation building is a continuous project” (18). Indian Literature has addressed issues related to nation building in various ways. When “a ‘historic’ moment subsides after a time,” Mukherjee opines, “the residual issues emerge as discursive subjects in social science and humanities”

(19). Postcolonial Indian Literature, according to him, is a “retrospective of the contexts of this nation building” (19). To exemplify this interface between literature and nation building, he, quite interestingly, refers to the history of different Indian adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when first few adaptations of *Macbeth* appeared in the Indian scenario, this play has been used by the Indian dramatists to sensitise the native audience regarding the contemporary national politics and governance:

The point one is trying to make is that anti-colonial, postcolonial or neocolonial – whatever the milieu, they all converge in reading back and forth through the lens of cultural history with the motif of *Macbeth* as a play that variously deals with the implications of power politics in India. (23-24)

The second section of the “Introduction” deals with the complex debates connected with the issue of canon formation. The editor elucidates the ways in which different writers belonging to the canon of Indian Writing in English (IWE) have enriched Indian Literature. In fact, he explains that he has chosen to use the nomenclature of “Indian Literature” in the title of this book to include all kinds of literatures that come under the broad category of Indian Literature. His approach is therefore inclusive and this is clearly stated in the following declaration, “Questions of popularity, spread and outreach, or reception may figure in politics of canon formation, but a volume like this one basically aims at the matrices of inclusivity” (37-38). In the third and the final section of the “Introduction,” Mukherjee has provided a brief outline of the essays included in the different sections of the book. The introductory section of the book is intellectually very stimulating because it urges the readers to understand Indian literature from different viewpoints.

The anthology is divided into five sections. The first section titled, “Indian Writing in English: Its Locations” has four essays. These essays make an attempt to read the canon of Indian Writing in English from four different perspectives. In the first essay, “Theorizing Indian Writing in English: Identities, Politics and Representation,” Sukalpa Bhattacharjee has intensively studied the canon of Indian Writing in English by primarily focusing on its evolution and its appropriation in the Indian academia. How has Indian Writing in English adapted itself to the changing political and ideological shifts within the nation? How has the representation of Indian Writing in English changed in the academia with the onset of globalisation? Bhattacharjee believes that the position of Indian Writing in English has remarkably shifted from being a typical “postcolonial genre” to becoming a “critique of postcolonial” (52). In the second essay, “Indian English Literature: Canons in Evolution,” Himadri Lahiri has tried to trace the journey of Indian English Literature from the perspective of syllabus framing. During the mid-1970s and the 1980s, the Indian academia, as Lahiri explains, was sceptical

about the usefulness of a course in Indian English Literature. But now the perspective of the syllabus framers in higher educational institutes has changed. Lahiri has meticulously analysed the factors which contributed to the change in attitude of the Indian academia towards Indian English Literature in the 1990s. The syllabus framers in Indian academia, as Lahiri has succinctly pointed out, are confused regarding the incorporation of Indian diasporic texts and translated texts in the course of Indian English Literature.

In the third essay, “Indian Writing in English, Its Literary History and the North East: An Appraisal,” Banibrata Mahanta focuses on the problematic relationship between the history of Indian Writing in English and Literature of the North-East region of India. Different historical records of Indian Writing in English have attempted to marginalise the importance of the Literature of the North-East region. This phenomenon, as Mahanta observes, is the outcome of territorial and cultural politics, because the region of the North-East is geographically separated from the mainland of India and also the people living in this region are “culturally” and “racially” different from the people of the mainland (116). The last essay in this section, “Rethinking Indian Writing in English in the Post-Global Age,” by Debamitra Kar situates the whole discussion on Indian Writing in English in the post-globalisation era, when, according to Kar, Indian English literary texts seem to be politically and culturally informed by the trends of this era. In the post-global scenario, the canon of Indian Writing in English, as Kar notes, has negotiated with the market forces to create space for the inclusion of certain literary texts that are popular in the world market and are also very keen to produce a particular ideological notion of Indianness. Contrary to these texts, there are certain other texts “written with specific reference to the conflict situation in Kashmir, or the North-East, particularly the ones that reflect the issues of human rights violation are hardly represented in the canon” (144-145). The Indian academia in collaboration with the publishing industry, as Kar observes, has promoted “a certain kind of literature” that has enjoyed “the benefit of wider distribution,” and in doing so, it has rejected those “works that raises questions regarding sectarian politics and the role of the State, ethnic violence, gender issues, problematic identity of the minorities of forced displacement within the country” (144).

The second section of this book deals with the genre of Indian English Novel and it also makes an attempt to read the evolution of this genre through the lens of nation writing. Among the five essays in this section, two are quite interesting. One is Albeena Shakil’s essay titled, “The Indian English Novel Beyond Authenticity.” In the first part of her essay, Albeena Shakil presents a historical overview of the evolution of Indian English Novel. The issue of authenticity is taken up in the next section of the essay where she questions the representation of India in the literary texts written by the authors settled in diasporic locations: “Do they write back to India from elsewhere, or do they

represent India to the world? Are they elites who write in English, or does the pre-given elitism of English language accord them underserved pre-eminence?" (162). Such questions haunt the mind of Indian critics who have given different explanations regarding this contentious debate on authenticity. Tajuddin Ahmed's essay presents a critical reading of Zeenuth Futehally's novel *Zobra*. Futehally is an Indian Muslim woman novelist and *Zobra* is probably the first novel written in English by an Indian woman. This novel captures the life of an upper-class Muslim woman, Zohra, who represents the marginalised voice of the Muslim women in the nationalist discourse. Ahmed interprets the character of Zohra from the perspective of Partha Chatterjee's notion of "new woman," "the 'bhadrāmohila' of the nationalist discourse" (192-93).

In the third section of this anthology, the emphasis is on Indian English Poetry. Nandini Sahu's essay reads the thematically rich Odia poems of Sachi Rautroy. Rautroy's poems depict the village life, which, as Sahu interprets, is meaningfully related to the idea of nation. The "Rajya" and the "Nadu" dialectics can be located in Rautroy's poems and his concept of village presents a "seminal understanding of the existential issues" (249). Jyotirmoy Prodhani deals with the different features of Rajbanshi poetry, which is a typical variety of Indian Poetry that wants to reclaim its past ethnic identity by revoking its cultural roots. The Rajbanshi poets are concerned about their community's identity and their poems are, according to Prodhani, about "an urgency to define and defend the collective self" (276). Debasri Basu's essay explores the aspect of unsentimental pathos in Eunice de Souza's poems. She feels that de Souza's poetry captures the lives of such women who "oscillate between the two extremes of self-assertion and compliance in a male dominated society, invariably leading to mental conflicts and frustrations" (312).

The fourth section of this book is based on the idea of subalternity. Three essays explore the aspect of subalternity in three different genres. Stuti Kare's deconstructive reading of Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" examines the role of creative writers in re-writing mythic stories of the past. Nabanita Biswas studies Ashok Mitra's *Calcutta Diary* which discusses the oppressive nature of state during the time of National Emergency. Pinaki De's essay, "I See the Promised Land: Patua Tradition and the (Re)Location of its Margins," is very interesting as it makes an attempt to read the illustrations in the graphic novel from the perspective of "patua" tradition. De's analysis helps us to understand the "creative global collaboration that juxtaposes certain traditional aesthetic practices with modern bookmaking methodologies" (368).

The fifth section addresses the significance of Dalit literature and politics in the canon of Indian writing in English. Sudev Pratim Basu looks at three Dalit texts: *Karukku*, *Vanmam* and *Joothan* through the lens of urban spatiality. The second essay in this section presents an interesting study of Bengali Dalit movement by focusing on Manohar Mouli Biswas's life writings. In this essay,

Jaydeep Sarangi has meticulously traced the history of Bengali Dalit movement. The final section of the book presents three essays that deal with the genre of Indian Drama and its representation of “different worlds.” The first essay in this section is basically a study of Indian theatre from the perspective of playwrights like Badal Sircar, Heisnam Kanhailal and Safdar Hashmi, who are representatives of an “alternative theatre movement in India” (435). This essay by Subhendu Sarkar traces the element of protest in these playwrights, who, through their plays, attempted to foreground the plight of the common man. While Shukla Chatterjee’s essay analyses the image of “New Woman” in Tendulkar’s *Encounter in Umbugland*, Sutanuka Ghosh Roy reads Mahasweta Devi’s *Bayen* through the lens of gendered subalternity.

Thus, all the sections in the book are connected to the idea of “Postcolonial Living.” The selection of essays in a volume like this is a very important task. Though the sections have been divided carefully by the editor, keeping in mind the issues/genres that are relevant to the field of postcolonial Indian literature, there are certain other aspects that have not been considered. I would like to refer to certain emerging areas mentioned by Dieter Riemenschneider in his book, *Essays on Indian Writing in English: Twice Born or Cosmopolitan Literature?* (2016). Riemenschneider discusses the contemporary trends in Indian English Writing that have to a large extent broadened the horizon of the canon. Certain new kinds of literatures/area studies like, Partition literature, Diasporic literature, literature dealing with the issue of animal rights, literature dealing with environmental issues, have become prominent in the contemporary scenario. His book introduces these new literatures/area studies and therefore it gives an updated idea of Indian literature. This book, unlike Riemenschneider’s book, does not include essays that are more contemporary to our sense of “Postcolonial Living.” Mukherjee’s claim to inclusiveness (as stated in the introductory section) suffers due to the absence of some major areas of concern in Indian literature. The book is very well edited, the production quality is good, but the cover design could have been better. This book will be useful for the students and research scholars interested in the development of Indian writing in English in the postcolonial period.

### Works Cited

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