Marta Dvorak, *The Faces of Carnival in Anita Desai’s In Custody*

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REFERENCES


Marta Dvorak’s The Faces of Carnival in Anita Desai’s In Custody gives a powerful, original reading of Anita Desai’s novel. Dvorak’s superb intertextual and metatextual investigation is all the more convincing for being couched in clear, well-written sentences, endowed with a momentum of their own. Although the reader senses that Dvorak is well-versed in post-colonial culture and criticism, she strays from expected discourse, merely using Homi Bhabha, for instance, as a tutelary guide for a close textual journey which prefers stylistic analysis and the mapping of motifs to general post-colonial statements. One might quote many such subtle detailed studies, such as, for instance, the “Joycean seriation of gerunds” (119) connoting sounds, or the delightful “strategy of counter-expectation” (72) based on repetition and contrast, or the way a comparison is used to conflate “diners and dinners, cannibals and carrion-eaters” (88). But The Faces of Carnival in Anita Desai’s In Custody does not simply pinpoint key stylistic strategies; it also offers a coherent reading as a whole, casting light on the ironic dimension of Desai’s text, from carnivalesque impulse to Menippean satire and parody. Marta Dvorak begins by tackling the difficult question of authenticity and authorization, a question which concerns all hybrid fiction and all Indian writers who, like Rushdie, Roy, or Desai, choose to write fiction in English rather than in an Indian language. Dvorak recalls that Desai has been blamed for depicting India through the filter of a foreign gaze. She counters such accusations by proving valuable information about Desai’s linguistic background as well as about Hindi and Urdu culture, but also by offering an original reading of the novel which focuses on ironic and parodic patterns which deliberately twist ghostly intertexts, not only Tagore or the Bhagavad Gita but
also, more daringly, Arthur Miller, Chekhov or T.S. Eliot. Analysis is thus both textual with its fine stylistic analyses of specific passages, and reader-oriented, raising questions of identification, challenging the function of irony and mimicry as well as of intertextual awareness.

Drawing on Bakhtin’s dialogic analysis of carnivalesque strategies of displacement, Marta Dvorak offers an extremely convincing study of the motif of food as a cultural marker in the novel, foregrounding ritual distinctions between raw food and cooked food, pollution, transgression, the violation of taboos, paying attention to (un)touchable food, and to the function of food and commensality as the basis of social structures. But Dvorak is also keen to differentiate Desai’s humour and her taste for the grotesque from the carnival’s unleashed laughter or Rushdie’s jubilation. Dvorak sees Desai’s bestiary and meat motifs as paradigms of predation, a political indictment of a society which has gone awry. Moreover, she unravels a more complex intertext to buttress her argument: she reads the feast motif in the tradition of romance-epics, and contends that Desai’s *In Custody* is meant to be read as an allegory, in the manner of Spenser, Dante, and above all Chaucer. She thus identifies Nur as a comic character, much in the manner of the Vice of Morality Plays, accounting for his foul, antisocial language, for the disappointment of Deven, the helpless focalizer, and for ominous details such as Deven’s dark ascent towards Nur’s apartment, a parody of the soul’s ascent towards God. For Dvorak, “allegory crosses the frontiers of culture more easily than fiction does” (119), hence her syncretic reading, blending the notion of mask and performance inherited from Morality Plays with the Indian tradition of dancing with masks. The reader is to look beyond the tradition of campus novels, and appraise farce and harlequinade as a question of genre. In her final section entitled “Transmogrification, transtextuality and transculturalism”, Dvorak probes into complex strategies of intertextual deflation, contrasting for instance *Death of a Salesman* and *In Custody*, and showing that the ending builds up then breaks a tragic pattern, replacing “the tragic hero with a bungler”. Dvorak’s book thus offers a personal reading and interpretation of Desai’s text. The author also dwells on the transmutation of the Romantic intertext, using Byron’s *Don Juan* or Keats’s *La Belle Dame sans Merci* as key intertexts, raising questions of assimilation and acculturation. Again, Dvorak’s text has a momentum of its own as she suggests that it is Keats’s “textualized orality” which appeals to Nur, unless it is his “pleasure thermometer”, “his trademark series of increasing intensities” (146). It is this weaving and unweaving of cultural references which fascinates Dvorak, as she unravels the way in which Desai portrays Indian culture, drawing on Indian philosophy and literature, but also on western literature and structural motifs, displaying “the author’s reconfigured paradigms of literary carnival and spectacle” (164). This book should appeal to students and teachers alike, as well as to all readers of Desai in particular and Indian fiction in general.
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Catherine LANONE is a professor at the University of Toulouse 2. She is the author of several books, on E.M. Forster, Emily Brontë, and Graham Greene. She has also written articles on Arundhati Roy, Jane Urquhart and Margaret Atwood. She is currently working on John Franklin’s journals and British and Canadian literary representations of the Franklin expeditions.