
Anne Castaing, Lise Guilhamon & Laetitia Zecchini
(eds.), *La modernité littéraire indienne : Perspectives
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Anne Castaing, Lise Guilhamon & Laetitia Zecchini (eds.), *La modernité littéraire indienne : Perspectives postcoloniales* (The Modernity of Indian Literature: Postcolonial Perspectives), Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009, 253 p. ISBN 978-2-7535-0898-9.

Catherine Servan-Schreiber

[1] On the occasion of the launching of the French translation of Homi Bhabha's essay, *The Location of Culture* (1994) (*Les lieux de la culture*), the journalist Jean Birnbaum sharply criticized postcolonial studies in France for their late and 'muddled' start and the more narrow approach compared to the 'Anglo-Saxon' school (*Le Monde*, 23 March 2007). Birnbaum's criticism appears doubly unfounded: not only he fails to recognize the originality of French studies in this field of scholarship, he completely underestimates or ignores the new generation of French scholars working on contemporary Indian literature.

[2] The book under review takes as its starting point the fact that novelists of the Indian diaspora writing in English have monopolized attention, while sources written in *deshi*, India's regional languages, have remained in relative obscurity. Three young literary critics and scholars of English and Hindi literature have taken it upon themselves to remedy this imbalance. Their goal is to call attention to this largely unknown literature, to advance a concept that involves thinking of the world in terms of relationships, and to define cultural specificities while always keeping in mind the dialogue and interrelations that underlie history, identity and literature.

[3] Conceived as a collaborative effort between scholars - India specialists and language professors - and Indian writers, the construction of the book is in itself quite original. Not only does this innovative volume offer an analysis of contemporary Indian literature, through the translation of select passages, it explores theoretical constructs originating from the Indian writers themselves. Each section of the book complements and refers to other sections, creating a

stimulating and gratifying interactive reading experience. The dynamics and originality of the approach derive from de-compartmentalizing various types of literature: fiction, non-fiction, essays, autobiographies and scholarly analyses, giving expression to a postcolonial perspective. From a thematic point of view, the trauma of Partition that inaugurated the postcolonial era runs like a unifying thread throughout the book. In order to explore the connections between literature, history, identity and even creativity, the debate is analyzed from three points of view: literary modernity rooted in India's mythical traditions (Part I), writing or rewriting colonial and communal violence (Part II) and a critical exploration of otherness and diversity (Part III).

[4] In order to explore the intertextual dimension of contemporary Indian literature, Laetitia Zecchini focuses on Arun Kolatkar's poem, *Sarpa Satra (The Snake Sacrifice)*, which re-writes and subverts the initial sacrificial episode of the *Mahabharata*. This long text, which is a product of multiple traditions, both oral and written, presents a transgressive contemporary version of the great epic poem and reveals that the sanitization of language conceals and neutralizes the violence of the world. Here *The Snake Sacrifice* is reinserted into its specific cultural and political context: the aggressive Hindu nationalist strategy in India, that strives to restore an Indian or Hindu essence by 'cleansing' culture and language of all its heterodox or so-called 'foreign' elements.

[5] From the point of view of both classical historiography and Subaltern Studies, Claudine Le Blanc's analysis reveals the way expressions of subjectivity can be seen as a form of modernity. She uses little known 'subaltern' sources of the oral tradition collected by John Faithfull Fleet (1847-1917), a revenue officer assigned to Northern Karnataka, and that he called 'popular ballads of the present century'. Published in the Orientalist journal *The Indian Antiquary*, these compositions are among the few remaining examples of popular literature dealing with local historical events. They provide a valuable source of information for analyzing the response of rural populations to colonization.

[6] In her contribution, Anne Castaing undertakes to identify the great narratives produced by literature, most notably by some 'emblematic' novels, in order to ascertain how they both support and expand 'National Histories'. In doing so, she questions the ability of fiction to allow the expression of history: how can narratives that 'organize' and 'make sense' still express History's complexity? In this regard, K.B. Vaid's novel *Guzrâ huâ zamanâ (Past time, 1981)* proposes an interesting alternative: through polyphony, arising from various and sometimes

contradictory discourses, the novel promotes the popular voice so often obscured by 'National Histories'. This is part of a larger project that involves questioning the historiographical implications of the numerous fictional narratives of the Partition, a major event in the recent history of the Indian subcontinent, and analyzing their role in the creation of a mythology of the events and their context, a 'great narrative'.

[7] Keeping in mind the importance of French thought, notably Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida for (respectively) Edward Saïd, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, and analyzing the contribution of *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha, Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas replaces these 'Commonwealth studies' in the contemporary globalizing context. She engages with the question of language and hybridity, and introduces the question of translation: 'One of the great concerns of contemporary postcolonial theory is thus this promotion of the marginal. How to preserve cultural diversity while refusing to admit the implicit power relationship in the polarization between the margins and the mainstream?' (Baneth-Nouailhetas 2006: 62).¹ Far from seeking to simplistically reverse doctrinal power relations, postcolonial theories highlight the complexities of discourse and enunciation in both colonial and subaltern narratives. Baneth-Nouailhetas' article attempts to illustrate the critical contribution of postcolonial theory by analyzing the ambiguities of narrative discourses on power in a selection of Rudyard Kipling's short stories.

[8] Lise Guilhamon's analysis of 'masala English' makes us aware that the English language is often tinged with 'strangeness' in Indian novels written in English, welcoming particular inflexions, turns of phrase and syntactic or morphological idiosyncrasies which seem to 'indianize it'. This linguistic adaptation, however, does not amount to a strict reproduction of English as it is spoken in India, a representation of Indian English just as there is an American or a British English. It is argued that the language in these novels might be more adequately described as 'masala English', *i.e.*, a poetical idiom that suggests, within the English text, the otherness of the Indian languages evoked within a fictional context.

[9] It appears obvious, reading the texts of this volume, that whatever theoretical questions may be raised within the field of postcolonial studies on contemporary Indian literature, and in the

¹ All translations of French in this review are mine.

interest of deepening the debate, vernacular sources must not be excluded. Various methods of diffusion of contemporary Indian texts co-exist and are reflected in teaching curricula in France. Since the 1980s, when Marie-Claire Van der Elst introduced the teaching of Indian literature in the English department at the University of Paris-IV and Anne-Cécile Padoux started translating R.K. Narayan's novels from English to French, this field of study has progressed significantly. In particular, this collective volume has taken to heart the manifesto signed by Annie Montaut, a linguist and professor of Hindi at INALCO, deploring the lack of attention given to literary works written in Indian languages, overshadowed by their 'Indo-English sister': 'We now give full attention to the 'inland' *deshi* productions. It has become necessary to translate Indian vernacular literature, which has so liberally proved its power and mastery of style, into French' (2005 : 1). Castaing, Guilhamon and Zecchini's work furthers recent French scholarship and has contributed to the dissemination of contemporary Indian literature in France. It follows in the wake of the volume edited by Annie Montaut, *Littérature et poétiques pluriculturelles en Asie du Sud* (2004), which emphasized among other aspects the aesthetic dimension of contemporary Indian literature.

[10] Currently we possess an impressive and growing body of contemporary Indian texts produced in vernacular languages and translated into French. From Hindi we can note: *Vie invisible* by Udayan Vajpeyi, translated by Franck André Jamme and the writer himself in 2000; *Un bonheur en lambeaux* by Nirmal Verma, translated by Annie Montaut in 2001; *La splendeur de Maya* by Krishna Baldev Vaid, translated by Annie Montaut in 2002; *Histoires de renaissance*, short-stories by Krishna Baldev Vaid, translated by Annie Montaut in 2002; *Un toit de tôle rouge* by Nirmal Verma, translated by Annie Montaut and François Auffret in 2004; *Tamas*, by Bisham Sahni translated from Hindi by Philippe Renaud in 2007; *Dans un pays tout plein d'histoires*, translated by Laetitia Zecchini and Annie Montaut in 2007. Among works in other languages: *Sangati (L'assemblée)*, a novel in Tamil translated by Josiane Racine in 2002; Ayappa Paniker's poems and *Les murs et autres histoires d'amour*, by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, translated from Malayalam by Dominique Vitalyos in 2007; *Toba Tek Singh et autres nouvelles*, short-stories by Saadat Hasan Manto translated from Urdu by Alain Desoulières in 2008; *La mère du 1084*, translated from Bengali by Marielle Morin in 2010.

[11] The debate on the comparative relevance of translating Indo-English sources vs. Indian vernacular sources is far from over, not least because some fundamental works in English have

not yet been translated into French, including some that are considered to be at the origin of Indian literary modernity, for instance the autobiographies of R.K. Narayan (*My days*), Mulk Raj Anand (*Seven Summers*), Nirad Chaudhury (*Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*), and the cosmopolitan novel of G.V. Desani, *All about Mr Hatter* (1948). Describing 'the New Social Science in India', Gautam Chakravarthy of Delhi University analyzed in this manner academic work on Indian literature in the last ten years: 'This development has been in the form of a growth spurt in academic publishing, with publishers, both new and old, investing seriously in producing series, monographs, translations, edited reprints, and with the arrival of new research questions, objects of enquiry and methodologies' (2010). Among all these concerns, he particularly emphasized the translation policy. Whereas in the past texts written in English coming from the diaspora were given priority in teaching curricula, nowadays even in English Departments, the quest for vernacular literature, whether in Urdu, Tamil or Bengali, is becoming the primary object of research. There is keen attention for unusual or important ignored or forgotten material. The evidence of these new subjects of study is observable in three recent books, by a sociologist, a literary scholar and a historian respectively: Sanjay Srivastava, *Passionate Modernity, Sexuality, Gender, Consumption and Class in South Asia*, 2010, Brinda Bose, *Translating Desire. The Politics of Gender and Culture in India*, 2003, and Tapan Basu, *Translating Caste: Stories, Essays and Criticism*, 2003. The critical role played by publishers such as Katha (specialized in translation) or Kali for Women in the emergence of the Indian literary modernity should also be noted.

[12] With a view to shedding light on the ambivalent social consciousness in contemporary India and the meaning of literature as a revelatory medium for it, two contemporary Indian writers' attitudes are compared in this volume. One is expressed in Ananthamurthy's essay *Being a writer in India*,² published in *Tender Ironies. A tribute to Lothar Lutze* (Chitre et al. 1994), which shows the schizophrenic relation induced by a double culture in Kannada and in English:

I am always trying in my writing to come to terms with my childhood, but does my nostalgia ever so subtly change those days as I try to recapture them in what I'm doing now also, as I relate those moments to you? How else can reality become

² Ananthamurthy is one of the leading writers in Kannada. He is the author of the novel *Samskara* published in 1965.

metaphor, and thus become more real than what it was at the level of appearance? You have to squint in order to see; you have to stammer in order to speak out from the depths. The Indian tradition of aesthetics is *dhvani*, the suggestion, that is the soul of poetry, and *varokti*, indirect communication, the sole way to communion. To tell a story is to move forward and backward in time at your sweet will and, in this unrestrained movement, to conquer time and reconstruct what otherwise would be irrevocably lost. It is this sense of continuity of lived time, preserved through memory, that makes us human. It is literature in one's language that makes this continuity possible. When I read Pampa of the tenth century or Basava of the twelfth century, I know how they thought and lived centuries ago, and that they are like me in their joys and sorrows. What am I but a link in this chain, unbroken because of my language, the precision and evocative power of which has been the concern of its supreme craftsmen through centuries. My language of daily use can do it, because words that describe reality can also leap out of the mundane and become metaphor. Thus my childhood becomes your childhood which is an act of love – an intense sharing made possible by language. The spiritual crisis of the hero came through and I remember I had remarked to Professor Bradbury that a European had to create the medieval times from his reading and scholarship, but for an Indian writer it was an immediate experience – an aspect of living memory. Ever since then, this has been a pet theory of mine – that different world-views which are the result of different historical epochs co-exist in the consciousness of an Indian writer, and, therefore, for him Chaucer, Langland, Shakespeare, Dickens and Camus are contemporaries – however apart they stand historically for a European. Professor Bradbury said in reply to my remark that I should find a style and a theme which could embody such a co-existence. All of us, part child and part adult, prepare to face our own death with the magic of words through which we glimpse an immortality that was given to us in our childhood. Thus time is linear and yet it is not. The English language, because of what comes with it, the technological western civilization, is more alien and more powerful. My language, Kannada, has survived the domination of the language of the ruling classes because of the illiteracy and also cultural denseness of the majority of its speakers. Therefore its strength lies equally in its oral and its literary traditions. Hence, it is hard to write powerfully if you are not rooted in village life, and, also, if you are unexposed to the West. This gives rise to sheer schizophrenia, often. My upbringing in a brahmin family, my father who was a man of great will with the strength and weakness of an autodidact, my education which set me on a journey away from my roots – all of them have fashioned me into the kind of writer that I am. Of course, the fact that I have to embody myself in Kannada, a language that has its own traditions, its own contemporary pressures to which I have contributed as well as responded has also

shaped me into what I am. As a writer I have a feeling that I am living backwards in time (pp. 28-9).

[13] The other one is expressed in Amit Chaudhuri's *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* (2008). Whereas Ananthamurthy insists on the schizophrenic character of writing literary creations in the Kannada language, Chaudhuri shows that reconciliation is possible within postcolonial hybridity:

I should say that, as an Indian writer of fiction in English, I've felt myself at an angle, from the start, from the project of the Indian English novel in the last twenty five years. This angularity itself, and its minor enigma, provides a common thread or node that runs through the essays, whether they're about modernity, humanism, or individual authors; that they are the work of a writer to whom the experience of marginality, and the significance of the minority vantage-point, has been important – but who finds it difficult to adhere to, or accept, the post-colonial intellectual's or writer's exclusive right in the present moment to define what the minority or marginal experience might be. Could there be marginal experiences, to do with the imagination, that are crucial to the life of the writer that postcoloniality often finds itself unable to open up to; and does post-colonial theory become, paradoxically, an instructive and pedagogic discourse on marginality, providing an absolute definition of what it constitutes? Does the pressure of the marginal, in its turn, lead us towards affinities that may have little do with identity and language? (...) Part of the book's narrative involves, then, the expression and exploration of a temperament – of an Indian writer who doesn't trace, as he probably should, his creative lineage to Salman Rushdie and the mandatory 'hybrid' post-colonial usages of English, but to a variety of (often conflicting) sources and forebears, including European and vernacular Indian (specifically, the Bengali) traditions, where the modes of recuperation, or the processes through which those traditions are made available to the writer, are as important as the traditions themselves. (...) What I've been resisting is not just this or that orthodoxy, but the terms of the argument as they're given to us today, with the so-called '*bhasha*' or Indian-language writers on one side, and Rushdie and his putative progeny on the other; and that 'modernity', rather than identity, authenticity, or language (in that modernity itself produced a constitutive consciousness of these things), might be one way of shifting the focus, of remapping a history – modernity as a creator of myths, fictions, and artistic practice, as a phase in our history, as a site under threat, as a mutating sign. (...) But Indian cultural studies' emphasis on conflating post-coloniality with popular culture means that it, effectively, refuses to recognise, engage with, and, most importantly, explore the formative history of

tension with its own 'high' cultural space. Since there's a growing, and indeed indispensable, informing presence for the postcolonial in the worldwide field of cultural studies, where the post-colonial is almost automatically associated with the cause of popular forms, it means that there's a huge, under-theorised, and even sentimental gap in the discourse; the gap involves not only an elision of the postcolonial 'high' cultural, but of a tension between the 'high' and the 'low' that is not, at once, a narrative of the tension between the post-colonial and the imperial, or, for that matter, between the Indian and the Western (2008: 11-16).

[14] Then Chaudhuri examines a further problem:

The writers of the vernacular literatures faced with the market-intimate onslaught of Indian writing in English, had recourse to, in defence of their own practice, an incongruous variety of romantic-nationalist and post-colonial arguments, to do with identity, marginality, and linguistic authenticity; a recourse to everything, that is, except 'high' culture and the significance of the modernist aesthetic that, ironically, so powerfully informed their own experimentation and development. This is a telling and significant contradiction in their position that hasn't been taken up, probably because people on both sides of the argument, for very different reasons, are intent on avoiding formulations on the 'modern', while they're ready to leap towards competing (essentially pre- and post-globalisation) articulations of 'Indianness' (2008: 202-3).

[15] Although this volume owes its innovative nature to its basis in *deshi* production, it refuses to be locked within barriers and dogmas, and sees no contradiction in treating simultaneously Anglo-Indian literature (literature on India written by English people), Indo-English texts (literature written in English by Indian people or people of Indian origin) and vernacular productions. The book, to some extent, reconciles the various facets of Indian literary modernity. Indian literary modernity does not imply the exclusive consideration of vernacular corpora, it includes texts that illustrate a postcolonial mode of thought in India and abroad, not losing sight of the fact that the Indian literary scene exists also by and thanks to the 24 million people who make up the Indian diaspora and speak English. The selection made here helps to clarify the issues. Judiciously chosen excerpts, an interactive approach and a playful attitude contradict Jean Birnbaum's criticism of French university studies on Indian postcolonialism, and provide a stimulating and inventive tool of analysis.

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