
Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare, eds., *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 208 pp.

Reviewed by **Neelam Srivastava**

Increasingly, critics have been questioning the lack of dialogue between scholars of South Asian literature whose prefix ‘postcolonial’ usually reads as a shorthand for ‘anglophone’, and scholars of South Asian literatures in the various *bhashas* (indigenous languages of the subcontinent). There exist very few full-length studies of South Asian writing considered holistically, rather than separated out into its numerous language-literatures. This volume presents a timely contribution to this emerging discussion around the links and connections between Indian literature in English—recognized as the globalized, successful face of Indian writing—and literature in the *bhashas*. The volume also tackles head-on the question of what this might mean for a re-thinking of the canon of postcolonial South Asian writing, when viewed within the context of the multi-lingual production of the subcontinent.

In the introduction, the editors, Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare, claim that their collection “explores the parameters of the energetic public debate among Indian authors and academics over the hegemonic role of Indian writing in English”(xi). The volume, which grew out of a seminar on South Asian writing across languages, is both multi-vocal—featuring contributions by academics, creative writers, publishers, and translators—as well as multi-generic—featuring the academic essay, the personal essay, and the interview. Iyer and Zare wish to redress the woeful paucity of attention bestowed to South Asian *bhasha* literature by Western scholars, citing the lack of references to this literature in the MLA database as an example. They claim, and rightly so, that the attention of postcolonial critics in particular has focused almost exclusively on a narrow canon of works by internationally fêted authors writing in English. They see translation as playing a very important mediating role in the debate around the contested canon of South Asian writing: a role that is increasing thanks to the growth of translation initiatives from *bhasha* literatures into English. Iyer and Zare are careful to add the proviso that their volume focuses on the language debates as they take place within the US and India exclusively. The debate on language in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh thus does not fall within the remit of this study, nor does the UK or the Caribbean, other key areas of the South Asian diaspora.

The volume has a tri-partite structure and content: the first section contains essays focusing on the debate about literary canons and authors

of Indian writing; the second features interviews with Indian publishers on “the challenges and opportunities available for Indian literatures in India and in the global marketplace”; and thirdly, a section on the role of translation “in bringing Indian-language literatures to Indian and non-Indian readers”(xxxiii). While such a wide-ranging structure allows for a multiplicity of perspectives on this debate, at the same time the rather uneven quality of the contributions betrays its origin in a series of oral presentations. Highlights of the collection are the essays on translation in the Indian context, and the interviews with renowned and ground-breaking Indian publishers and editors such as Urvashi Butalia, founder of Kali for Women and Zubaan Books (both hugely important ventures that contributed to the emergence of women’s writing in India); Mini Krishnan, an editor of Oxford University Press India who has been at the forefront of translation publishing; and Geeta Dharmarajan, founder of Katha, an organization that undertakes the translation of Indian writing from 21 different languages into English.

Having said that, the section on literary canons also features very interesting essays. Nalini Iyer and Lavina Dhingra Shankar write eloquently and intelligently on the success and status of South Asian American women authors such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Meena Alexander, within the US literary context. Iyer argues for a consideration of the South Asian American canon on its own terms, rather than lumped together with ‘all’ South Asian diasporic writing from such diverse locations as the Caribbean and the UK, linking it to the different patterns of immigration undertaken by South Asians in these parts of the world. Iyer and Dhingra Shankar both establish the links to, as well as the divergence from, other Asian American writing. Dhingra Shankar analyzes the problems arising out of the reception of Divakaruni and Lahiri by American and South Asian American audiences. She finds that Divakaruni’s bestselling novel *Sister of My Heart* “perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes regarding India, while appealing to feminist audiences interested in themes of female bonding and sisterhood”(32). Similarly, Lahiri is careful not to antagonize her North American audience with her narratives of inter-cultural encounters and experiences of Bengali immigrants in the Northeastern US. Her criticisms of Americans are mild rather than scathing: “self-consciously writing to and translating other tongues and cultures for multiple audiences, Lahiri enlists identification (and either regret or self-exoneration) among (Caucasian or other non-South Asian) readers who might have indulged in a similar rejection of the barbaric Other”(40). Dhingra Shankar’s criticism of Lahiri tends to conflate author and narrator in a way that establishes a problematic equivalence between fiction and a form of ethnography that is judged according to a more or less ‘authentic’ or suitably ‘political’ standard. However, the critic is quick to recognize this, also recognizing

the difficult position of the ethnic woman writer in the US, who if she achieves any form of recognition by the mainstream, is immediately accused of selling out and being a traitor to her community. Neither an ethnic writer nor her characters should have to bear the burden of representing their entire ethnic group. However, given that these communities get a limited exposure in fiction, it is true that literary representations acquire an increased capacity and power in shaping these communities for mainstream audiences. Dhingra Shankar concludes that Lahiri's and Divakaruni's are narratives of "assimilation", drawing a distinction between the negative connotations this word assumes in the academy, and the positive ones it assumes among the South Asian immigrant community: assimilation is considered "an unquestioned prerequisite of professional and personal success. These audiences may be glad to read about their own and experiences of similar Others, without pondering the political implications of the representations"(48).

Josna Rege's essay on the writing of Ambai, a Tamil writer (the pen name of CS Lakshmi), and Rukhsana Ahmad, a British South Asian playwright, aims to offer a way out of the binary opposition between anglophone and vernacular literature in the South Asian context. Both authors, she argues, "represent a small but emerging tendency among South Asian writers to write in two languages and two genres"(54). By their constant shift between languages—Ambai writes her creative work in Tamil, and her academic and essayistic work in English—both authors present connections and bridges between diverse South Asian literary and linguistic traditions. Rege's essay suggests how we might enlarge the restrictive canon of postcolonial authors currently present on most course offerings in Anglo-American universities.

The weaker sections of the volume are the interviews with, and personal essays by, South Asian authors, including Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mahesh Elkunchwar (a Marathi playwright), and S. Shankar. While these may have some value for students and scholars interested in their work, in my view they did not contribute in any significant manner to the debate around literary language in India, and tended to regurgitate truisms that were more carefully explored in the critical essays of the collection.

The interviews with Indian publishers make for very interesting reading. Geeta Dharmarajan gives a brilliant overview of the work done by Katha in assisting the growth and spread of Indian literature in translation. All three publishers offer a valuable insight into the development of Indian publishing, and its interesting positioning between the onset of the big multinational conglomerates in India—HarperCollins, Random House, Penguin—and the outstanding work done by small publishing houses like Kali for Women and Zubaan, driven by a political agenda rather than by the market. Home-grown publishers such as these have been

instrumental in increasing the visibility of *bhasha* authors on the Indian literary scene, where the focus of the national media is almost exclusively on the author-celebrity writing in English.

In the translation section, the following essays stand out. Anushiya Sivanarayanan offers a focused and nuanced reading of Bama's famous Dalit autobiography, *Karukku*, and its translation into English from the Tamil. Sivanarayanan finds that the English of the text homogenizes and simplifies the personalized and emotional connotations of Bama's use of rural (as opposed to literary) Tamil, the language of her childhood. Sivanarayanan warns against the perils of globalization in translation, of the easy standardization of language, taking away its nuances. But the critic also has an issue with the way Bama presents her subject-position in the novel as entirely subsumed within a Dalit identity politics; as a we, rather than as an I. *Karukku* is the first novel that "extends and reconstructs the question of Dalit identity in literature"(136). The rise of the Dalit politics in the 1990s made this into a "poster text" for its emancipatory project. Bama wants her text to be read primarily as a testimonial of a caste-based identity, and this comes through even more clearly in the English translation, because it does away with Bama's specific choice of register in Tamil. "What remains is a singular insistence that we read her works as peculiarly Dalit and nothing else"(139). In doing so, Sivanarayanan argues that Bama "proves the essentialist justifications of those who continue to oppress her in the name of her caste"(146). But Sivanarayanan advances an unsatisfying argument against Bama's purported "essentialization" of her identity; the argument that "being a Dalit is a subject position that is available to anyone involved in liberatory activities"(142). She invokes James Baldwin as an African American author who constantly 'problematized' his own racial identity. But Fanon argues that the racial Other is over-determined from without, and that it is almost impossible to escape the imposition of a racialized identity. As for suggesting that anyone involved in an emancipatory activity is a Dalit, this seems to be a naive statement at best: to be a Dalit is to be subject to constant and relentless discrimination and oppression throughout your life.

Christi Merrill's essay on the place of translation in postcolonial studies is perhaps the one that engages with the issue of translation theory most directly. She considers arguments by Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Tejaswini Niranjana and others on the status of translation as a way forward out of the aporia of thinking universalism: Butler proposes "a second view of universality as a future-oriented labor of cultural translation" (Butler quoted by Merrill, 182). While Merrill offers many suggestive remarks, her overarching argument on translation was not always easy to follow or extrapolate.

The collection ends with a thought-provoking discussion by Arnab Chakladar, of the Web as a possible site where translation can feature as a

process and not just as a finished product, where alternative versions of an already published translation of a text can exist, and where the market economy of publishing, with its emphasis on a text “that sells”, has less purchase. The web also may provide a solution to the lack of communication across practitioners and readers of different South Asian languages, by offering bilingual websites. The Web, by virtue of its constantly unfinished and interactive nature, offers the possibility for translators and readers to comment on translations, and for editors to present footnotes and prefatory apparatus in the form of hypertext.

This volume, in attempting to link different academic and literary constituencies together, will appeal to a variety of audiences: scholars of South Asian writing, translators, specialists of Indian postcolonial literature, will all find something of interest here. Moreover, the strongest essays also offer insightful interpretations of emerging new canons of South Asian writing, such as South Asian American women’s writing and Dalit writing. Most importantly, by not focusing on the hyper-canonical postcolonial authors present in countless academic publications on South Asian writing, the editors effectively bring about a creative re-mapping of the canon.