

Review Essay**By Dheeman Bhattacharyya**

***The Writer as Critic: Essays in Literature, History, and Culture.* Jasbir Jain. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2011. Print.**

Looking from the perspective of literary studies, to be more specific Comparative literary studies in India, this volume demands applause not only for its enterprising academic venture and for immense scope it promises in the pages of content but also how a seasoned academician has executed the self-imposed task of mapping more than a century of literary studies in India. This volume traces the development of major theoretical and intellectual engagement of writers with their times which ranges from their take on language to major events both social and literary to show how they have often influenced each other. The essays in this volume (both original and translated) have been collected to capture the intensity of representational experiences in various fields of cultural productions in India. 'Culture' being a much-contested category with its diverse ramifications and the various challenges it posits in the Indian context, has been dealt with astutely. The present collection surpasses generic boundaries and has been enriched with manifestoes, prefaces to volume, extracts from autobiographies, history, and fiction.

In trying to capture the complicated process of production of literary texts in India, Jain has tried to map the conflict of the individual author with her/ his immediate socio-political pressures. These pressures influence the process of selection of form and content. A particular historical event and literary event is insufficient to understand the ethos of textual negotiation, widely speaking the critical aspect of reception in the Indian context. In a multilingual country like India, working across

language is a challenge and the process is complicated, which involves collection, selection, translation. This hints at the important role played by translation from and into various Indian *Bhasha* literatures and into English in the context of this volume also. “What does translation mean in India” by U.R. Ananthamurthy raises pertinent questions related to the translation scenario in a multilingual country like India. Though the dominant concern of this book is the creative process involved in the production of these essays across century and a half, one cannot ignore the importance of choices involved in designing the broader framework of this ambitious endeavour. Muktibodh’s “The Third Moment” from *Ek Sahityik Ki Diary* and Jayanta Mahapatra’s “Confrontations with a Poem” map and reflect on the creative processes of individual authors. It is a challenge to balance between the aesthetic aspect, chronological progression and the continuous pressure to avoid repetition and not leaving out both visible and not so prominent events in a volume like this. While talking about generic divisions and formations in the Indian context, Jain emphasizes the importance of locating the essays at their point of origin to avoid evaluating literary or for that matter any cultural production through western lens. She has expressed her discomfiture regarding using western models as parameters to comment on genre formations or shift of ideas or how literary works in India are removed from what exists in the west. In this context, Goverdhan Tripathi’s prefaces to *Saraswati Chandra* (1887-1901) are important. This should be considered as a major academic shift because it would expose how our literary works have been mediated by western perception and intervention. This would also affect the reception of our previous literary production and contemporary cultural productions. In this context her discussion on writing in the language of the colonizer i.e. English is important. Writing in English is a political act of communicating with the colonial master on one hand and a major barrier in communicating with fellow citizens on the other. Thus, the sections on

Jotirao Phule and Govardhan Tripathy are extremely significant in the discussion of bilingualism and its significance in the Indian context. There is a development within the structure of the book itself. Though professor Jain started with a west/ non west division to talk about power structure in cultural productions, she has rightly emphasized the importance of considering the different social hierarchies, the difference of ideology and divisions within the country itself. She has also tried to redefine the position of minority discourse by bringing together Derozio and Jotirao Phule in the same volume. This volume also exposes the politics of language and language formation. Language is a tool used by our writers to escalate regional and national causes. Chughtai and Garg experimented with the hidden power of language. Language shapes identity. That the function of Urdu is not delimited to occasional 'Ishque' and 'Muhabbat', that 'inquilaab' was also a part of its lexical practice is exposed in Altaf Husain Hali's theoretical criticism in Urdu language. The inclusion of *Hali's Muqaddama She'r O Shairi* corroborates the complexities of literary practices in India which professor Jain had rightly pointed out in her introduction to this volume. She has rightly pointed out the importance of the formation of the PWA (Progressive Writer's Association) in 1935/6. The formation of this association has a history, which possibly started with the publication of 'Angare' in 1932. Premchand himself translated the first draft of the meeting of 1934 and published it in *Hans*. This event is extremely important to understand 'Mordernism' in Urdu poetry in India. Jain goes ahead to link this event with the major shift in the treatment of reality in later writers. Selections from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Sarat Chandra, Premchand, Mohan Rakesh initiates renewed dialogues where Rabindranath and 'Agyeya' can open up new avenues to negotiate ideas of nation, nationhood and if we are allowed to extend it to nationalism in the present context. The complex challenges of understanding cultural productions in India have been addressed through

the smart selections of Sitakant Mahapatra, Nirmal Verma's thought provoking deliberations.

The Writer as Critic: Essays in Literature, History and Culture, as the editor aptly describes, is a theoretical journey, having its roots in indigenous knowledge systems covering more than a century, and it engages with serious cultural theories. The selection of authors (with an introduction to the cultural ethos of their cultural production) has its own politics, which the editor has dealt with in her introduction to this seminal volume of critical engagement. With her erudition she had addresses various marginal positions of these authors vis-a-vis their position in the National circuit. Hence Henry Louis Vivian Derozio's "On the Colonisation of India by Europeans" and Jotirao Govindrao Phule's "Preface to *Ghulamgirf*" sets the right tone for the volume where the writers are contesting various hierarchies from their marginalities. Altaf Husain Hali's "Muqaddama She'r O Shairi" roughly translated as "Introduction to Poetry and Poetics" is the most influential theoretical work in Urdu. This has been translated by M. Asaduddin and important excerpts from the first sixty pages of *Muqaddama* have been included in this volume.

This volume is a seminal work, which deals with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya and O. Chandu Menon are important case studies as far as the reception of the Novel is concerned. 'Bengali Literature' included in this volume critically reviews *Lives of the Bengali Poets* by Hari Mohan Mukurjya and *Mitra Prakas* and a self review of Bankim's own work *Kapal Kundala*. He situates these works, including his in the literary milieu, important as the next essay in the volume would be the preface to O. Chandu Menon's first edition of *Indulekha*. The preface is important for several reasons as it deals with which shaped his literary productions. The discussion on *Alaler Ghore Dulal* thus becomes extremely personal and literary negotiations directly related to the reception of the English novel in Malayalam. Goverdhanram Tripathi's prefaces to *Saraswati Chandra* are important

in the sense it extends the ongoing theoretical concerns with the narrative form and the influence of the western mode of cultural production. Rabindranath Tagore's 'The Historical Novel' can provide critical insights to access not only the works of Bankim but also subsequent critical engagements on 'History' and 'Fiction'. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's "The Tradition and Virtue of Literature" deals with the debates around essential attributes of literature, which culminates into reception of Rabindranath's work. Though one may rightly point out that translation of these essays could have been done directly from Bangla. Premchand's "The Intent of Literature" is the Presidential address delivered by him at the first session of Progressive Writer's Association in 1936, which in itself is a major literary event. Tripti Jain has translated the essay from Hindi. Jainendra Kumar Jain's "Literature and Society" reflects the negotiations of a 'dislocated' writer's position in the society. Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh's "The Third Moment" (Teesra Kshana) is formed of several excerpts from one section of *Ek Sahityik ki Diary*. The third moment is a moment of revelation, when fantasy assumes the form of literature and thereby is an effort to theorise the creative process. Ismat Chughtai's "To Those Married Women" is from her autobiography *Kagzi Hain Pairahan*. This essay deals with female subjectivity and issues of censorship and goes further to accentuate how censorship shapes cultural productions. Agyeya's "Memory and Time" and "Memory and Country" comments on concepts of time and space which can be further extended to understand critical categories like 'Desh', 'Itihaas' which probably Rabindranath was trying to grapple with in his novels, especially *Gora*. Gopalkrishna Adiga's "The Renaissance Yet to Come" can be situated as a dialogue with Muktibodh's take on the same event. Renaissance was an incomplete movement as it failed to engage the non-elites. Mohan Rakesh's Essay "The Novel and Depiction of Reality" translated from Hindi for this volume deals with the 'real' and the depiction of

the reality in fiction. He tries to situate various questions within the broader framework of the narrative structure to highlight the various techniques deployed by individual authors to establish connections between the 'ideal' and the perceived notions of the 'real'. The two extracts from Rahi Masoom Raza evoke the sense of dislocation, migration, violence which are some of the markers of the cultural productions of the 1940's. The rupture in the narrative of *Aadha Gaon* is heightened by the Preface which appears after two third of the novel is over and that has been include in this volume. As the title aptly suggests, Nirmal Verma's "Language and National Identity" contextualizes his concern with language as a tool of asserting individual identity and the National on a broader scale. U. R. Ananthamurthy's "What does Translation Mean in India" appears at a crucial point in the volume. It appears as a comment in itself highlighting the importance of approaching so many traditions in so many languages through translation to understand the cultural ethos of 'India'. He raises important question vis-a-vis translating experiences also and highlights the 'politics' of translation as a process— may be a technology to understand or translate the experiences of the 'other' when Indian Bhasha Literatures are translated into 'English'. Ra Ga Jadhav's "Dalit Feelings and Aesthetic Detachment" has been translated by M.D. Hatkanagalekar as marking the journey of the volume which started with Derozio. This essay deals with Dalit cultural productions and artistic detachment. He raises some important questions directly related with the process of writing— is it possible for a Dalit writer to not write about the lived experience, that shapen her/ his identity? Sitakant Mahapatra's "Indian Culture; Quest for Perspective— Dualities, Resolutions and Transcendence" and Mridula Garg's "Word as Censor" are recent but important contributions to the Indian Literary ethos.

This volume is a seminal work, which deals with major literary concepts, valuable in literary

studies in India. It further accentuates the significance of applying comparative approach to comprehend the literary ethos of the subcontinent. Above all, one cannot ignore the pleasure of reading this volume of critical essays, which ranges from Derozio to Garg.