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# Old Words, New Worlds: Revisiting the Modernity of Tradition

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# Old Words, New Worlds: Revisiting the Modernity of Tradition

ANANYA VAJPEYI

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In the Hindi film *Raincoat* (2004), Rituparno Ghosh presents a short story by O Henry in an Indian milieu. The place is contemporary middle class Kolkata; the main actors, drawn from Bollywood, are at home in the present. Most of the conversation between various characters revolves around cell phones, tv channels, soap operas, air-conditioning and automated teller machines, leaving us in no doubt as to the setting. But given that the story is somewhat slow, and the acting by the female lead, Aishwarya Rai indifferent at best, what gives the film its shadowed mood is its beautiful music, and the director's obvious love for Kolkata. Both these elements, strangely, are at odds with the historical moment sought to be represented. Ghosh himself has written the film's theme song, rendered in soaring notes by the Hindustani vocalist Shubha Mudgal. It clearly displays the influence on him of the medieval Bengali Vaishnava poets Caitanya, Jayadeva, and others who wrote about the love of Krishna and Radha. The city where the story unfolds is a still-colonial Calcutta, with rickshaws pulled by men on their feet, pouring rain, slatted wooden window-blinds and heavy 19th century teak furniture straight out of Satyajit Ray, bridges over the Hooghly river, a train chugging across a flat blue-green landscape, and the haunting silhouette of the Victoria Memorial. The background refrain, in rustic Hindi and a monsoon-appropriate raga, asks of a tormented homesick Krishna:

*Mathurā nagar-pati  
Kāhey tum Gokul jāo?*

O Prince of Mathura,  
Why would you go back to Gokul?

The director's vaunted talent lies not in his ability to get a decent performance out of Rai (in this he fails – Ajay Devgan's acting is not overwhelming either), nor in

## REVIEW ARTICLE

**The Modernity of Sanskrit** by Simona Sawhney  
(*Ranikhet: Permanent Black; co-published by University of Minnesota Press, 2009; pp 226, Rs 495 (HB).*)

his updating and Indianising O Henry's tale, but in his simultaneous reference to post-colonial, colonial and pre-colonial Bengali culture, and thus to a dense underbelly of significance that gives weight to an otherwise trivial story. Calcutta's status as a big city, its urban decrepitude, its faded imperial grandeur and grinding poverty, these we already compute; so too the pathos of Radha and Krishna's separation and the impossibility of their reunion, which is nothing other than the universal impossibility of returning to childhood. Ghosh is clever, then, not in successfully adapting a piece of American fiction for an Indian audience, but in attaching these other, rich registers of meaning to the slender narrative he has chosen. Calcutta's modernist decay, as well as the eternal pain of the divine lovers Radha and Krishna become grafted on to the protagonists' thwarted love for each other, and on to their consciousness of time irretrievably lost, slipping away like their stolen afternoon together. As the plot, the music and the images mesh with one another, we lose track of the temporal context in which the events are supposedly embedded. We cannot really say what time we are in: mythic time (Mathura-Gokul), the deep past (Jayadeva), the medium past (British Raj), the near past (Mannu and Neeru's youth in Bhagalpur, conveyed through flashbacks), or the present (the long day of the story, in 21st century Kolkata). Here, in this synaesthetic synchronic confusion of worlds, the sign of art.

Indian cinema's current Wunderkind is not the only one to rest his oeuvre on a layered and complex aesthetic tradition. If

we begin to look, Kalidasa and Krishna, Vyasa and Valmiki are everywhere in the art and literature of modern India, as are many other authors, characters, tropes and narratives that invariably appear to us as familiar, yet differently relevant in different contexts. They require no introduction for any given audience, yet at each new site where they turn up, as it were, there is the interpretive space to figure out what exactly makes them pertinent on this occasion. Thus the work of writing and reading is always ongoing, always inter-textual, always citational, and unfolds within a framework that blurs rather than entrenches the boundary between the traditional and the modern. Kalidasa counts as an ancient in one reckoning, as the greatest poet of the Gupta imperium; he is thoroughly modern if we read him via, say, Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali literature or Mohan Rakesh in Hindi literature; he is also, through other archives and genres, quite medieval, called and recalled throughout the vernacular millennium. Many literary texts and their key protagonists have this sort of a life, across times, spaces, languages, genres and political contexts in the Indic world. The *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the life of the Buddha, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the life of Aśoka – these come immediately to mind (examples could be multiplied). On the one hand, these are perceived as “classical”; on the other hand, we cannot understand India's literary modernity without them because they are constantly being made present to us – precisely “re-presented”. This is a paradox that critics and historians are only just beginning to grasp.

Let us say that in the evolution of literary-critical discourse, eventually it would be worked out that modern Marathi literature, say, is deeply engaged with its own past, with that of Sanskrit and Persian, and perhaps also with that of other geographically

adjacent and linguistically related languages, dead (like Maharashtra Prakrit) or living (like Kannada).<sup>1</sup> Such a working out would also take place for Hindi, Bengali, the southern languages, etc. What interrupts this imagined course of literary criticism and literary history, especially in the minds of secular intellectuals like Simona Sawhney (and before her, G N Devy), is the rude barging-in of politics to the university, the library, and the consciousness of the studious individual.<sup>2</sup> Pankaj Mishra images this interruption very memorably in the thuggish right wing student leaders who dominate the campus of the Banaras Hindu University in his essays and fiction about Varanasi.<sup>3</sup> Hindu nationalism shatters the slow rhythms of reasoned self-reflection, renders cultural self-knowledge at once urgent and endangered. 1990s Hindutva seizes Rama, or Kurukshetra, turns them into identity symbols through a massive, mediated and thoroughly modern type of semiotic violation. Suddenly all of our plays, poems, novels and paintings, our histories and songs, our films and television shows, replete with the excess of imaginations preceding or paralleling our own, become other to us, taken out of our hands, transformed into weapons with which to hurt and exclude non-Hindus from our lives as Indians. Torn out of a cultural conversation that may extend over millennia and a sub-continent, texts become inauspicious and unrecognisable. Critics have to stand up and reclaim their hermeneutic prerogative. The ethical moment of criticism is at hand.

### Literature as Moral Anchor

*The Modernity of Sanskrit* by Simona Sawhney ably makes the argument for an ethically vigilant, politically active, and intellectually timely criticism. Sawhney describes the crisis as she sees it, proposes a counter-challenge, and then proceeds to demonstrate how this post-Babri Masjid critical practice (to use her own point of departure) could be realised. She reads Kalidasa's *Śākuntalam* and *Meghadūtam*, the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Gītā* in and of themselves, and also through 20th century writers in Hindi and Bengali, like Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh, Hazariprasad Dwivedi, Rabindranath Tagore, Buddhadeb Bose, Jaishankar Prasad and

Mohandas Gandhi (Gandhi is the odd man out in this group of litterateurs, but more on that later). When we read this book we realise with a shock that lately in the humanities, the pressure of theory and the hegemony of history, not to mention the political economy of translation have basically crowded out literary criticism altogether.<sup>4</sup> We cannot really remember the last time we encountered, in English, a close, careful reading of any Indian text, ancient or modern, where the textual object was not subjected to translation, philological reconstruction, historical analysis or theoretical treatment. Not that these operations are not valid in themselves, but none of them does what literary criticism does, which, as Sawhney reminds us, is to *read the text*. She brings the neglected critical idiom and the old-fashioned practice of criticism back to the table, judging our favourite texts in terms of categories like poetry, justice, violence, compassion, beauty and law, and revisiting a certain kind of value-based scholarship that we had set aside for the last two decades.

Sawhney's opening movement, a meditation on love and memory (both expressed in the word *smara*) is absolutely the strongest part of her uniformly elegant and insightful book. Further, her careful readings of Rakesh's play, *Āśādh kā ek din*, Bharati's verse drama, *Andhā Yug*, Hazariprasad Dwivedi's, Buddhadeb Bose's and Rabindranath Tagore's essays on the *Meghadūtam*, and of Kalidasa's Sanskrit drama, the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, are stunning. Her exegesis of the famous connection between verse, curse and lament, *śloka* and *śoka*, made in Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa* to account for the origins of poetry; her interpretation of the turning neck and backward glance (*bhaṅga*) in Kalidasa and Asvaghosa as the corporeal imaging simultaneously of eros and thanatos; and her exposition of both monstrous violence and bestial helplessness in the tragic figure of Asvatthama in the *Mahābhārata*, via the word *paśu* (lit: animal/captive), are all simply delightful and would stay with her readers.

Of course, proving her thesis, part of the reason we like these readings is because *we know them already*. We know that the lovesick Yaksa sent his message to his beloved through a cloud that could not possibly have understood him; that Valmiki

saw a hunter kill the male of a pair of coupling birds and thus, in a moment of both judgment (against the hunter) and empathy (for the surviving she-bird), gave birth to poetic meter; that Dusyanta and Sakuntala's love has contradictory elements of desire and cruelty, a turning towards and a turning away; that the Buddha's break with his attachments, like that of many of his followers, involves a shearing conflict between the injunctive force of asceticism and the persistent attraction of the world; that Asvatthama's father Drona was killed by treachery because his son shared a name with a slain elephant – these are ancient, familiar and repeatedly surprising stories that never fail to enthrall us. Iteration is everything. In her new book on the Hindus, Wendy Doniger also assembles a vast compendium, a veritable sea of these stories, many of them from Sanskrit literature that we always already know.<sup>5</sup>

If I may be permitted an autobiographical moment, Sawhney's self-presentation as an ideologically driven latecomer to Sanskrit attracted me. Like her, I too trained in Anglophone and European literatures, literary theory and criticism, only to take a turn to Sanskrit somewhere in the mid-1990s. Like her, I consider myself permanently a student of the language, not a scholar of it, and I too qualify my own intellectual practice with labels like "history", "theory" and "secularism". Of the Indian languages, Hindi is my native tongue, my home. I love Kalidasa and Tagore, Krishna and Gandhi as much as she does, and they are the subjects of the book I am currently writing. I too would hope to be a *sahṛdaya* reader, not a *bhakta* of any kind of classical or modern canon. Ideally I would emulate her balance between experiential and cognitive aspects of literature (*anubhūti/jñāna*). I share her implicit faith that literature is the moral anchor of a people; that in our "classics" we may seek, and find, the sources of our self.

So naturally, at first I thought that Sawhney's book was written both for me and to me, even though I have never met the author. But I must confess that I have yet to experience either the seduction or the fear of Hindutva that Sawhney evinces. "Secular" though I may be, I would not like to put Hindutva anywhere near the centre of my own inquiry into texts and

traditions, whether premodern or modern. I could not build an epistemology on the ruins of the Babri Masjid and the ashes of Gujarat, nor do I believe that the threat of Hindu nationalism needs to define and delimit the epistemological or ethical stance of our generation of Indian scholars, whether we belong to the English language academy or the *bhāṣā* institutions. To me this is as absurd as if the contemporary critic James Wood were to constitutively relate his enterprise of reading great fiction to the political project of the Democratic Party, or even worse, to orient all of his critical practice to denouncing the Republicans.<sup>6</sup> He may very well have certain political convictions we consider to be enlightened, and these may inform and energise his work, but his business is not to support Obama or criticise the Bush administration: his business is to *read the texts*. An agenda of critiquing American imperialism cannot predetermine his reading of texts new or old, and if it does, he will stop being the stellar literary critic that he is and become just another ideologue. Thus, even as I identify closely and sympathise deeply with Sawhney's work – with its trajectory, objects, method, style and politics – something about its avowed motivations leaves me cold.

### Political Readings of Sanskrit Epics

Let me explain, for I am sure many will share my discomfort – even as there must be many who would agree with Sawhney's premises. Everyone who now works on India has worried about Hindutva in some fashion, and I am simply continuing a wider public conversation here on these pages, with Sawhney as our chosen interlocutor. My point is that secular intellectuals have precisely reduced themselves to mere ideologues, and thereby stopped being critical readers. Sawhney herself is too fine a reader to fall into this trap, but many are sure to get the wrong idea from her, and waste their energies charging at the windmills of Hindutva instead of tackling the real issue that she, also, identifies: the disappearing practice of historically grounded, linguistically adept and critically astute reading. This practice is receding because the conditions for its possibility and reproduction are under attack.

Hindutva may distort and misuse Hanuman and Shivaji, Ayodhya and Dwarka, and such appropriations may make us want to fight back and reclaim what we hold dear, for our own – presumably ethical – purposes. But Hindutva is not to blame for us abandoning our textual traditions, forgetting our vernaculars, neglecting our knowledge systems, and destroying our institutions of cultural literacy. Those are crimes for which we are all, left and right, secular and communal, equally responsible. “*Kaṇ kaṇ mein vyāpey hain Rām*”, is the Bharatiya Janata Party's slogan. If there were such *vyāpti*, if Rama really pervaded our imagination as he did in the past, he could not have been so easily taken from us – our thoughtful, slender-limbed, dark-skinned, lotus-eyed god, our ideal son, husband, brother and king, our prince in exile and lover in despair, perfection personified to half the civilised world for hundreds of years – and turned into a Muslim-hating mass murderer. To paraphrase Gandhi, the enemy is not the Englishman; we ourselves are our own enemy. Perhaps the time has come to acknowledge that Hindutva is the symptom, not the disease: that we have to take responsibility for our communalisation as we had to, in Gandhi's view, for our colonisation.<sup>7</sup>

Sawhney's discussions of the character of Krishna, especially as he reveals himself in the course the *Bhagavad Gītā*, though competent, could have benefited from some reference to Sudipta Kaviraj's masterful treatment of Krishna in Jayadeva's *Gīta Govinda* and the Bengali Vaishnava traditions, and also in Bankimchandra's 19th century opus, the *Kṛṣṇacaritra*. His book, *The Unhappy Consciousness* set a very high bar almost two decades ago.<sup>8</sup> Not only is Kaviraj a superbly gifted critic, but his reading would have especially relevant to Sawhney because it foregrounds precisely the status of Krishna as a “classical” versus a “popular” figure, a warrior-statesman in one form and a playful lover in another. Interestingly, it is Krishna's modern reader, Bankim, who wishes to classicise him, as Tagore notices before Kaviraj, and Sawhney would have done well to consider what this might mean for Bengali/Indian literary modernity.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, at many points in the book, Sawhney's failure to refer to the work of

Sheldon Pollock is puzzling, given she has reinvented herself as a Sanskritist since the early 1990s. (A minor point: *The Modernity of Sanskrit* needs a Bibliography, because its sample of references is somewhat idiosyncratic.) Just two glaring omissions by way of example: Pollock's hugely provocative essay on the *Rāmāyaṇa* and political imagination, in the aftermath of Hindu-Muslim conflict Ayodhya and Bombay, that Sawhney takes to be the turning point of her own intellectual project, and his recent discussion of the origins of poetry in Sanskrit literary theory, through a myth of the meeting of Poetry Man (*kāvya-puruṣa*) and Poetics Woman (*sāhityavidyā*).<sup>10</sup> Sawhney's treatment of the relationship between poetry (*kāvya*) and art (*kalā*) as reframed by modern Hindi literary theorists cannot really afford to ignore Pollock's comprehensive revamping of our understanding of Sanskrit literary and aesthetic categories (*kāvya*, *alaṅkāra*, *dhvani*, *rasa*, etc) in both his books, of 2003 and 2006.<sup>11</sup> This is quite apart from his consistent and monumental contribution to the contemporary debate about the narrative, structure, language and history of both the Sanskrit epics, texts that are central to Sawhney's book (at the very least, she must have some awareness of Pollock's important analysis of the intrinsic humanity-cum-divinity of Rama).<sup>12</sup>

### Problematic Analysis of Gandhi

Even if understandably she did not want to digress too much into either Sanskrit poetics or Sanskrit literary history, Sawhney could have taken on as a conversation partner someone like Prathama Banerjee. Banerjee's intelligent work on imagination (*kalpanā*), literature (*sāhitya*) and literary-aesthetic experience (*rasa*) via both Tagore and his Bengali contemporaries, as well as the Sanskrit systems – most especially her reflections on how classical Indic categories, as transformed by colonialism, are at once incommensurable with western categories and constitutively enmeshed with them – has pertinent implications for the problem we may broadly designate by the Rudolphs' defining phrase from 1967 “the modernity of tradition”.<sup>13</sup> In some ways Sawhney is on a much surer footing when dealing with literature than with political philosophy or social science – compare her

smooth handling of U R Ananthamurthy's novel, *Saṃskāra*, with her problematic analysis of Gandhi on the *Gītā*.<sup>14</sup> Gandhi's views on caste (*varṇa*) and non-violence (*ahimsā*) are notoriously complex, and must be deciphered through a wide range of both his writings and his political actions, as also through a by-now robust, highly variegated and fast expanding body of Gandhi scholarship spanning three quarters of a century.

The triangulation of compassion (*karuṇā*), empathic experience through the modality of literature (*karuṇa rasa*), and non-violence (*ahimsā*) made possible by reading, simultaneously, ancient texts like the Buddhist canon and the *Mahābhārata*, and moderns like Tagore and Gandhi, could be enormously suggestive in terms of developing or demonstrating a perturbing connection between ethics and aesthetics in Indian thought. More attention to Gandhi over time could get Sawhney there. For now she is brave to take on the Mahatma, but seems out of her depth in the immense subtlety and unprecedented radicalism of his thinking. Gandhi's genius lay producing, from his intimacy with the tradition, a genuinely novel set of political and ethical categories, whose nomenclature is as classical-seeming as their content is unexpectedly modern (or even, according to the Rudolphs, postmodern!).<sup>15</sup> Gandhi is deeply religious but utterly unorthodox, apparently comfortable with a Sanskrit past but really belonging to a future that is yet to come about. He is as enigmatic as his Krishna, full of contradictions and play, as aware of the tragic dimensions of history as he is hopeful of its radical potential. To give Gandhi his due, Sawhney will have to write another book. But given how brilliant and beautiful this book is, that is a promise we are eager for her to keep.

Thanks as ever to Pratap Mehta, who (arguably) is not responsible for my views, but definitely acted as the agent provocateur! Thanks also to Ajay Skaria.

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NOTES

1 Let us think of the work of the contemporary Marathi intellectual Sadanand More, for example.

2 G N Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (London: Sangam Books), 1992.

3 Pankaj Mishra, *The Romantics* (Anchor), 2001; Pankaj Mishra, *Temptations of the West: How to be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet, and Beyond* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2006. See especially the Prologue, "Benares: Learning to Read", pp 3-21. Both the novel, *The Romantics*, and the Prologue to *Temptations of the West* build on his original, brilliant essay in the *New York Review of Books*, "Edmund Wilson in Benares", surely one of the classics of modern Indian prose. See the *NYRB*, Vol 45, No 6, 9 April 1998.

4 Most of the best literary criticism I could think of in English comes from those who are primarily writers and not critics, like Salman Rushdie, Amit Chaudhuri and Pankaj Mishra. A scholar of pre-modern literature who writes great criticism, like David Shulman, is a rare exception in Indic studies nowadays, which was not the case when people like Ed Gerow and A K Ramanujan were alive.

5 Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Penguin), 2009.

6 James Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (The Modern Library), 1999; *How Fiction Works* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2008.

7 As I write this piece, India's general elections have just concluded and the BJP has suffered a massive setback. It appears the Indian electorate takes Hindutva less seriously than many secularists had feared. The Gandhi I am recalling is to be found in his *Hind Swaraj* (1909).

8 Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India* (OUP India), 1995. See especially chapter 3, "The Myth of Praxis: Construction of the Figure of Kṛṣṇa in *Kṛṣṇacaritra*", pp 72-106.

9 Rabindranath Tagore, "The Nature of Krishna" in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Writings on Literature and Language* (OUP India), 2001, pp 207-21.

10 Sheldon Pollock, "Rāmāyaṇā and Political Imagination in India" in the *Journal of Asian Studies*, 52:2: 261-97, 1993; Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (University of California Press), 2006, pp 200-04; Appendix A.5, "The Invention of *Kāvya* (From Rājāśekhara's *Kāvyaṃimāṃsā*)", pp 591-96.

11 Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (University of California Press), 2003.

12 Sheldon Pollock, tr and ed, *The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmiki, An Epic of Ancient India, Vol 2: Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (Princeton University Press), 1986; *Vol 3: Aranyakāṇḍa*, 1991. See especially in Pollock's path-breaking "Introduction" to the *Aranyakāṇḍa*, a section titled "The Divine King of the Rāmāyaṇa".

13 See Prathama Banerjee, "The Work of Imagination: Temporality and Nationhood in Colonial Bengal" in *Muslims, Dalits, and the Fabrications of History: Subaltern Studies XII*, edited by Shail Mayaram, M S S Pandian and Ajay Skaria (Permanent Black and Ravi Dayal), 2005, chapter 8, pp 280-322. I recently heard an anecdote I want to share with readers: The Sanskritist James Fitzgerald, currently editor of the massive University of Chicago Press *Mahābhārata* translation project (originally overseen by the late J A B Van Buitenen), recounted to me a few weeks ago Susanne Rudolph's opening lecture in a South Asian Civilisations class at the University of Chicago in the early 1970s. Fitzgerald recalls more than 30 years after the fact that his then-teacher, a young professor of political science, began her course on modern south Asia with a (characteristically brilliant) lecture about Yudhishthira, the Pandava prince and the son of Dharma who is in one sense the main character of the *Mahābhārata*. I cite this recollection as a perfect example of the very thesis about the relationship between tradition and modernity that the Rudolphs, Susanne and her husband Lloyd, introduced into the discourse of south Asian studies back in the 1960s.

14 I would have loved to see Sawhney read Rani Siva Sankara Sarma's *The Last Brahmin: Life and Reflections of a Modern-day Sanskrit Pandit*, D Venkat Rao trans from the Telugu (Permanent Black), 2007. This fascinating fictional memoir straddles the line between criticism and history, addressing many of the same themes as Sawhney's book.

15 Lloyd I Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (University of Chicago Press), 1967; Lloyd I Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *Post-Modern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (OUP India), 2006.



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