# *Book Reviews*

Harish Trivedi. *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India.* Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995. Pp. xiv, 224. £40.00, £14.99 pb.

Harish Trivedi's highly lucid and readable *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India* first appeared in India in 1993 (Papyrus, Calcutta) and has now been published with a new preface by Manchester University Press (1995). This publication history is slightly unusual since few Indian books have appeared in India first and then reissued by a Western press; the opposite is in fact generally the norm. There are a number of reasons why this book is very good, even exceptional. The first is that it is a book about literary production that comes from a lover of literature and aesthetics. Indian scholars of cultural studies—Aijaz Ahmad, for instance—are capable of traversing the same areas as Trivedi does but would have written very different works. Second, what Trivedi tries to avoid is the ideological overkill (not that Trivedi is not aware of the politics of writing) by making a range of literary texts the focus of his close readings. Thus in his examination of Byron and the East, Trivedi questions the value of sweeping generalizations that would unproblematically lump Byron with other orientalists as someone who also produced the Orient (96). Third, this book is about "transactions"; it is about how Indians and the British have read each other; it is about reconfiguring postcolonial theory with reference to literary productions that destroy the myth that modern India has only produced good writing in English; and it goes a long way towards dispelling the myth that reading India was a one-way process with both power and knowledge squarely in the hands of the British. The Indian-British encounter may have been about colonial (mis)representations; it may have been about "imagined" or "inscribed" India but we must not forget that these were also "transactive" encounters in which, probably from the founding of the Indian National Congress onwards, Indians too were constantly examining ways in which their own British heritage could be indigenized. It is here that literature in regional languages, and especially the translation of English texts into these languages, are important sites of study.

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How does Trivedi go about making his case? He divides his ten chapters into three groups: part 1 (4 chapters) on the reception of English in India; part 2 (4 chapters) on the representation of India in English literature; and part 3 (2 chapters) on essays with a postcolonial agenda. Throughout these brilliantly composed chapters (in a style that has a mesmeric quality about it, and witty too) Trivedi critically rewrites the metropolitan postcolonial project through a sustained examination of how Indians themselves have responded to English literature. It must be remembered that English as a discipline of study began in India some fifty years before it got going in Britain. Thus many English writers have been part of the Indian tertiary education system and of the Indian culturescape generally for well over a hundred years at least. It is wrong to speak of English writing simply as a colonial relic although, admittedly, initially it had a largely instrumental role in the imperialist agenda. Shakespeare, that supremely canonical figure, is no longer a narrowly national English writer since Indians have engaged with his plays for a very long time. He is the author most commonly taught in "a great majority of the 186 universities in India" (21), his pre-eminence underlined by the number of times he has been translated into Indian languages. And then there are texts such as the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* that get translated into Hindi not through the Persian original but through the Fitzgerald translation.

This kind of orientalist mediatization (in Trivedi's second chapter presented through a detailed discussion of Harivansh Rai Bachchan's translation as *Umar Khayyam ki Madhushala*) again signals that the need for a much more complex engagement with the West requires a less adversarial and certainly not binary postcolonial poetic. Indeed, in Trivedi's chapters on T. S. Eliot (chapter 4 on Eliot in Hindi and chapter 7 on Eliot's use of India) we get two original contributions to the general Eliot bibliography. The exciting point about these essays is the extent to which Hindi scholars have (mistakenly) identified Eliot with Hindi poetry because of a perceived commonality between Eliot's endless present continuous sentences and their use in the Hindi language (where the present continuous and not the simple present is the dominant indicative mood). As for Eliot's own India, Trivedi systematically debunks the not uncommon argument among so many Indian critics that Eliot understood Indian thought well and his poems, at crucial moments, are a celebration of Indian thought. Far from it. Eliot is always the high Church of England Anglo-Catholic (or however else he may have defined his Christianity) for whom the use of the occasional Sanskrit word or phrase was a juxtaposition that in fact emphasized the greatness, the clarity of Christianity, and if he did like Sanskrit words, this has to be seen as no more than an expression of modernist aesthetics. The point is that Eliot's use of Sanskrit should not be confused with Indomania. As Trivedi notes: "It is also Hinduism and the

much vaunted Indian spirituality that are seen as sunken against the abiding and exclusive truths of Christianity" (134). Strange that Indians would have embraced a poet who would have probably felt more comfortable with Macaulay and James Mill than with Sir William Jones and Nathaniel Brassey Halshed. The same treatment, with a stronger political twist, is directed against another darling of Indian literary criticism, E. M. Forster. So many Indians have embraced Forster as another writer who, in *A Passage to India*, made great use of Indian mysticism: that strange sound in the cave (wasn't it "om"?), the narrative of Krishna's birth, and so on. Yet seen against another contemporary such as Edward Thompson (lesser than Forster but for the Indian should not he be greater?), Forster's representation of India is all aesthetics and very little politics. Not that this in itself should get in the way of judgement but really one cannot keep on placing Forster's text on a pedestal for all the wrong reasons. Unlike Thompson, Forster never wanted to stick his neck out on matters of politics and as for his understanding of Indian spirituality, like Eliot, he knew very little. If nothing else these essays do challenge Indian academics to do archival work (which is Trivedi's great strength) and in doing so, literary critics in India—one hopes—would begin to revaluate some of these "master" English writers.

But where does English literature stand in the curriculum? Why teach English as a national literature simply because, as one argument goes, one learns from it the literary history of England? Fifty years on since independence, and with a decisive shift in global power as well as in India's own political affiliations (its long flirtation with the Soviet bloc, for instance) is not it time that we began to face another kind of reality? Many universities in Australia, for instance, no longer have a department of English. In these universities, English literature is in fact taught alongside Australian, American, and postcolonial writing as well as alongside texts in translation. Again the local non-English scene in India provides us with a more progressive model. In Hindi, for instance, many more non-English writers are being translated. Indeed, Milan Kundera was available in a Hindi translation long before he was available in an English translation in India. What excites the Indian literary imagination (in Hindi, Bengali, and other Indian languages) are writers from Latin America, from Africa, from the US, and from Europe. In regional languages, India is responding to late modernity as it should through a form of literary globalization. One of the points that seems to underlie the Trivedi thesis is that postcolonial theory (of the centre-periphery type) simply forgets the march of history and the power of literature itself which always aligns itself with movements that are on the ascendant. As for England, it must be said that no really great book has come out of there in a long while.

So Trivedi finally makes his own proactive intervention into a curriculum that still seems to exist in a framework that goes back to

Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Indian Education. One hundred and sixty years later, is it not time for English departments to listen to the voices of multilingual India in designing their English curriculum? Trivedi makes a case for what he calls the *panchadhatu* (or the five elements) of literary education in India. In this system, one gathers, English departments would become part of a comprehensive literature (even a comparative literature) department in which (English) literature will be taught through a curriculum comprising five elements of literary study: literature in English translation; literature in English from elsewhere; literature in English from England; literature in a modern Indian language; literature in a classical language. There is much in this model that is commendable, but it is presented as a highly untheoretical exercise. The argument, it seems, is that so long as these components are taught, somehow literary education would reflect the kind of book that Trivedi has produced: it would be a literary education in which an Indian student can easily move through Hindi, Sanskrit, and English literatures. Moreover, it is assumed that overnight the 186 English departments in Indian universities would have staff qualified to teach these courses without pushing and pulling in directions that would make the model itself totally unworkable. There are in fact easier models that one can adopt. An English and Comparative Literature model for one. In this model, all courses at the undergraduate level are arranged in genres, periods, themes, and so on. The unifying course is a course in literary theory that acts as a prerequisite. Thus in a genre course such as Narrative Fiction, English texts are read alongside Dostoevsky, Premchand, and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (the last three in the original or in translation). Similarly, a poetry course (let us call this one the Poetry of Meditation) may examine English devotional as well as Indian *bhakti* verse. However, to get these courses going one needs theoretical models: theories of narrative for narrative fiction and a devotional poetics for the second. Clearly, under categories such as "thematic" or "periodization" or under an altogether separate category, one could even teach literatures in a modern Indian language.

As for the final group mentioned in Trivedi's *panchadhatu*, literature in a classical language, real claims can possibly be made by only three: Sanskrit, Old Tamil, and High Urdu/Persian. Now Trivedi's preference it seems is really for Sanskrit and it makes good sense given that in India Sanskrit literature has a pan-Indian presence. One way to get this literature in the curriculum is by implementing the old second language requirement for the BA that still exists (at the MA level) in many North American universities. If under the genre category classical Sanskrit drama and the Epic were offered as electives (to be taught in English translation), then those with Sanskrit as their classical language could work from primary texts anyway. Evidently, one could have national literatures, including postcolonial writing, in the syl-

labus as well. The trick really is to ensure that students are told quite clearly that for the BA major in literature they must do at least one genre course, the compulsory theory course (which, in India, would have a strong dose of Sanskrit literary theory), a period course, and perhaps a context/theme course (such as postcolonial writing, representation and gender). It is a pity that what Trivedi does so well in his own book gets transformed into a syllabus that does not really do the obvious: that is, move the teaching of literature from periods and literary histories to theory and interdisciplinarity.

The last section is presented here by way of a debate with the author. It should not supersede what I consider is one of the best books to have come out of India by an Eng. Lit. critic. Trivedi is a great reader of texts; he writes with enthusiasm and a rare fluency. A reviewer like me who also reads most of the texts mentioned in this book in the original, finds reading the book a particularly rewarding experience. It is a pity that while the Indian diaspora continues to produce highly inventive literary critics in English, there are few and far between in India itself. If Trivedi's book can inspire other Indians to write as well—and to discuss writing in India's many languages with the same skill—then this book will go down as that "moment" when Indian Eng. Lit. criticism reached maturity.

VIJAY MISHRA

Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, eds. *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*. London: Random House, 1997. Pp. xxiii, 578. £7.95; £5.60 (India).

Salman Rushdie seems to have a special gift for getting embroiled in controversy. This time he has ensured it even before *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* reached India by publishing the introduction in the special fiction issue of *The New Yorker*. His contention that "there is only one Indian writer in translation whom I would place on par with the Indo-Anglian" (52) provoked a large number of Indian academics to question Rushdie's credentials. The book features fiction and non-fiction by 32 authors, including Rushdie himself, and the second half of the "Introduction" (xvii-xxiii) provides a good guide to the writers who appear in the anthology. It is the opening section which has raised hackles. Rushdie declares:

> The prose writing—both fiction and non-fiction—created in this period by Indians working in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 official languages of India, the so-called "vernacular languages," during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning "Indo-Anglian" literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. (x)