

K.D. Verma. *The Indian Imagination: Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English*. New York: New Martin's Press, 2000. Pp. x, 268. \$69.50

K.D. Verma's *The Indian Imagination: Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English* examines selected works by Aurobindo Ghose ("Sri Aurobindo"), Mulk Raj Anand, Balachandra Rajan, Nissim Ezekiel, Anita Desai, and Arun Joshi as "representations of a consciousness." The identifiable consciousness is, according to Verma, the consequence of tradition and modernity confronting each other, and arising particularly from an intense sense of tradition during the colonial and postcolonial times (of India). Thus the colonial and postcolonial periods set the boundaries of this study. By applying works from especially the colonial period and from the empire to the Indian writings in English, Verma argues that postcolonial studies does not preclude colonial studies. The thesis comes timely when hiring universities increasingly use terms such as 'contemporary minority literatures' or 'post-independence literatures' to define a specialization in postcolonial literatures.

However, such a thesis comes with its own challenges. For example, the book rarely considers the fields of pre-colonial literature other than the religious and canonical (Sanskrit) works such as the *Bhagavagita* or the *Mahabharata*, nor does it concern itself with the extra-colonial, those worlds in the sub-continent that lived and died and lived again without a single word or concern that could be called English, or the world of translations of all periods. Further, Verma's view of an East-West relationship of "confrontation and synthesis" (2) acknowledges a rather limited function of post/colonial cultures and ideologies. The perspective can benefit from Homi Bhabha's insights into *ambivalence* as an ever-changing mode beyond complicity and resistance that disturbingly moves into *mimicry* that may or may not be mockery, further suggesting decentered and multiple levels of *hybridity*.

Verma's book begins with an introductory chapter entitled, "Indian Writing in English: Structure of Consciousness, Literary History and Critical Theory." The switch from "imagination" in the title to "fantasy" briefly and then to "consciousness" in this chapter and in the rest of the book goes unexplained. The meaning of consciousness, as one gathers from a reading of the entire book, varies from a translation of *cit* as "pure consciousness" (41) to a vaguely Hegelian argument of the subject as a thinking agent. (193) But the concept of an over-arching mental awareness makes room for Verma's insistence on what he calls, "the universal" and "the human," two highly volatile terms in the field of postcolonial discourse. Some of the dire consequences of

Verma's insistence are: he praises Aurobindo for examining "issues of literary history and criticism with Arnoldian disinterestedness and intellectual objectivity, putting aside issues of class, race and nationality" (68); further, in the "Preface," he introduces Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie* as "metaphors of universal human oppression and suffering" (n.pag.); for him, Desai's works are significant because they are "universal representations of history and human consciousness" (7). Perhaps the quickest way to point to the problem here is by quoting Bhabha from his article in *October* 28 (Spring 1984), "Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse":

Universalism does not merely end with a view of immanent 'spiritual' meaning produced in the text. It also interpellates, for its reading, a subject positioned at the point where conflict and difference resolves and all ideology ends. It is not that the Transcendental subject cannot *see* historical conflict or colonial difference as mimetic structures or themes in the text. What it cannot conceive, is how it is *itself* structured ideologically and discursively in relation to those processes of signification, which do not then allow for the possibility of whole or universal meanings. (104)

In other words, in aspiring to 'the universal and the human' what is registered is a Eurocentric preference and that too for the canonical.

The three chapters following the introduction are on Aurobindo as poet, thinker, and critic. Aurobindo is one of those in whom Verma finds a "unique synthesis of the East and the West" (33). It seems that reverence for the *guru* sometimes impedes Verma's critical analysis of the works of Aurobindo and later of Anand. Therefore, when Tagore praises Aurobindo announcing, "India will speak through your voice to the world," Verma sees no problem with the respective roles assigned to both Aurobindo and to India. The chapter that deals with Aurobindo's epic *Savitri* as "a Miltonic, Romantic and Tennysonian poem" takes off on eulogies by those such as Romain Rolland and Ronald Nixon, and without much ado, Verma lists Aurobindo with Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, and his poetry with Vyasa, Homer, Virgil, Dante and Milton. In explaining this categorizing, Verma writes: "Although the structure of *Savitri* is intricate, self-defiant and elusive, the poem is extremely well unified and tightly knit. The nature of its unity is not literal but symbolic, that is, the unity of form and meaning" (38). A reader may not always get too many clues to the rationale behind these adjectives. Further, a question such as, could Satyavan (i.e., Aurobindo) redeem his spouse were *she* (Savitri/Mrinalini Bose) the victim of *Yama* unfortunately remains irrelevant to Verma's dedication to Aurobindo.

Of the following two chapters on Mulk Raj Anand, it is the latter chapter that introduces the author while the former appears to directly plunge into his works. In attempting to discuss at once the oeuvre: *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, *The Seven Ages of Man*, *Apology for Heroism*, *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, *Two Leaves and a Bud*, *The Village*, *Across the Black Waters*, and *The Big Heart*, Verma loses the opportunity to examine any single work at length. Again, attempts at universalizing themes lead Verma to conclude that Gauri of *Untouchable* is “very much like Hardy’s Tess” (100). Others such as Catherine Earnshaw, Jane Eyre, and Hetty Sorrel are not far behind in this comparison. “In a sense,” reveals Verma, “we all are untouchables and coolies” (93). While it is the liberal metaphorizing of a specific social issue that results in this generalizing, Verma does not tell us what the literary, philosophical, or practical use of this conclusion is.

The rest of the book includes a chapter each on Balachandra Rajan’s novel, *The Dark Dancer*, Nissim Ezekiel’s collection of poems, *The Unfinished Man*, Anita Desai’s novel, *Baumgartner’s Bombay*, and two chapters on Arun Joshi’s novels, *The Apprentice* and *The Last Labyrinth*, respectively. These chapters through close readings have a greater sense of focus, a more sustained and comprehensive development of concepts, and clarity of expression. However, here too the characters of Rajan, for example, remind Verma of British rather than any Indian counterparts: “Krishnan’s mother reminds one of Mrs. Bennett of *Pride and Prejudice*” (135); further, Verma makes a startling, if enigmatic, argument for the Dark Dancer in a Yeatsian mask (136). His conclusion that Krishnan’s wife Kamala represents the moral and philosophical position of Gandhi needs to be re-examined in the context of a quotation from the Dark Dancer that Verma himself introduces, words spoken by Kamala that implicate in one breath ‘occupation,’ ‘submission,’ and ‘obedience’ whether to the State or to the family as equally death-dealing. The patriarchs unfortunately hear only what they want, and hence the comparison to Gandhi. Another, point of concern is Verma’s random references to the communal riots during Partition as “racial riots” (142). While Verma does well to denounce the riots, he does not rationalize his assumption that the parties involved, Hindus and Muslims, belong to different races.

Verma provides enlightening close readings of Ezekiel’s *The Unfinished Man*. He quotes the poet extensively giving the reader a taste of about nine of his poems. The secondary sources referred to and critiqued are out-dated (mostly from the sixties), but the perspective that Verma brings to these poems in their comparisons with the canon (Ezekiel’s “Barbaric City” and Blake’s “London”) are relevant to postcolonial studies as demonstrations of writing *for* the center. Desai’s Hugo Baumgartner is once again compared to

Hardy's Tess etc., and this chapter introduces the novel and provides an easy-to-follow analysis of the work in terms of the development of the protagonist. The last chapter, on Joshi's *The Last Labyrinth*, is perhaps the best in terms of a clear thesis and development of argument. One might take issue with a problematic interpretation of the female characters in this novel as "commentary" to the "tragic product" that is the male protagonist. (209), but this chapter as well as the one on Joshi's *The Apprentice* are mostly free from digressions on the canon and effectively achieve their purpose mainly through an analysis of the relevant protagonists. The absence of a concluding chapter prevents Verma from bringing together some of the connecting themes in his work and from theorizing his understanding of consciousness and universalism in relation to the selected pieces.

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Keith Foulcher and Tony Day, eds. *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002. pp. viii, 381. US \$35.71 pb.

The essays in *Clearing A Space* emerge from a workshop on "Postcoloniality and the Question of Modern Indonesian Literature" held at the University of Sydney in 1998. For those unfamiliar with Indonesian literature, the collection provides fairly strong grounding to some of the complexities in approaching canonical Indonesian texts as well as other writings marginalized by region or regional languages, style, genre and author's gender.

According to the editors, the term "postcolonialism" in the book defines "a critical discourse that can be used to investigate the specific literary properties of 'postcoloniality' in Indonesian literature" (3). Postcolonial critical strategies, for the authors in the collection, demonstrate the interplay of particular multiple local and global forces that provide form and meaning to the texts analyzed. Such strategies are also applied to literary texts written during the colonial Netherlands Indies to draw attention to the hybrid cultural formations and identities emerging from the colonial experience. Moreover, the notion of not having passed the last "post" in "postcolonial" literature pervades literary and critical writings from the era of President Suharto's New Order regime. Common elements like questioning canonicity and a keen engagement with Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry, hybridity, ambivalence, and "third space" ensure the book's appeal to a broader, more universal readership of other postcolonial literatures and criticism.