

ways. *L.A. Law* is not feminist or anti-feminist, she argues, but often uses the multiple narrative format to make contradictory claims (the famous lesbian kiss episode between CJ and Abby is coupled with another plot line that equates homosexuality with pederasty). The show is framed such that it benefits both from feminism and from the status quo, getting to swing both ways. What I like about Mayne's close readings of the swinging doors in media culture, is that it shifts feminist and queer arguments away from moral claims ("this is good" or "this is bad;" "this resists" or "this is co-opted"), to specific analysis of the workings of gender and sexuality.

The pleasure of reading *Framed* comes from the minute and multiple moments that take one beyond the male gaze and open into a labyrinth of possibilities for analysing the pleasures and frustrations of watching today.

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Rumina Sethi, *Myths of the Nation: National Identity and Literary Representation*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999. Pp. 232. £42.

Indian writing in English has charted a different course since the eighties, registering in some ways the shift from the teleological, identity-based model of Commonwealth literature criticism to a kind of postcolonial criticism that is increasingly concerned with the locations of cultural self-representation. The four stages of Indian English writing that S. K. Desai saw as paralleling "a counter-historical consciousness," starting with the uncritical acceptance of colonial modernity, followed by ambivalence, then a return to roots and traditions, and finally the establishment of a separate and relational identity, hinged on an idea of postcolonial Indianization marked by a (re)discovery of "the 'genuinely' Indian" sensibility (57). Current postcolonial discourse largely rejects this notion of an authentic, unified, homogeneous recovery of traditions and pasts, demanding, instead, greater attention to the exclusions of history, its gaps and silences, and the relations of class, caste, religion, gender, and language that structure representations of history and culture.

Rumina Sethi's *Myths of the Nation* starts from the premise that it is the thematics of Indianness or Indianization in Indian writing in English, particularly in the periods of nation-building, that can explain its "persuasive, and even progressive form, and its consequent reach towards 'reality'" (7). Historical fiction does not only reflect the nationalist ideology but also constructs models of cultural identity through various narratological forms, such as oral history, vernacularism, parabolic, and prophetic legends, myths, and folktales. The focus of the study is Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, first published in 1938, a

methodological choice that, Sethi claims, allows her to trace the processes by which historical fiction functions as the literary arm of nationalist ideology.

Disentangling some of these interconnected processes are five distinct segments. The first chapter looks at the indigenization of the English language by making it the carrier of the oral, multicultural, and hierarchically divided cultural identities of India. Sethi details the stylistic variations employed by Rao to convey an aural rather than visual culture through a repertoire of conjunctions, ironic modes of address, and translations of the curses and blessings "appropriate" to ordinary village folk (52). The second chapter investigates the novel's association with Gandhian philosophy and a concurrent stepping out of history into a deathless metaphysics of liberation. Central to this process is Kanthapura's local Congress leader, whose transformation from a "Gandhi man" to a saint evokes the sublation of Gandhi's political image to a divine one in order to enhance mass support. The third and fourth chapters take up Rao's depiction of the sudden political awakening in Kanthapura, especially among the women. The bloody uprising that ensues against foreign rule is described by Sethi as a move towards "historical syncretism . . . wholly identifiable with classical Hinduism" rather than an historical interpretation and analysis of the resistance (129). A comparison of contemporary people's movements with Rao's allegorical representation of resistance brings Sethi to the conclusion that Rao's women, like Gandhi's, remain strongest when they see in the image of the nation their goddess Kenchamma, the best of tradition and womanhood. The homogeneous discourse of nationalism, thus, cannot articulate the conditions of subaltern resistance: the pariahs or the lower castes, the coolies of the coffee plantation, and the women labourers. The penultimate chapter of the book traces quickly the development of Rao's vision of the essence of India through a further immersion in high Hinduism and a more concerted construction of the "real" Indian or insider. Sethi concludes that in "the trajectory of Rao's vision from *Kanthapura* to *The Chessmaster*, we can see the evolution of a select Hindu India which resolves Gandhi's moral concerns in the ideal representation of a universal, all-embracing 'India'" (171). The final chapter underlines the book's starting premise that fiction performs a kind of cultural work that is both distinct from and a part of history. While both history and fiction work with discourses and languages, it is not by dismissing the imagined communities in both but by looking closely at the myths and identities they construct that we will grasp better the power of their persuasion and the reach of the realities they construct.

The structure of *Myths of the Nation* undercuts the harmonious tautology of Rao's *Kanthapura*, where the class, caste, and gender divisions flow naturally as it were into the catalogues of village life as part

of the bountiful, simple, and ritualistic life of the village. Splitting the novel along separate and opposing thrusts, Sethi reveals the schisms underlying the homogeneity of *Kanthapura's* nationalist discourse, namely, "the ideological and the novelistic/dramatic" and "the Gandhian/national and the Brahmanic" (90). By looking at how a Hinduist common destiny is scripted to harmonize and naturalize social divisions and contradictions, Sethi performs important critical work in prying open the text's nationalist vision of a postcolonial future.

Exactly how and why the imagined community of *Kanthapura* rooted in a Brahmanic, Sanskritic, traditional rural ethos remains relevant, as national/historical fiction today, especially in the context of the developments and transformations of its imagined community, does not seem adequately explained, however. Although raising several questions about the meaning and significance of Brahmins themselves becoming the debunkers of caste hierarchies in Rao's novel, Sethi does not position Rao's nationalist politics within contesting conceptions of nationalism nor in relation to contemporary organized movements against caste and class domination.

One phenomenon that remains on the margins of this study of the myths of national identity is the disturbing reach of communalism in the decades preceding independence and in the present. Even as Rao writes *Kanthapura* (1938) and after Gandhi performs his legendary salt march (1930), Hindu-Muslim riots are being reported from various parts of India. The nationalism of Gandhi, Nehru and others was conceptualized, as Gyanendra Pandey shows, to contain such strife: "one would have to say that communalism and nationalism, as we understand them today, arose together; the age of communalism was concurrent with the age of nationalism; they were part of the same discourse" (236). The pattern of mainstream nationalist discourse that evolved in this period emphasized Nation over Community, the privatization of religion, and ancient Hindu principles of unity, tolerance, and syncretism as the framework of nationalism fit to contest colonialism and separatism. This new nationalism that seemed to dissociate itself from communal identities contained not only embedded Hindu perspectives that were noted by Muslim nationalists, but its construction of a "pure" Spirit of India, mirrored in its many kings and spiritual leaders, left out the lived political and material struggles of the people. This context of the embedded relationship between communalism and nationalism in India's colonial history and the continued prevalence of the idea of a spiritually superior Indian culture cannot be missed in *Kanthapura's* nationalist discourse.

The nationalist strain in Rao's *Kanthapura* acquires a more dangerously communalistic tone in the novel's treatment of women's politicization and is a chilling reminder of the growing participation

of women in communal organizations. Rumina Sethi compares the local struggle of the women in *Kanthapura* to the techniques of the Gandhian mobilization of women in the nationalist movement, noting both the opportunities afforded by the latter and its limitations. The contradictions between vision and articulation are made clear in the image of the “heroic role of women . . . in leading the revolution against inequality, abuse, and social justice,” a role, which remained nonetheless fixed on “the symbology of the mother, so that women entered public life primarily to play maternal roles” (134).

In analysing the central place of religion in the representation of the women’s involvement and resistance, however, Sethi seems to miss the convergence of the novel’s gender ideology with the ideologies of womanhood within a burgeoning Hindu communalism. The Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS) — the virulently anti-Muslim, patriarchal, upper-caste Brahminic force — established its women’s wing in 1936. Religion, the very heart of the RSS mobilization, interpellates women as not only mothers but also Hindu subjects, custodians of the lived faith, heroic members of the Hindutva brigade, facsimiles of mother goddesses. The spontaneous, apparently apolitical solidarity of the women of *Kanthapura*, organized in the name of the Goddess Kenchamma with her benign and monstrous powers, the leadership of Brahmin widows, recalling the iconic status of celibate women within Hindu nationalism, and the suppression of class agitations in favour of loyalty to the nation, bear striking similarities with the Hindu right’s structuring and management of the space of women’s politics and history. What Tanika Sarkar has to say about the Rashtrasevika Samiti (the women’s wing of the RSS) fits the representation of women’s resistance in *Kanthapura*: “it expands the horizons of domesticity and adds serious, politicised dimension to femininity. At the same time, the thrust of the transformation is to obliterate the notion of selfhood, to erase concern with social and gender justice . . .” (188). The return of the *Kanthapura* women into the folds of domesticity and religious practices at the end of the novel, also marked by the choric repetition of the names of Hindu nationalist heroes and deities and the removal of Badé Khan, the “short, bearded, lip-smacking, smoking, spitting, booted” Muslim police officer from the scene (122), does not reflect the aftermath of such radical peasant movements as Telangana and Tebhaga, but reaffirms the return to such cultural roots as may be signified in ancient Sanskritic scriptural injunctions of worship and service.

Having identified several of these scenarios in her book, Rumina Sethi places the book firmly “within the genre of historical fiction emerging in India at the time” (149) and attributes the success of the book to its convincing construction of “what are commonly believed to be the mythological qualities of the Indian ‘soul’” (150).

In this, Sethi stops short of advancing her documentation of Rao's literary and political maneuverings to questions of authorial and critical self-positioning. A theory of historicity seems implicit in the book, often opposed to fictionality and invoked through comparisons between "ideological" and "material," or "ideological" and "dramatic"; however, that theory is unable to interpret the overlaps and the crises of identity that the intersection of these terms necessarily compels.

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ROMITA CHOUDHURY

Eleanor Cook. *Against Coercion: Games Poets Play*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1998. Pp. xiv, 318. \$39.50.

Eleanor Cook argues that poems are "serious games" (xi) that "proceed by indirection" (xii) and that these "indirections speak to our entire lives" (xi). For Cook, the rhetorical game of poetry is so serious that it is nothing short of a war waged against coercion. The amalgam of play and war is not unfamiliar to readers of her earlier book, *Poetry, Word-Play and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*. Focusing primarily on twentieth-century poetry and culture, Cook portrays the poet as a figure of unexhausted power: the poet "has been there already, has thought of *x*, has felt *y*, has observed *z*, and will thereby direct the reader further" (xiii). As appealing as the image of powerful poets may be, one cannot help but think that Cook is more convinced of their cultural power than they themselves were. It is hard not to think of Stevens's anxiety respecting his "positively lady-like" (L 180) habit of poetry-making and Ammons's relief to find that his testicles are (thank God!) still there after he has been sitting around for hours typing a long poem on (of all things!) an adding-machine tape. Still Cook's argument is compelling and impeccably defended throughout. She enthusiastically exhibits the power of poetic language to liberate us, personally and nationally.

In the nineteen essays that constitute the volume, the poetry of Eliot, Stevens, Bishop, Wordsworth, and Milton, to name the principal players in the grand game of poetry-making, is subjected to the rigor of Cook's method of "putting pressure on a poem" (xiii). And she is anything but guilty of hyperbole when, in the *Foreword*, she informs