

## EDITORIAL

During 2006 I was a Fulbright Scholar in the US lecturing on various aspects of Indian thought and culture. The students and scholars who attended my lectures were quite keen on India and were very well informed. They prepared themselves in an up-to-date manner and I had to take extra care that I was also avant-garde enough to lead them on into debates and discussions of continued relevance. However, what struck me about the young people as rather singular was their insistence on issues within the specific decade—none appeared to be too interested in matters beyond their own times. Even during the innumerable extra-mural discussions very few chose to deliberate on the *past*: their references were always about *the last decade* or at the most *the last two decades*! Back home in India things are not too different these days. With the ubiquitous presence of the internet and the sophisticated laptops and palmtops within reach of the average student there has spread a new sort of *here-and-now* attitude which includes a sheer negligence of anything that's history as holding forth but mere *show-case* significance. The past has now become a bucket *of ashes*!

The concern for the present is certainly a healthy attitude, no doubt and something most welcome among the young. But the total negligence or complete absence of a sense of history is quite a dangerous issue. For the present all our memory appears to reach back only in terms of a few decades, and we appear to be more than contented with this. In literature this appears as the media-concocted hype on young people's writings marketed as of great value (and no one talks of timeless relevance!). Ignorance of history is one thing but the inordinate discarding of significant issues of the past is a perilous affair. We need to recall that our present is but a continuity of our past, and our future is conditioned by our responses to our past as well. By hiding our heads in the dreary sands of the present like an ostrich letting life pass by we are no doubt hastening in an intellectual apocalypse. Not too long a time ago (1987), Allan Bloom spoke about the closing of the American Mind. Whatever were the political correctness or incorrectness of the issues he was highlighting then the point was that western mind appeared to close down its own intellectual heritage in the wake of certain ideologies. Is this also happening in the Indian context?

Cultural symbols are codified in our artistic and literary creations.

The acts of representations are thus of utmost significance as signs of the times and to understand a culture is to understand the cultural act.

We live and move amidst sights and sounds. What we make of our lives depends a lot on the way we read meaning and significance in these. Moreover there are other signs and symbols both visual and verbal that we deliberately create in order to communicate with ourselves as well with others. These constitute our representations of the world around us. However, acts of representation need not always also dissociate ourselves from the world as it presents itself to us. The process could also lead us back towards a symbiotic relationship or engagement with our existence in the world.

What we normally understand by *culture* is a document composed of specific signs, sounds and symbols. And some of these are self-reflexive representations consciously and deliberately conceived. That ours is a world contaminated by the ingenuous association, combination and even banal confusion of multifarious signs, sounds and symbols is a tactile fact for which we need not seek farther than our own individual responses for corroboration. How do we make sense of this situation? Do we need to make any efforts at all, or is it a natural process? How do we go about reading and re-reading the represented image? Some of these queries would take us back to the ontological questions of art, literature and aesthetic representation. And this forms the general atmosphere of these essays.

Reading into representations, we can make some sense of our culture and metaphysics. The manner and mode of our reading or re reading also would contribute to the significance of the acts of representations. Culture transforms and is transformed through such representations. History and ideology also contribute to representations. Representation is thus sign, sense and meaning. In their various ways these essays engage with some of these issues in their various dimensions.

Contemporary theoretical discourse has introduced into our cultural practice, concepts such as *centre, periphery, text, context, difference, alterity, subversion, transgression* and the like. These have in turn triggered new intellectual vibrancy into the general slackening of dynamics and direction that followed on the wake of the modernist movement of the sixties and the political radicalism of the seventies—more so in south India. There also exists simultaneously a transverse concern for a new nationalism/internationalism with its consequent ambivalent attitude towards the postcolonial western-style modernizing of society, state and the nation. How do our cultural practices respond to these? What is their present status/dynamis? Is there a need for the cultural idiom to be excessively

concerned with theoretical issues? What is the role of critical theory and practice in the context(s) of Indian literary and artistic representations? Is there already a strong intellectual movement to subvert and turn the centre-periphery model inside out? What has happened to the tentative attempts—those probings and explorations toward a common Indian Poetic/ aesthetic—toward the retracing of regional ideology and narrative? How do problems related to region, language and culture operate in the larger framework of nation, religion, spirituality and the narrative? Where and how do problems of region and environment, gender and ethnicity, figure in these? These are among the many questions that the following essays attempt to formulate answers for, in their various ways. By incorporating the works of creative writers/artists and critical thinkers the volume hopes to throw significant light on these issues. After all no statement can achieve that finality of truth, and every act of representation is but an attempt in this direction.

The opening essay, *Breaking the Bowl of Clay: The Dynamics of Representation*, argues that our present day world is *fabricated into being* by the extremely sophisticated media that is an offshoot of technology. We are living in a virtual reality, not only on account of the complexities of our media culture, but also due to the inordinate flux of economic and market values into our ontological framework. In short, contemporary culture has come to be profoundly commercial. Mass produced market oriented values dominate us and control and manipulate every aspect of our lives. The television and the internet have come to represent primarily the commodity culture alongside the big-moneyed film industry. They churn out so-called popular images of culture fetishizing the same as the supremely valuable commodity. In the words of Walter Benjamin, “Culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented!” Perhaps it is the developing countries more than the so called developed that face the mighty presence of the cyber world. For, the process of production of a post industrial situation has been for the developed countries a process historically necessitated (through the feudal to the monarchical and post renaissance enlightenment, industrial revolution etc) while the developing countries did not have to evolve through such similar paradigms in order to access a globally shared technological know-how. Nevertheless in our present day world one cannot segregate even cultural crisis! We share our technologies and we share our crisis very much like we share our air and our skies, or water. Nowadays the television has come to represent our reality for us. Even the veracity of an incident gains its validity only when represented through this medium! Reality has become virtual. Semioticians and culture critics have time and

again reminded us that any representation is more than what it represents, more than merely a reproduction of what it represents, it also contributes to the construction of reality. The essay goes on to draw attention to the cultural implications of these issues. The contemporary aesthetic cannot be dissociated from history and the socio cultural reality. There does exist a dialectical relationship between the represented and the real. Therefore the inverted virtual image that our commercial culture parades through our present day visual media only serves to distance us further and further from the real. The discussion that is organized under four heads: *the dynamics of representation; representation and cultural dialectics; representing the real; representation and value*, contends that in order to reorient ourselves toward our forfeited human values, we need to break our idols as much as our delusions. The begging bowl of clay needs to be shattered. The spiritual is the most dynamic and therefore the real!

Ashokamitran is an *Indian writer in Tamil* of renown and recognition. His *Literature, Culture and Society- A Writer's Response*, is indeed a personalised response to the cultural scenario of the Tamil country. He points out that creative writing in the Tamil has not been able to keep the momentum and dynamic that was set forth by the Siddha writers, beginning with Sivavakkaiar, which although largely spiritual and metaphysical, did hold the seeds for further replenishment. However, the literature of the last one hundred and fifty years could be seen to provide a record of a dialectical relationship with the history and society of this part of the world. The essay is set forth in a personalized narrative tone and inquires further into this relationship between creative literature and contemporary culture.

K Ayyappa Paniker in his *Vive la Difference!: Imperialism, Colonialism, Post-colonialism— Challenges to Cultural Plurality*, speaks about culture and imperialism in the context of colonization. He uses the term 'imperialism' to refer to the attitudes and behaviour patterns of a culture that exercises hegemony of some kind or other on cultures different from itself. The term colonialism, as he points out, could then be used to the situation of a culture that is dominated by another culture. One of these is identified in terms of assumed superiority which does not brook any questioning by the other, while the other is tacitly assumed to be the recipients of the so-called benefits of contact with the dominant culture. The two are conceived as opposites and the relationship is dialectical. The colonization of the country is followed by the *colonialization* of the subject population, and this invariably colonializes the culture too. Hegemonial acceptance of the behavioural patterns of the superior culture undermines the indigenous one. Even now in the contexts of globalisation there looms large the threat of homogenization that wipes out all differences.

Information technology seems to pave the path of standardization, until a counter-technology is developed which will control the tendency towards homogenization of cultures.

Any effort to reconstruct/deconstruct women's discourse from the historical past would bring up questions regarding methodology and cultural constructs. Issues such as the authenticity of the woman's voice and the socio-cultural framework of the utterance would of necessity surface. UshaVT in *Voices Behind the Veil: Representing Bhakti* draws attention to these theoretical issues while contextualising the discourse of the women mystics of medieval south India. Does representing the personal as the public necessarily exclude the mainstream, she asks. Was the notion of invisibility foregrounded in order to subvert the voices behind the veil? Or was it the notion of valorizing silence as a desirable feminine trait that precluded women's utterances from being heard? Usha explores the concept of woman's space within the religio-cultural sphere through a close reading and analysis of the writings of two women mystics, Andal and Akka Mahadevi.

In *Premodern Superstitions: A Counter-normative Approach*, M. Ramakrishnan, argues that the smooth and even contours that demarcate the modern from the premodern are the conceptual creations of modernity motivated by a deep-rooted myth rather than the logic of objective analysis. In the latter day view that postmodernism affords, the divide can be seen as actually emerging from the modernist tendencies to historicism propped on binary oppositions like man/ nature, mind/matter, male/female etc. The essay goes on to contextualise certain premodern "beliefs" that would be shelved as merely local or folk, and problematises them historically. Received knowledge from the traditional societies need to be seen in newer perspectives as sacred and valuable.

In *The Story of my Experiments with Writing Life: Problematising the Feminine Pen?*, B. Chandrika—, better known through her Malayalam pen name Chandramathi—writes of her own attempts from quite early in life to be honest and truthful to experience. Reflecting on her writing career she feels that the social contexts have perhaps become less frozen in our own times and this loosening of rigidity could account for the greater reach of contemporary writers, especially the woman writer. Fiction, she observes, could offer the best way to counter the forces of dominance and de-stability.

Guillermo Rodriguez Martin in *"Modern" Indian Poetry in English: Some Critical Issues*, reflects on the situation of modernity in the context of Indian poetry in English. He examines critical positions like questions of identity, idea of nation and nationality, region and the narrative. He feels that, in order to come to

*terms with ideas of modern and the post modern, we need to re-frame our own literary contexts and cultural history.*

Madhusudhana Rao's *Places without Road maps: Significance of Place in the Postcolonial Discourse*, focuses on the simultaneous existence of place and language as means of identity in postcolonial discourse. This takes place at two levels in recent Indian fiction in English: first it becomes a presence in the writer's mind in creating the mood and guiding the narrative destiny: second, it becomes a means of internalizing the self and place for the personal satisfaction of the writer. The essay goes on to explore the imaginary homelands in Salmon Rushdie's fiction.

Postmodern concepts caught on in fashionable literary circles in Kerala quite early. However, they only added to the welter and confusion in intellectual and creative terms, argues MGS Narayanan in his *Modernism, Postmodernism, Creativity and Colonialism in Malayalam Literature*. The essay goes on to argue that the end of imitation marks the beginning of creativity. It is the dearth of creativity that marks the advent of hypocritical self-asseverations and fashionable jargons. For Narayanan, the recourse to almost all contemporary critical jargons in the historical context of contemporary Malayalam writing reveal but the insufficiency of the well-springs of creativity.

Lalitha Lenin considers the advent of postmodernism in the contexts of information and communication technology. *Theoretical perspective of Subalternity: A Different Approach to Literature and Culture*, is thus a re-examination of critical issues in this direction. In her view, the new theoretical decentralisation of power that the advent of postmodernism signifies, proffers more scope for empowering the subaltern and the dalit, and so might prove to be quite fruitful in the future.

Raman Nair's essay *Repositories of Representations: People's Information Systems in Kerala—A Short Survey*, is an overall view of the status and development of public libraries in this part of the world and how intimately they are linked to the culture.

Usha Bande in her *Representing Culture, Repossessing History: Cultural Nuances in Three Indian English Novels*, argues that the cultural implication of the colonial experience is one of the significant aspects of literary studies in the postcolonial period. She cites Fanon's observation that colonialism not only enslaves a people politically but also devalues their precolonial history, thus invading their culture and present. The essay goes on to make a study of three works of fiction in order to examine how the authors reclaim their identity by remapping their cultural territory, and how, by reverting to the traditional narrative strategies they work out an indigenous framework.

*The Theatre of Protest* in Kerala signaled in more ways than one, the emerging political consciousness in the people. Vayala Vasudevan Pillai's essay provides an overall view of the development of the political theatre of the seventies and eighties in Kerala. As he shows, the theatre was directed at enlightening the common man and at questioning the so called "upper class and the elite" on contemporary issues directly concerned with peace, food, freedom and social justice, irrespective of caste, creed and sex. The German master Bertolt Brecht and several other innovators have been instrumental in shaping this spirit of enquiry and self-reflexivity on aspects of the stage and performance.

Enrique Cámara de Landa's *Three Perspectives for the study of Hybridization in the Italian Tango*, is an interesting case study of the hybridization of the Argentinian Tango in the Italian culture. Fundamentally identified with its place of origin this dance form has undergone much transformation(s) and cross-cultural diffusions. The analysis of the structural traits in the Italian tango reflects, as Enrique Camara shows in his study, the product of an interaction of the various elements —suppression, substitution, transformation, etc.

In the final analysis, I hope, these essays in their various ways reveal, the multifarious aspects of representation and its dynamics in culture, literature and the arts. And as I remarked at the beginning, their prime momentum lies in the pursuit of those ontological questions in terms of cultural and aesthetic representation.