

## Tradition-Modernity Encounter in Postcolonial Indian Literature

Satish C Aikant, *Postcolonial Indian Literature: Towards a Critical Framework*, Shimla, IAS, 2018, pp. viii+113, Rs. 425.

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Anthologies, books, and readers on both postcolonial literature and theory are innumerable and the plethora of writings on this area are in many ways compelling both the readers and researchers to consider this field and use its resources carefully. Contrary to this assumption, there are still books and studies being churned out from publishing houses proving the field to be an inexhaustible terrain of scholarship. Not just Asian and African academia, rather even European and American scholars with added enthusiasm engaging with postcolonial writings produced by native, Diasporic and expatriate authors having the tenor of colonial, anti-colonial and decolonial underpinnings. The leading scholars in this area like Gayathri C. Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Aijaz Ahmad and so on have taken new turns in their theoretical ruminations in order to keep the field alive with new rules of the game in place. Hence, the discipline of Postcolonial Studies remains relevant and vibrant as both the creative and the critical output are prolific.

Aikant's book on postcolonial Indian literature (the title of the book is the same) bears witness to the in-depth research happening in Indian academia in this field and how it is promoted by the Centers of Academic Excellence such as the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS). The nine pages 'Select Bibliography' at the end of the book does attest to the serious and rigorous research that this author undertook during his two years of fellowship at IIAS Shimla. The book follows a simple effective writing style that allows even a novice in postcolonial studies to grasp the background and easily follow the debates and arguments. The first two chapters introduce the reader to the world of postcolonial literature and theory and provide ample background and familiarize them with the seminal writers and thinkers of the field. In the introductory chapter, the author

declares openly that the scope of the book is confined to the landscape and mindscape of the colonial enterprise of the 'the British Empire' and so the nations, people and literature under perusal are inheritors of a common cultural and linguistic coloniality. The relationship of colonialism with capitalism and imperialism and the thin line between the three are presented in a lucid manner in the beginning. The scholarly engagement with the very understanding of colonialism and its various epochs and epiphanies pave the base to comprehend the complexity of postcolonialism. The invocations to Indian and Western scholars to 'position' the postcolonial turn out to be successful as the writer affirms "... in its therapeutic retrieval of the colonial past, postcolonialism needs to define itself as an area of study which is willing not only to make, but also to gain, theoretical sense out of the past" (p. 10). The historical contours of postcolonial studies invariably involve serious discussions on the categories like 'centre', 'margin', hybridity, 'identity', 'other' and many more and this book deals with all of them in a situated manner. The interdisciplinary nature of this field is brought out by exposing the tools used by it in estimating 'the proper order of things' and the author assigns postcolonialism as a novel way of 'seeing the world' and 'representing reality' against the grain of colonial hegemony.

Postcolonial theory is introduced through the controversy of Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad on third world literatures as "national allegory" and this approach produces curiosity in the reader to know and go deeper into this discipline, which is by nature controversial and revolutionary. The discursive function of the postcolonial is foregrounded by showing the crisis in 'three worlds theory' propounded by the western scholars. The scope of postcolonial theory is unlimited as it focuses on

'writing' and 'resistance', in other words the act of 'the empire writes back' in theory and praxis. Postcolonial studies privileging certain authors and their theoretical positions in a way make the field narrow, and the need of the hour is to bring to lime light the articulations and pronouncements of multiple authors who engage with gender, class and caste in their writings. The long and erudite deliberation on two influential books on postcolonial theory, namely, *Orientalism* (1978) of Edward Said and *The Empire Writes Back* of Bill Ashcroft *et al* provide a broad perspective of this discipline to the reader. The parallel drawn between postcolonial theory and the Dependency theory of Economics is succinct and the impossibility to accommodate 'much of the literature from India...within the framing grid provided by ... postcolonial theory (p. 30) is also acknowledged. To make postcolonial theory 'all inclusive' the author proposes 'to rework the concepts of 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' (p. 32) and believes that it would initiate an alternative approach that would promise freedom and equality to the writer who is in 'a condition of in-betweenness'. The scathing attack on 'print capitalism' does not end in repudiating it, rather turns to be a plea to become more inclusive by bringing into its ambit the non-conventional by an act of 'widening of the literary canvas' (p. 34). There is a sustained appeal in the book demanding postcolonial theory not to slip into a 'master narrative' of hegemony, instead take a position to become a resistant force that will dismantle monolithic and totalizing concepts. The contemporaneity of postcolonial theory, according to the author, posits its ability to 'interrogate contemporary myths of unitary nationhood' and 'supply us with an ethical paradigm for a systematic critique of institutional suffering' (p. 39).

The ensuing four chapters apply postcolonial theory in the four works of four famous Indian authors and bring to light the encounter between tradition and modernity and the tension, ambiguity and ambivalence involved in this encounter. The analysis of Tagore's *The Home and the World* opens up debates on nation and nationalism, which are essentially Eurocentric and modern in nature. The emergence of nationalism in India and other colonized nations is not the result of the blind reception of western liberal tradition, instead the ferment of it came from an anti-imperial movement demanding freedom. Tagore, who was initially with Gandhi in national movement, gradually disentangled himself from it by denouncing the claims of nationalism "which teaches [them] that a country is greater than, the ideals of humanity" (p. 46). The gory picture of World War I reaffirmed Tagore's position on nationalism and he believed it to be a utilitarian idea to the core as it disinvests humanity of its spiritual nature. Tagore was dismissive of both virulent

nationalism of the West and the non-violent nationalism of Gandhi. The novel exposes the futility of nationalism that ignores righteousness and conscience. The protagonist of the novel verbalises Tagorian vision of nationalism that privileges humanity over nation. *Bande Mataram* in the novel metamorphoses into a totalitarian/fascist paean and by doing this Tagore "registers his absolute disapproval of the iconographic phrases that drive nationalism" (p. 54). Tagore envisioned an internationalism that promoted a symbiosis of the East and West within a pattern of 'creative engagement'. Thus, the postcolonial ideal of nationalism finds an alternative vision in Tagore in which 'Home' and the 'World' transcend the narrow walls of division and embrace the ideal "*Vasudhaiva Kudumbakam*".

The chapter on R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* is a telling comment on the attitude of the Indian elite towards Indian National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The evolution of 'the notion of India as a nation' (p. 59) and Gandhi's role in it is captured well in the beginning of the essay. Then, it goes on to analyse the novel and shows the 'amorphous nature' of the colonial bourgeoisie during the national movement. Gandhi is not Mahatma in this novel, whereas in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* presents Gandhi as an incarnation. In this novel, Gandhi and his ideals are not just compromised, rather used by the 'individuals to enhance their own status' and this is a fatal blow to the person and movement that he embodies. The very expression 'Quit India' suffers infamy as it is painted and propagated by Sriram who knows not the essence of it. Thus, the novel portrays the 'general atmosphere of ambivalence' of the times and distances itself from any 'ideological commitment', which was emblematic of the majority of Indian elite and a small fraction of the common man. The novel, however, succeeds in problematising the ideals of nation and nationalism.

The thorough analysis of U.R. Ananthamurthy's novel *Samskara* provides a postcolonial reading of caste with special focus on the Brahmanical traditions and its clash with modernity. The author appreciates the novelist for writing his novel in Kannada and making his plot rural to convey a typical Indian theme. The summary of the novel given in the essay gives the reader a feel of reading the whole novel and Aikant's reliance on S. Nagarajan's study of the novel adds to its credibility. The study becomes a vehement social and political critique as he observes, "the brahmin hero represents the modern intellectual and Chandri, the lower strata of society from whom the intellectual expects new impulses and powers for a political and social renewal to emerge" (83). Projecting the protagonist Praneshacharya as an epic hero and allowing his hubris not for a tragic end, but for a renewed self-consciousness and self-discovery is a new approach to the very reading of the novel. The Acharya, confined by

the norms and rituals of Brahminism, breaks the chains and enters into a 'world beyond caste and Brahminism' and turns to be an itinerant pilgrim and leaves the novel without a resolution which according to A.K. Ramanujan, is 'a movement, not a closure'. The novel, thus, is triumphant in foregrounding the Indian specific caste issue within a postcolonial narrative structure.

The author selects Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* to analyse 'gender' in postcolonial scenario. The prominence given to women in National Movement by Gandhi went into oblivion in the post-independent era and women again "became the victims of double-oppression" (p. 95). The lives of the female characters in the novel revolve around tradition and modernity. They submit to 'a discriminate continuum with tradition' and thereby accommodate both tradition and modernity in their selfhood. The male character in the novel is a polygamous chauvinist who freely follows his libidinal drive and binds the women in his life within the normativity of the sacrament of marriage. The three women in the novel do not resist or relent against tradition, but they find consolation and audacity to live in the union of sorority and thereby repudiate the 'monumental lies' about nation, people and womanhood. Thus, women as the preserver of tradition in Indian mythology, in the novel, prepare the ground for, not a catastrophic, but a possible

change in a post-independent, postcolonial society, which is predominantly patriarchal and hypocritical.

The book, as a whole, contributes to the Indian scholarship in postcolonial studies and opens up new avenues of research with new priorities and emphasis to the young Indian scholars. The specific Indian postcolonial realities can be brought to wider attention only through such studies in place. The shortcomings of this research 'monograph' are limited, but worth mentioning. The study is totally silent about the other postcolonialism(s) outside the colonial experience of the British Empire and it is a pitfall as it may create a wrong notion of postcolonialism as a sole 'anglophone' reality. Raja Rao's 'Foreword' to his 1938 novel *Kanthapura* is certainly a manifesto to Indian postcolonial studies, but the appearance of the same citation in two places in the book could be averted. There are also certain unscholarly sweeping statements like "...colonization is a process requiring analysis and interpretation" (p. 5) and such comments in a 2018 book on postcolonial studies seem to be redundant. The summaries of the novels in chapters five and six is bit too long and it, in a way, compromises the serious research aspect of the book. Of course, these are just minor mistakes, but they in no way hamper the content and the objective of the book.