

and Mayawati celebrate *melas* in honour of Shambuka Muni but in what way this newly valourized myths help in the quest for learning, self-development and social transformation of Dalit boys and girls in the poor Dalit locales? How do common Dalits feel about such new symbols especially when it is being used for narrow political gains by the elites among them? Such an inquiry calls for a new ethnography of human subjectivity beyond valourized political discourse. The objective of engagement with discourse is not only to valourize its own terms but to subject these to further critical interrogations. Thus the links between myths and human emancipation have to be explored beyond the valourized logic of what political leaders do or say for their own power and aggrandizement.

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Melting Moments, A Collection of Punjabi Short Stories by RAGHBIR DHAND, translated and edited by RANA NAYAR, Unistar Publishers, Chandigarh, pp. 220, Rs. 295

Diaspora of educated Punjabis to United Kingdom in nineteen sixties was no less than an historic event. They went there in search of greener pastures but had to face many difficulties. The strugglers, after many years of toil, could find the jobs which could provide them honourable place in the society. Raghbir Dhand was among the lucky few who could get artistic repose, after some years of struggle, and enrich Punjabi literature with their writings. His sensitive mind

experienced social, racial and cultural tensions in the foreign land. He was bitter about the treatment meted out to the immigrants but he did not recoil from the unsavoury situations and unpleasant individuals. Rather he tried to understand the scheme of things and come to grip with the ground realities.

Nostalgia gripped his mind with great intensity all through his stay in UK. Not that he longed to come back to India, he was simply reminded of ethical values and cultural ties dear to his heart. In *Leaves of Acacia*, Dhand relates the story of two old friends who are disillusioned with the materialistic culture of the West and decide to return to India for good. The homeland is no longer a safe haven and they find to their dismay that the communal ties are no more as strong as they used to be. Towards the close of the story, Chain Singh gives vent to his feelings, to which his friend Des Raj replies, "Look Chain Singh, what you're saying is hundred per cent correct. Who has the heart to cut off his roots? You tell me, did we want to do it? After all, it's only when things reach a flashpoint that a man is forced to chew leaves of acacia." *No Exit* focusses on the plight of a youth who shuttles between his homeland and the foreign land in the hope of settling down somewhere comfortably. The end result is that he is neither here, nor there – "But the car wouldn't even move backwards. Now the wheel was rotating in the reverse motion. Forwards-backwards, forwards backwards; the rotating wheel cut a deep trench there. But the car would move neither forwards, nor backwards."

Raghbir Dhand was born on November 1, 1934 at Jandiali Kalan

in Sangrur district. His formative years were spent at Ahmedgarh where he received much of his formal education. He was hardly thirteen when partition took place and the upheaval left indelible imprints on his mind. He passed Gyani from Panjab University and started his career as a school teacher at Majitha (Amritsar). While teaching, he did his graduation privately and then joined Khalsa College for Education, Amritsar for the degree of Bachelor of Training. Later he served in different schools and, in the meanwhile, passed his MA in History from Panjab University, Chandigarh. In 1965, he migrated to England and worked in factories and offices for some years. On completing his teacher-training course from the Leeds University, he ventured forth on his coveted path of a school teacher. His quest for knowledge earned him PhD degree from Kim-U-Sung University, Pyongyang, North Korea in 1979. All these years he had been deeply associated with Progressive Writers Association of Great Britain. His untimely death in 1990 snuffed out the flame that had started burning bright in the field of Punjabi fiction.

He had in his kitty many collections of short stories when he departed from this earth. He published his first collection of short stories, *Boli Dharti* (The Deaf Earth) in 1972. In 1975 appeared *Us Paar* (Across the Shores) that highlighted his cosmopolitan outlook and presented the double perspective of a cultural outsider. His third collection *Kaaya Kalap* (The Metamorphosis) was published in 1980 wherein the dark clouds of Emergency in India loom large. His fourth collection *Kursi* (The Chair) appeared in 1988 that vouchsafed his

place as a 'self-assured settler'. Still the happenings in his homeland continued attracting his attention with great intensity. The last collection of his short stories, published in his lifetime in 1990, accentuated his mood of disillusionment and despair. The story *Shan-e-Punjab*, that gave this collection its title, was in a way his swan song.

Rana Nayar has selected, in *Melting Moments*, 14 stories of Raghbir Dhand for translation into English. He has selected only such stories as have the location of, not India, but England. The reason being that Dhand had spent almost twenty five years of his creative life there. While commenting on these stories, Nirupama Dutt has observed, "As a writer, Dhand was known to use language with the deftness of a painter's strokes and the achievement of this volume is that the translator is able to retain this ability in the English language, which is a very difficult task indeed. This volume is important not just because it is the first ever attempt to showcase Dhand's work in English but because it has been done so well with an insightful introduction putting each story in a perspective." The guiding principle behind the selection of the stories seems to be the problem of dual cultural identity.

Snowbound in London presents the perfect scenario in this context. Channo is a working woman, mostly travelling in the bus. Once she is caught up in snowstorm that leaves her stranded on the road. While waiting for the bus, she recalls how her husband saved her from the four Englishmen who tried to misbehave with her. That conduct of their's was due to the racial tension in the city. Sandhak gave sound beating to two

of them but the others wounded him badly. The incident gave her husband swollen eyes while two of his teeth were knocked out. Recalling the incident, Channo exclaims, "You accursed white men, may you burn in the fires of hell!" Before long, the bus arrives and she reaches home safely. Once at home, she feels apprehensive of her young daughter who has not reached home as yet. Then she receives a phone call:

"Hello, mummy, Jassi here!"

"Jassi, you? . . . Where are you calling from? There is snow all around . . . Where are you?"

"Mummy, don't you worry. Listen to me . . . I'm calling from interchange. All the buses to our part of the town are cancelled. Should I take a cab and come?"

"A cab? . . . No, no, don't take a cab. You just walk across. No, but don't even walk it . . . It's dark already . . . a cab is all right. . . ."

"Mummy, hurry up and tell me! I've no more change on me."

"All right, take a cab, then . . . But make sure . . . that the cab driver is not our Indian or Pakistani . . . he should be a White man . . . you understand. . . .?"

In some of the short stories, Raghbir Dhand dwells on the theme of search for identity, alienation from the land of birth and reconciliation of contradictions in the adopted land. He is particularly averse to religious fervour in human relationship. At times he takes recourse to humanistic values when the going gets tough. He has a wry sense of humour that highlights the oddities of a situation. He deftly interweaves the plot and seldom leaves a dangling strand. His approach to the characters is unbiased. Incidentally, he is rooted

to the soil of his birth but at the same time he accepts the time-tested values of the land of his adoption. His cosmopolitan outlook endears him to the readers at home and abroad. It is perhaps this aspect of his short stories that has prompted Rana Nayar to translate these into English. He has done a commendable job at the time when the readers in Punjabi have started ignoring his contribution to Punjabi fictional literature. Indeed the stories have been meticulously translated and artistically presented.

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Of War and War's Alarms and 21 other stories, by R.W. Desai, Emerald Publishers, Chennai, 2005, pp. 217, Rs. 100

Better known as a renowned Professor of English at Delhi University and internationally known as editor of *Hamlet Studies* (1979-2003), Dr RW Desai started appearing as a short-story writer in his mature years. Of course, not without a touch of professorial learning, the short-stories that Dr. Desai has gifted to us in English make an interesting reading, each offering an 'impression' of life 'with the maximum economy and felicity of expression'. The Stores, as the author himself says in his direct address 'To The Reader', are 'indicative of social awareness, of life's irony, of happiness, of frustration, of gender difference.' The list, as he puts it, 'is endless.' Every story included in the volume offers fresh experience of life narrated with severity of style and serenity of temperament, imparting profound insight into one or another aspect of the affairs of men. What the book can do to the reader