

Book Reviews

Aesthetics of Literary Classification, by Milind Malshe, Popular Prakashan, Mumbai, 2003, ISBN-81-7154-859-8, pp.178, Rs.150.

That literary classification has an epistemic, aesthetic and taxonomical basis, that distinctions between genres is a running controversy within literary and cultural studies, is the 'contract' that the book under discussion establishes between the readers and the writer. Professor Milind Malshe has been a protagonist of a very unconventional aesthetic theory of genre distinction in terms of 'contracts', a metaphysically deep notion of understanding 'deep structures' of a genre of art. Part of Malshe's novel theory of aesthetics emanates from Hindusthani classical *nritya* and *tarana* as art forms and genres that combine the configurational, representational and the mimetic aspects of aesthetics meaning in a non-linguistic mode of performance and hence breaks with the fixed traits of a genre. Applied to Western canons of aesthetic developed by Aristotle, Kant and a host of other literary theorist such as New Critics and post-Structuralists, the essentially representational aspects of a genre looks like a denial of categories, kinds and names that has evolved in the so-called Western aesthetic theories. Malshe discusses a host of such Western theories in both the fields of aesthetics and literature to

demonstrate that the criterion for distinction of genres by them produce a deeper *antinomy* between the experience of the aesthetic and the literary 'object' in a genre and the rule or the contract that 'classifies' it to a genre. Malshe, therefore, contends that the terms of debate in determining 'genres' are 'essentially contested', but 'they need not give rise to 'antinomies', which cannot be rationally resolved' (p.144). Ways of resolving such antinomies and paradoxes lie, according to Malshe, 'in the form of life and the language games of a given cultural tradition' (*Ibid.*). The question is, can we adopt a *Culturalist* position without getting entangled into the antinomies and the paradoxes that it throws us into? Shouldn't we rather adopt a third person point of view in understanding the limits of a culture bound theory of genre?

The concern about antinomy between object and the law of genre originates from Kant's anxiety about antinomies of reason. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant in a sense overcomes such antinomies, when he credits the transcendental power of imagination in creating representations of possibilities of experience, which 'schematized without concepts' and which are *also* affects of cultural objects that are present before the senses. Subjective judgment about such affects, which are non-representational, non-

conceptual and sensual, does not issue from the faculty of reason, but from a desire for the beautiful that resides in the very process of constituting a 'pure form' divested of the world of representations. Malshe goes a step further in separating aesthetic experiences from cognitive mechanisms by granting it 'autonomy' as an experience of alterity, which is an existential possibility. This strategy is paid off in a rich way when he undertakes critique of central problems within critical traditions. Particularly the idea of life as 'uncircumscribed spirit' in the Romantic-Symbolist tradition as enunciated by Virginia Woolf is commended by the author as it lies uncaptured in the images, metaphors, plots that are used to organize a text belonging to lyric, narrative or drama as a genre. This further points to the possibility of an aesthetic rendering of life without making it subservient to verbal texture of the literary text, a strategy of granting autonomy to both the text and its affectation. Such an autonomy of the text establishes the larger possibility of having a contract between the author and the reader/audience that modifies the meaning of the text to the extent that it makes possible 'reversal of values', which is an existential affect of a genre upon an audience or a community of readers, who themselves constitute the new meanings given to an

aesthetic experience. This, of course, is what goes against the dogma of the New Critics, that is, the supremacy of the text. As Malshe shifts the centre of gravity of aesthetic understanding from text to its reception in terms of responses from readers, he opens up the closures of modernist literary theories to an intersubjectively arrived meaning. In a true sense, as Malshe commends, Heideggerian critique of art-as-thing, especially Heidegger's discomfort with thing as already constituted within a horizon and suggests an alternative of creating things in art as disclosure, as 'wound of existence' (pp. 74-77).

Two limits are conflated here: limits of culture and limits of a critical tradition. The fundamental distinctions between lyric and ordinary as employed within high modern European culture with all its attendant revolutionizing functions, for Malshe, are determined by 'traditions' of culture. It is in this functional mode, concepts and distinctions utilized by literary theories, perform a cultural role. This simultaneously gives life to a prevalent aesthetic and literary theory and performs what it constructs/ deconstructs within a culture. Therefore, Malshe formulates that aesthetic and literary theories cannot be asked to deconstruct what it performs within the culture by exercising a 'reading against the grain'. If it tries to do so, it turns out to be self-contradictory as Post-structuralists like Derrida lands up in. Malshe argues that Derrida's interpretation of the statement; 'I will not mix genres' institutes the law of contamination within the law of purity. What the law of genre, 'I will not mix genres' performs by *not* allowing mixing genres is under-

mined by the law itself that does not participate in or belong to any genre. In other words, neither any specific un-mixed and individuated genre instantiates the law nor genres that are not to be mixed by law as an imperative signify the act of not-mixing genres. Rather the act of 'not-mixing' as a performative meaning gets postponed and hence individuation of genre remains an impossibility. What Malshe argues is that this deconstruction of what the law performs is subject to the same process of deconstruction leading to the reverse moment. If the law of genre gets undermined by genre itself, the reverse moment is that the same norm of undermining applies to the very act of under-mining. Malshe argues that if Derrida aims to deconstruct the closure of all texts, then how does one understand the very meaning of 'closure', 'deconstruct' or terms like, 'because', 'therefore' etc.? If indeterminacy of meaning is applied to these terms, how does one succeed in carrying out deconstruction of what deconstruction performs? Malshe, therefore, is very cautious in suggesting a 'reading against the grain' exercise as it logically stultifies itself. This situation with modernist aesthetic and literary theory poses a challenging problem of naturalizing aesthetics/literature, which the book promises to do.

Malshe ambitiously defines 'naturalization' as a 'process of assimilating a text within cultural system or modes of order'. In a sense this is a simultaneous identification of the limits posed on a text by a culture as well as a demarcation of 'boundary' of the text. He brings in Eliot's notion of engagement with texts that are prior to an author as well as Jonathon Culler's notion of

an in-built intertextuality of discursive practices offer a systematic explanation of the complex relation between culture and text that determines even the conceptual and generic character of a text. That classification into genre brings in a necessary theoretical grounding of a text and brings description of literary and aesthetic phenomena under it. It also involves the possibility of transcendence of the 'thematic' of the text, as meaning of a text is mediated by a correspondence between past and present, formal and material, noumenal and phenomenal etc. These possibilities lead us to what Malshe called, 'basic categories of literature' or contracts, which are underlying bonds that link author with the reader and one text with another (p. 106). The most important question in identifying such contracts is a methodological point that Malshe raises about the relatedness of literary contracts with the non-literary ones, which is another way of re-inscribing the relationship between literature and culture in the field of aesthetic reception. In doing so, Malshe places emphasis on the possibility of implied author/reader relation, which is part of a holistic understanding of the relationship between literature and culture. He identifies modes of contract in the form of functions like emoting, showing, telling, all of which identify their 'objective correlative' as a pragmatic necessity. Malshe also employs Wittgensteinian notion of 'form of life' to describe how literary texts communicate their meanings, which not only happens within an already given form of life, but ensures a creative autonomy for form of life in which it happens. By preserving an idea of context for

literary expressions, Malshe alludes to the fact that literary texts share their fictionality with non-literary propositional content that they embody. This is how the fictionality or literariness is brought under some kind of propositional content to narrow down its meaning, but at the same time such an operation of governing fictionality under the thematic widens the scope of understanding how the text is related to human life that exists in complex forms. It is such a relationship between text and life that establishes intertextuality and a kind of 'family resemblance' between language games that texts individually partake in.

Malshe demonstrates how this project of naturalization explains better the fictional and metaphoric character of literary narratives without compromising the possibility of arriving at a reasonable contract between the text and the world. Supposedly this demonstration is directed against the post-structuralists, who conceive the text as inherently metonymic yielding only to an interpretive abyss. Contrastingly, Malshe takes up a reading of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* to show that an ideological and aesthetic decentring of literary meanings base themselves upon a radically new vision about existence and experience that calls for a 'reformulation of the relationship between art and human life' (p.143). This is to counter the thesis that post-structuralists advance, that is, literary language as play only gives rise to an aesthetic of absurd or the negativity that ends up in dissecting the endless oppositions in the text. For Malshe, anti-novels like Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Joyce's *Ulysses*; anti-plays like

Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of a Character* and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* defies rules of genre only to grapple with the complex, fuzzy and intertextual character of human life. In doing so, they employ all kinds of literary and philosophical techniques like 'syntactic inversion', 'foregrounding of absence of meaning', 'fuzzing of boundaries' etc. all of which mark a specific purpose and use. Without taking such purposes into account, anyone would fail to understand construction of a particular meaning in a particular text, which again is organically related to life itself. In other words, Malshe denies the thesis that life does not exist outside text or representation, rather preserves a meaning of life in terms of creativity, which is a continuous flow from life to text and text to life mediated by cultural and aesthetic norms and practices. Literary and aesthetic practices like 'stream of consciousness' method as employed by Virginia Woolf or a breakdown of the fit between the word and the world employed as a technique to communicate absurdity of life by Beckett, are nothing but a manifestation of the basic literary contracts. But just as a contractualist fails to develop a ground, which is culturally neutral, which is not always already contaminated by existing discursive practices, Malshe too, falls in the same hermeneutic circle in his holism of 'contracts', which follows from concrete practices. As a logical notion, basic literary contract as an underlying principle of classification of genres is a surrogate of an already existing hermeneutic linkage between reality and representation and hence presupposes what it attempts to explain. What Malshe does is to widen the circle with his

claim that aesthetic and literary reproductions of life are enhanced by techniques that critics, authors, and readers value as useful and therefore classification into genres follows a pre-existing cultural scheme.

What is instructive to note in contemporary discussions of aesthetics is that how one avoids the hermeneutic circle of life-literature connection by proposing an 'explanation of the inexplicable' as Kafka does in explaining the myth of Prometheus in four legends.¹ Kafka's presentation of legend follows a pattern: first, Prometheus betrays the secrets of gods to men; second, he gets one with the rock because of unbearable pain inflicted on him; third, he forgets himself and in the fourth place, gods grow weary of Prometheus' act as he becomes one with the rock. This is how the actors of the legend end the legend marking the failure to explain the inexplicable by the legend. The current state of literary and cultural theories mark a Prometheusean end after growing weary of what they cannot explain. By offering a theory of basic contracts Malshe is trying to salvage literary theories from a deracinating end, but in the process his own explanation sounds like a Kafkian 'explanation of the inexplicable' that goes through increasing virtualness introduced in contemporary aesthetics. This calls for a principle of 'deterritorialization' of aesthetics in Deleuze's sense², that is, by a practice of constant 'opening up' to a difference of interpretation, which is difference without concept.

However, Malshe's attempts of stitching together the entire corpus of modern and postmodern literary and aesthetic theories provide a feast

of ideas that often arrange itself to a central theme of 'meaning' of aesthetic and literary experience. This provides a grasp for critical thinking and incisive analysis. With his two decades of teaching of Aesthetics, Malshe is able to generate a considerable hybridity that crisscrosses theories with texts and puts them in a lucid juxtaposition. His commitment to British analytic philosophy, of course, gives him a not so fashionable and yet a rigour that makes the book stand out.

NOTES

1. Frantz Kafka, "Prometheus" in *Parables and Paradoxes*, translated by Wilma and Edwin Muir, New York: Schocken, 1970: 83.
2. Giles Deleuze concept of 'deterritorialization' means an endless dissemination of signs on the surface of the text that is transferred onto the very process of production of signs. See, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (1972), Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1983: 292-3.

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Vikram Seth: *An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, edited by G.J.V Prasad, Pencraft International, Delhi, 2004, pp.185, Rs 400.

By any standard, Vikram Seth is a striking literary phenomenon of our time. He has made impressive running in both fiction and non-fiction, as well as in poetry. Yet he has not made critical impact on par with his peers. The volume under review in the form of twelve papers on Seth's varied range of works fills a long-felt gap. These well-written essays—all freshly commissioned

contributions except two reprints—focus on *From Heaven Lake* (1983), *The Humble Administrator's Garden* (1985), *All You Who Sleep Tonight* (1990), *The Golden Gate* (1986), *A Suitable Boy* (1993), and *An Equal Music* (1999). The comprehensive assemblage of explorations aims at opening, as the blurb announces, 'various windows into Seth's world to enhance the reader's understanding and appreciation of this highly talented and most accessible writer'. How does the book deliver on the promise? Moderately well, I would say.

Allaying Seth's fears, as it were, Hugo Brunner, the publisher of *From Heaven Lake*, rang up the author the day before its official publication: 'Don't jump into the Thames if there is a bad review or no review at all.' Much to the surprise of the publisher and the author, the book was well-received and was also awarded the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. Seth's perceptive and delightful account of his travel experience from North China—across Tibet and the Himalayas over to Nepal and India—is discussed by Nandini Chandra in her paper 'A Different Gaze: Vikram Seth's Journey through Mainland China'. Unlike Paul Theroux in his *Down the Yangtze*, published in the same year as *From Heaven Lake*, Seth does not wax magisterial in his observations. He is more nuanced and less judgmental, without any 'overt ethnographic mission', as Nandini notes. Also unlike Rahul Sankrityayan, the Marxist traveller from India in the first half of the 20th century, Seth does not dwell on 'the legendary and historical mystique of Tibet'. In spite of the freedom deficit in the Maoist dispensation, Seth sees reassuring evidence of efficiency and professionalism in Chinese society,

and hence his gaze is different from the available perspectives on the mystical orient.

Although Seth is drawn to the 'warm humanity of common people' in the account of his hitchhiking adventure—not that he is not unaffected by ideological imprint on people in their quotidian transactions—his motivations are different from those that we see in Amitav Ghosh's travel accounts of Egypt, Myanmar and Cambodia with a rich diet of historical detail. Seth seeks to recover the real China from beneath the veil of ideology, but his itinerary follows a liberal trajectory in cutting contrast with Ghosh's committed mission. In a vein different from Naipaul's in his early travel accounts of India, Seth's slant is not dismissive of either Chinese cultural heritage or its ongoing, de-ideologised economic boom. Seth highlights the people, as well as pans across the landscape, without any colonial fixation or postcolonial position. However, cursory references to the Hindi writer, Rahul Sankrityayan as well as to Amitav Ghosh and Naipaul in Nandini's frame of reference needed further exploration.

Four papers in this anthology are devoted to Seth's poetry. While GJV Prasad and KC Boral evaluate Seth's poetic craft and thematic preoccupations in *The Humble Administrator's Garden* and *All You Who Sleep Tonight* respectively, Tabish Khair and Angelie Multani look at *The Golden Gate* with disparate points of view. Both Prasad and Baral give full marks to Seth for his technical accomplishment. Prasad provides explicatory snapshots of many poems from the anthology to underline Seth's formal control and compression of details as well as his