

concepts that later become anthropomorphic and are finally encompassed in the religious canon by rites and rituals (p. 150). *Dharma* is the realization of the rhythmic unity of all beings; it calls for an ethical relationship with all and everything. The order of the cosmos obliged a *dharmic* behaviour on the part of all living and non-living things. And it was ecological.

In the second part she attempts a biological reading of certain hymns. *Manduka, the Frogs* (RV, VII;103), where in parallels between brahmins and frogs are drawn, is not looked down with ridicule, but, on the other hand, as she points out, these hymns reveal the sensitivity of the *rsi* to the changing environment, to the movements of the sun and clouds and life on earth. Vannucci draws our attention to similar evocation of frogs in other cultures, especially the references in *Zend Avesta*.

She marks out the short hymn of only six slokas on *Aranyani*, as being extra-

ordinarily significant. "*Aranyani* is sacred as part of *rta*. . . She is sacred as a mother, who gives all she has and in turn requests only respect and love . . ." (p. 262). This hymn serves to reaffirm the Vedic ethos. Man must abide by the natural laws or face dire consequences. Love and respect for all nature is at the root of Vedic metaphysics that is conceived in an environmental ethic.

M. Vannucci's readings are not entirely without drawbacks: she follows her own chosen path and her overall intention is to prove what she states hypothetically at the beginning, and to that end she totally disregards or deliberately neglects all other possible angles of perception. In the end, however, one does not disagree with her! Her *interpretative* reading, which is largely impressionistic, as has been pointed out, is built on scaffolding that is theoretically unsophisticated, and at no point does she seek to bring her arguments into continuity with, or at

least in close proximity to, the present day intellectual debates on deep ecology and bioregional narrative. Of course, her genuine scientific involvement and erudite scholarship that are evidenced in every page of the book would remain unchallenged. After all, that is the merit of such a book. Its range and disposition are beyond compare, and the scholarly reader as well as the avid student of environment and philosophy, would find this work intellectually satisfying and sufficiently stimulating. Above all, we need to keep in mind that in "theoretically" contaminated times like the present where theory and counter theory perpetrate unending race for meaningless dominion, what we have remorselessly misplaced are essential values—of life, nature, God. M. Vannucci's endeavour reestablishes such lost grounds of being.

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Rilke, Kafka, Manto: The Semiotics of Love, Life and Death



by Rosy Singh
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Harman Publishing House, New Delhi,
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These three essays on the Semiotics of love, life and death in Rilke, Kafka and Manto by Dr Rosy Singh present the discourse analyses of very diverse discursive formations. Beginning with the mundane socio-cultural contexts fixed in specific space and time of historical dialectics, these eminent writers of east and west have transcended the empirical realities, without however ignoring their basic contradictions, to arrive at the universal human truths.

The first intense meditations on the themes of love, life and death are presented in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*. In a most remarkable and unusual structural form that anticipates the *nouveau roman* by several decades, Rilke weaves a cobweb of love, life and death with the sociological and cultural threads leading to

the mental constructs of the most impersonal, mechanical encounters in the clinics and hospitals of modern industrial society. The reader is presented with a spectacle of ordinary, physical end of life, followed by the most extraordinary existential encounters which can be envisaged only at a metaphysical plane. One can comprehend this unusual crisscrossing of the human and the surhuman in the normal socio-cultural-historical context, or, as existential, conceptual constructs in the domain of the *imaginaire*, as Dr Singh has so brilliantly attempted.

These literary discursive formations of Rilke always deal with the simultaneous fusion of the unconscious and the conscious. More often than not such a formal literary discourse leads the readers astray but if one follows the Cartesian dictum that a discourse,

literary or otherwise, must be understood by following syntactically and systematically the interlinking sequences of reason, placing the various elements or parts of a discursive structure within a conceptual whole, the literary critic arrives at a different perception of existential human predicaments. In modern times, Louis Althusser emphasizes the totality and the unity of the discourse when he criticizes the naive Marxists who compare disparate passages from the writings of Marx to prove their predetermined theses. According to Althusser, they destroy the unity of the texts and the discourse which emerges from that unity and make haphazard comparisons. In other words, a text must be studied in its structural constitution of syntactic and paradigmatic formation before its discourse is placed in the

mediatory domain of pragmatics. The context within and the context without are interrelated but this relation is dialectical which begins with the recognition of the unity of the discourse.

In her analysis of the texts of these writers, Dr Singh has revealed their architectonic structures by first presenting the texts in the sequential order of the articulations of the text-discourses by the authors themselves before attempting at a semiotic understanding of their conceptual structures. In this particular case, there was also the question of meta-language. The first two writers have articulated their discourses in German and the third in Urdu. Dr Singh is obviously highly qualified for this task. Both her M.Phil. and Ph.D. theses on Kafka were written in German in the Centre for German Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. The presentation of the text in its sequential, syntactic order is also important, for as Descartes has insisted, the conceptual, architectonic construct of the text is always based on interlinking dialectics. If the order of the emergence of this dialectics is ignored, the overall discourse can never be comprehended. The parts, the narrative sequences, must be understood in terms of the whole, the overall conceptual construct. For example, in Rilke's text, the underlying thematic unity is realized in the existential domain of human predicament in the face of the imminent death where the dialectics of the Being and the Other is brought in sharp focus. It is much more so in the most intense feelings of Love where invariably there is an obliteration of the One or the Other. Ultimately both Death and Love end up being the transcendental truth of human existence. To substantiate this predicament, and its resolution, if there can be one in such metaphysical encounters, Rilke constitutes a highly condensed paradigmatic discourse where the times present and the times past lose all their physical configurations. As such, in spite of the apparently most non-sequential order, the text of Rilke presents a thematic unity par excellence. Once the

critic or the reader grasps this fundamental technique of the constitution of Rilkean discourse, every sequence, every mediation, every casual remark to the events or the personages of the historical or the mythical past becomes a part of the emerging conceptual whole. We must appreciate the fact that Dr Singh has explored all such references and has given much needed information and related quotations in the appendix.

As the architectonic structure of Kafka's novel, *The Trial*, is very different from that of Rilke's text, Dr Singh has followed a different method of analysis. The same is true of Manto's short stories. By adopting different analytical strategies, Dr Singh has shown her penetrating understanding of the structural critique, which must be coordinated with the specific formal configuration and architectonic structuration of each text. At the same time, she has demonstrated that whatever be the spacio-temporal context, the literary discourse must not be confined to any given time and space. The socio-cultural-historical context is only a point of departure, the literary discourse must not be confused with any journalistic or realistic reporting of an event. The social scientist deals with corporate, communal entities, the literary discourse emphasizes the individual existential predicaments. There is no doubt that an individual is a member of a group or a class and to a large extent his behavioural patterns are determined by the socio-economic conditions of that group, but for the creator of a literary discourse, the individual is not dissolved in that group. Jean-Paul Sartre used to say that while it is true that Paul Valery is a petit-bourgeois, it must also be realised that every petit-bourgeois is not Paul Valery. The Marxists of socialist realism and other social scientists for whom the individual's identity has no significance cannot understand this paradox. Hence, they can neither follow the path of literary creativity nor analyse a literary discourse. Most of the interpreters of Kafka have tried to pin him down to

specific class and political situations or have simply transformed him into a typical Jewish writer. Dr Singh has shown how these critics have misunderstood the basic Kafkan theme of the absolute absurdity of all bureaucratic, dictatorial systems where human dignity and human freedom are crushed under one or the other pretext. The Kafkan discourse as such transcends all time and space, whether it is historical or religious, and remains valid today as it was earlier for the readers of all religions and cultures.

The two short stories of Manto analysed here have another methodological problematic. Not only their formal structuration is different from those of Rilke and Kafka, Manto has attempted to articulate the existential predicament of two very dissimilar protagonists, but being a very sensitive writer, he has been able to transcend the apparent, manifest contradiction. Manto does not reflect, in *Hattak*, on the socio-economic compulsions of a prostitute, he accepts her cultural existence as such. Unlike the fashionable progressive writers of his time who would have simply blamed the society for all her ills, he presents her as the most sensitive human being, who in spite of being a poor old prostitute, can emotionally and existentially respond to *Hattak* or humiliation. From a manifest human non-existence, she rises to assert her being, an assertion that is normally reserved only for the bourgeois. Instead of writing a political pamphlet, that is what it amounts to in most of the progressive writings of his time, a diatribe against the whole social system, Manto's prostitute, the most marginal character of the Indian social set-up, emerges as a sensitive human being, who, in her extreme predicament of existential destabilization, transcends not only her class but also her gender, and with a highly charged semiotic signal dominates her most critical moment, and becomes the master of her own destiny. The narrative is neatly divided into two parts, the passive, docile state before the existential crisis

of *Hattak* or humiliation and the slow but sure assertion of her being after her existential destabilization. There has been also a question of translating the title of this narrative. Dr Singh's analysis shows how the critics and translators of Manto have completely misunderstood his discourse. As the impressionist painters demonstrated that under a given impact of rain, snow or fog, the whole atmosphere, the paysage is transformed, the impact of humiliation penetrates the entire text of Manto. To underline this most important aspect of the narrative, Dr Singh not only employs all the three equivalents in the English language, viz., *insult, hurt, humiliation*, but in her brilliant presentation of the text, she shows how every gesture, every act in the text serves as semiotic signal to emphasize the overall impact of this existential transgression.

The formal structure of the second short story of Manto, *Thanda Gosht*, follows a different discursive order, almost the reverse of *Hattak*. A savage brute, a Sikh peasant of unparalleled cruelty, who indulges in all the loot and plunder and rape during the partition of the country, encounters, during one of his savage sorties, the most beautiful death that shatters his Being and completely destabilizes him for ever. He loses his virility, his manhood, his Being itself. The existential encounter with death, a certain death, pushes the hot-blooded life into the abyss of absolute depression and transforms the burning impulses into cold flesh, *Thanda Gosht*. In the last dying moments of this unusual being, we witness a surreal admixture of love, life and death. It has been very common, and I would insist, very fashionable, for the progressive Hindu writers to show good Muslim characters and for the progressive Muslim writers to present noble Hindus. Manto does not follow this cheap propagandist path. The religious and the socio-cultural milieu is irrelevant for Manto. He finds sensitivity and human dignity in the most marginal characters of the society, and even though, the

reactions and responses of his characters seem a bit exaggerated, and enter into a rather surrealistic articulation, Manto's texts remain the human discourses par excellence. Whether the stereotypes are determined sociologically or politically, they remain stereotypes all the same, and they have no place in a literary discourse. Writers like Rilke, Kafka and Manto dwell deep into the extremely complex nature of human beings and instead of proposing some preconceived formula to resolve their complexities, they reflect on the intricacies of their existential predicaments.

To underscore this aspect of Manto's sensitivity and concern for human dignity, Dr Singh has compared Manto's *Hattak* with the narratives of Maupassant, Brecht and Sartre. Apart from Maupassant, the two avowed Marxist writers, Brecht and Sartre, remain well within the established dogmatic belief that the downtrodden will remain downtrodden forever until some corporate revolutionary movement liberates them from the shackles of historical compulsions. In spite of all his existential understanding, Sartre's prostitute cannot rise above her social status. And when, in another play, *Flies*, Orestes challenges Jupiter, it is nothing but a political diatribe of a naive comrade. Sartre obviously did not see the contradiction in his two characters. The same is true of his trilogy, *The Roads to Freedom*, where at the conclusion of the narrative, we arrive at a definite dead end to freedom, for which Sartre was considered a pessimist, nihilist philosopher in spite of his otherwise very active participation in every progressive movement.

We must not forget that a narrative is a conceptual construct. Within its architectonic structure is constituted the formal and conceptual domain which is the domain of thought in praxis par excellence. The writer is within his writing; outside his writing are only the biological and social contours which are transcended in the very process of the creative act. Articulating a discourse is

a dialectical act. It is a dynamic act, an act in praxis. To be is to think, and for a writer, to be is to be engaged in the constitution of a discursive formation within which his whole being of a writer, a thinker, is realized. To follow the formal and conceptual configurations of the writing is to follow the tremendous labour pains of the writer in creating a new form, a new discourse, a new life. This is why every great writer has his own mode of reflection. Each discourse is a unique existential exercise in the domain of conceptualization. Apart from the different conceptual structures of these writers, we see this creative differentiation in the two short stories of Manto analysed here. Dr Rosy Singh has demonstrated that a literary critic can neither impose the pre-conceived notions of narrative structures nor the ideological constructs of any movement, progressive or otherwise. In the Indian context, the two artists one can think of are Saa'dat Hasan Manto and Ritwik Ghatak. Both of them had serious differences with their comrades on the nature of the creative act. But it is primarily because of their refusal to follow the trodden path, however glamorous it might have looked at that time, that they were able to constitute unique discourses in literature and cinema. They transcended the socio-cultural-political contingency. They sinned and suffered but from their existential suffering engaged the great art of the Indian sub-continent. It is at the plane of human dignity and freedom that writers like Rilke, Kafka and Manto meet across cultures and across historical spectrum to reflect and meditate on the eternal themes of love, life and death. There will always be the specificity of time and space and the socio-economic contradiction of the historical progression but the creative artists will continue to engage in the most humane act of thought in praxis to traverse and transcend this inevitable dialectics.

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