

Book Reviews

Alka Hingorani. *Making Faces: Self and Images Creation in a Himalayan Valley*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012, pp. 166, US \$ 45.00.

In the lower foothills of the Himalayas, in the Kullu District of Himachal Pradesh, the largest local festival, Paush Navratri, takes place each autumn in the district capital of Kullu. The nine-day festival celebrates the goddess Durga Mahishamardini, and on the tenth day the festival of Dussehra begins. The latter worships in particular the triumph of Rama over Ravana, in addition to Vishnu, Shiva, Raghunathji, Ganga, Surya, Ganesha and other deities, devatas, and mountain deities and ancestors. Himachal is referenced in the *Mahabharata* as the place where the Pandavas went into exile after losing the dice game to Duryodhana; and local Kulutas fought on the side of the Kauravas in the great war. During the Pandavas' exile, Bhima married the *rakshashi* Hidimba, and in the region one can find temples to Hidimbadevi.

Thus, Himachal is rich in mythic history, which partly accounts for the longevity of the centuries-old Kullu Dussehra. On the first day, hundreds of visiting deities arrive from throughout the region to pay homage to Raghunathji at his temple. They are transported on heavy *palkhi* (palanquin) or *ratha* (chariot) from villages as far away as a hundred miles. Many of the villages are small, remote and situated at high elevations. On each *ratha*, the gods are materially present in the form of face-images or *mohras*—a term sometimes translated loosely as “masks,” though they are not worn, and they comprise not only the face but also the upper torso of the deities they embody. On a single *ratha*, eight to twenty-four *mohras* are arranged in rows of three or four, one row atop another, with a single large *mohra* above or below. Swathed in colorful embroidered silk and satin, adorned with jewels, and surrounded with flowers and appurtenances, the groupings are topped by an elaborate *chhatri* (parasol, umbrella), though smaller *chhatris* may be placed elsewhere. (Some scholars characterize *chhatris*

not as parasols but funerary tumuli or stupas). The people in the various villages, though often poor, share among themselves the expenses of the journey to Kullu, participating in the festival, decorating the *ratha*, maintaining *mohras* in *bhandars* associated with temples, and replacing *mohras* and *chhatris* when they wear out.

Mohras are approximately eight to fourteen inches high and five to eight inches wide. Generally, the most ancient ones (perhaps sixth century) were cast in brass, and later ones in bronze. Casting in modern times is with a metal alloy (for example, a blend of gold, silver, iron, lead, tin, mercury, copper, and zinc). In about the fifteenth century, *mohra* and *chhatri* began to be made by embossing silver and gold. The *mohra* and *chhatri* can be intricately crafted from thin, soft sheets of the metals. Because of their delicacy, they need to be replaced after about twenty-five years of use. Today, they are usually fashioned by a local craftsman, who is hired by a village. The craftsman is a *shudra*: he may be a *sunar* (goldsmith), or even from a *lohar jati* (a sub-caste of blacksmiths). While he is working, however, he is treated respectfully by members of upper castes, who share meals and living space with him. When the new *mohra* or *chhatri* is completed and consecrated, he returns to his caste status and can no longer touch it.

Art historian and scholar Alka Hingorani traveled to Kullu in 2002, 2003, and 2004, for varying periods, to conduct research on *chhatri* and *mohra*. Her new book, *Making Faces: Self and Image Creation in a Himalayan Valley* (2013), is the result—a beautifully illustrated and finely written study of the craft, ethnography, and aesthetics associated with making these sacred objects. To my knowledge, it is the first book published outside of India that focuses so closely on this subject.

Hingorani divides her book into four parts: Object, Process, Aesthetics, and Artisan. This is refreshingly straightforward, and the many stunning color photographs are helpful. But covering these dense topics in short chapters is quite ambitious in a book of only one hundred pages—though it can be argued that one cannot

begin to understand *mohra* except in a context comprising all of these parts. Hingorani manages to discuss the sacred objects in relation to religious art and local craft, Himchal social structures (including caste and religion), and individual artistry. She devotes about half of *Making Faces* to detailing the exacting labor of embossing in gold a particular *chhatri*, which she observed and photographed over many weeks.

Indeed, this is the best part of the book. In describing the crafting of the *chhatri*, Hingorani also describes the artisan, Taberam Soni. While observing and interviewing him, she lived in Khanag, walking-distance from Bhargole (population, eighty-five). Taberam had been commissioned by the Shesh Nag Temple in the small village of Kot to fashion a new twenty-four-carat gold *chhatri*. The old one was melted down, and a cube of newly purchased gold was blended with the salvaged metal. After the appropriate rituals, the embossing could begin. Taberam used handmade tools to hammer the ingot into a smooth disk twenty-one inches in diameter and less than a sixteenth of an inch thick. This first step alone is an impressive feat.

Given the many beauties and value of *Making Faces*, my disappointments are primarily that the book is not longer. While Hingorani's discussion of the crafting of the *chhatri* is excellent, her discussion of aesthetics and social context is, sadly, too brief. This is all the more disappointing because, while Hingorani understands the Indian tradition of aesthetics, she devotes half of her chapter on aesthetics to the theories of Hegel, Kant, Foucault, Barthes, Jameson, Chomsky, Bourdieu and other critics. The perspective of these Western intellectuals have a place, but they seem to crowd out the more pertinent traditional aesthetics and cultural nuances of India, and it feels unnecessary to attempt to reconcile their rhetoric with Indian concepts. A fuller exploration of local sensibilities—particularly in the context of Dussehra—might have been more productive and informative.

When Hingorani queries Taberam, she asks perceptive questions. For example, she notes that, when the *chhatri* is nearly completed, the onlookers say, "This is indeed beautiful," although it doesn't yet look quite right to Taberam. He responds, "It lacks weight." Then what does it mean for something to "look right"? Hingorani says,

Speaking of *vazan*—that is, weight or presence—is like referring to timbre in a voice or the sound of an instrument, a qualitative assessment that defies description, often challenges articulation (75).

In other words, for the knowledgeable artisan, the aesthetic qualities are suggested by the work, but are

inexpressible except experientially. This notion can lead the reader not to the West's preoccupation with constructed social space, transgression, subversion, and the complicity of the dominant and dominated. Rather, as in parts of her chapter on aesthetics and in her insightful notes, Hingorani rightly references Bharata's *Natyasastra*, Anandavardhana's *Dhvanyaloka*, and Abhinavaagupta's *Abhinavabharati* as central to the aesthetic theories of *rasa* and *dhvani*. But she does not uncover the matrix that would fully connect them to her discussion of object, process, and ritual. *Rasa* theory is all the more relevant if the reader understands the implication of Hingorani's statement that in the Kullu Valley, "the making and receiving of objects . . . is always interactive, always a performance." In the *Natyasastra*, Bharata (or its several authors) elucidates *rasa* in precisely the terms of dramatic performance. The aesthetic focus in the tradition comprises an art's ability to facilitate a sudden spiritual and emotional "breakthrough," from the mundane and transient (*bhava*) to an ineffable and non-paraphrasable tranquility bordering on *moksa*.

As scholars such as Kathleen Marie Higgins have pointed out, the aesthetic theories of Abhinavagupta in particular challenge the West's ways of seeing art's function. The metaphor (rather, the indirect suggestiveness of an association) in *rasa* theory is tasting, rather than seeing. Abhinavagupta explains, "The spectator optimally moves from awareness of the emotional content of a performance [or work of art]... to a state of savoring... the emotional character in a universalized manner... *Rasa* is identical with the taste of one's own blissful self."

Just as Abhinavagupta comments on *rasa* as a presence in dramatic performance, perhaps it is useful to understand *mohras* not as objects but as inextricable parts of a performance—or ingredients in a meal—which began ages ago and will continue for as long as *rasa* is renewed in the communal celebration of Dussehra. While Hingorani could do more to explicate Abhinavagupta's very nuanced theory in relation to other aspects of her book, she compresses the theory beautifully in several places, such as at the end of her chapter on aesthetics. Here she relates Taberam's response to a print of Kali about to step on Shiva's prone body; unaware of Shiva's identity, Kali stops midstride. The depiction in the print, however, is wrong because, as Taberam observes, the artist has placed Kali's foot on Shiva; Kali's pause is the very essence of the story, he says. Thus, Taberam displays his aesthetics in his statement of what was "not right" in the picture: the moment as depicted was completed and so "staved possibilities, dissipated tension, drained the dramatic moment of its potency, Hingorani writes. "A

raised foot held in abeyance would have conveyed the conceit more appropriately . . . and allowed the imagination of the viewer a freer rein." Taberam's aesthetic observation is an appearance of Abhinavagupta's theory of *rasa* (the experiential awareness of an eternal, universal emotion) and *dhvani* (the overflowing of meaning conveyed in a suggestiveness arising from performance). Though it is questionable whether this is matter of "dialectics," Hingorni states this notion very well when she writes,

To keep to the object in isolation is to stay with the surface of things, whereas meaning is generated and kept alive through a process that involves the sustained participation of the community in the dialectic between idea and action, the interchange of expectation with response, which controls both change and continuity.

Even more pertinent here is when Abhinavagupta characterizes the experience of a spectator who is receptive to *rasa* as "a melting of the mind." And who can say where such intermixed metaphors of process, beauty, and cosmic performance will lead?

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Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Ranjini Mendis, Julie McGonegal, and Arun Mukherjee Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012, pp. xxxv+665.

Born out of the 14th international Triennial Conference of ACLALS held in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 2007, *Literature for Our Times* is an ambitious volume in scope and breath of literatures and methodologies. As Ranjini Mendis notes in the preface, the conference theme was prompted by the desire to invite discussion about "the role of literature in our troubled time" (xi) and the range of essays comprised in the volume speaks to the urgency that writers and critics still feel about the function of writing in the social world. But this collection also has a second, and equally important, mandate. In the introduction, Bill Ashcroft reminds the readers that the volume appears about twenty years after the groundbreaking publication of *The Empire Writes Back*, a key text in bringing together the "textual attentiveness of Commonwealth literature and sophisticated approaches to contemporary theory" (xv) and facilitating the emergence of postcolonial studies. Time has come, Ashcroft notes, to bring the "radical reflexivity of the

field" to the contemporary moment: "What exactly are postcolonial studies? Does this field remain within observable or even locatable boundaries?" (xv). At a time when the institutionalization of world literature, globalization studies, and interdisciplinarity may seem to overlap with or confine postcolonial analysis to a historical, and thus passé, category, Ashcroft is keen to remind us that the "supplementarity" (xx) and "boundary-crossing" (xxi) of postcolonial studies is also what guarantees its dynamic nature and always contemporary thrust.

The collection comprises nine sections and afterword that illuminate the range of concerns and geographies attended to. Questions of method are at the forefront and make up Section I of the collection through the analysis of works spanning from the Caribbean to Canada and Australia. Of particular interest is Lincoln Z. Shlensky's discussion of the politics of speech in Jamaica Kincaid's work—especially in view of the fact that Kincaid herself has never embraced this descriptor—and the way in which her writing "helps to recontextualize postcoloniality as a performative rhetorical mode" (38). Orientalism and Said's critique of imperial scholarship informs the discussion of Daniel Roberts' essay on Thomas De Quincey's writing in light of Indomania and Indophobia, while Satish C. Aikant revisits the complexity of the history and discourse of the Indian rebellion of 1857 in a novella by Ruskin Bond.

Translation as a site of contestation, healing, and social bond is at the heart of the essays of Section III. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O points out the need to shift the relation between dominant and subjugated language to a notion of translation that counters "the dictatorship of monolingualism" and creates "a commonwealth of letters to feed the commonwealth of the human spirit" (122). Ngugi's own work is discussed in relation to translation in essays by John C. Hawley and Mumia G. Osaaji, while Robert Young engages with Ngugi's conceptualization of translation by drawing attention to the many languages that comprise 'English' literature and the shifting roles of English across local, national and transnational communities. A highlight of this section is Elena Basile's discussion of Hong-Kong born Canadian Jam Ismail's poetry, which, Basile notes, recasts translation as the sign of the "internal dissonance of languages at play within the subject herself" and a position that "inhabits the very constitution of the subject" (161). Here translation is poetic choice in order to heal the wound left on language by colonial cultural violence.

The transformative power of translation is effectively followed by discussions of diaspora and migrancy in texts spanning the Caribbean, Canada, India, and Fiji in Section