

India in the World

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If, as Amartya Sen points out, the colonial approaches to India were exoticist, magisterial and curatorial, what new type of discourse could the West propose with regard to India and its plurality that will have the merit of moving away from the beaten tracks of Orientalism? While awaiting Sen's own *India and the World*, readers might want to discover *India in the World*. A “doing” of India in many voices marks the focus of this new book of essays which touches on subjects ranging from India in the medieval English imagination, Cervantes's influence on Indian literature through translation, Indians in East Africa, the lost idylls of Kashmir, the plight of Dalit women, to Gurinder Chaddha's cinematic diorama of South-Asian diaspora.

The twenty-five essays in *India in the World* must have stretched a lot more than the bounds of editorial consensus. The implosive tactic of honing in on “India,” not just as an idea but also as a word, makes its invocation quite tenuous in the context of the arrangement and selection of some essays in the volume.

The very first essay on the reception and creation of an imagined India is a case in point. The essay has a very intriguing topic but is marred by an episodic style and haphazard piecing together of evidence. The essay looks rather like the brief text of a conference presentation or the cursory notes towards a scholar's minutiae of his recent reading. Needing elaboration and a sustained engagement, the essay, as it stands, has the potential to be a work of frontier scholarship but delivers only a string of highlights, the real thing being elsewhere.

The dispensation of the three rubrics, “Postcolonial Issues,” “Literature,” and “History and the Arts” is also confusing. All of the essays in the first section deal with literature as do all of the essays in the second section. The essays in both sections, with the exception of the opening essay, are all about postcolonial issues and yet they have been partitioned indiscriminately. Further, there is a glaring cleavage of topoi in the first section, between Bradshaw Busbee's essay and the rest. This is probably the result of the editors having to draw essays from a set of conference presentations without the luxury of inviting essays to cover vital areas.

A critical survey seems to be the thrust of most of the essays in the first section. Notable exceptions to this pattern are the contributions of

Elizabeth Damböck, Corinne François-Denève and Christopher Rollason. Damböck's theoretical point about how multiple hyphenation in the jargon of identity politics straddles the seemingly opposed positions of stereotyping and exoticism is illuminating, and adds credence to the idea that much of this hyphenated terminology is oxymoronic and utterly self-reflexive in the best manner of poststructural figurations of self and the world.

François-Denève's crisply argued essay balances a rich piling of evidence with a fresh re-territorialisation of contexts, in a Deleuzian manner, relegated largely to the realms of popular culture studies in university curricula. Her argument, regarding the French mediation of orientalist excess in visions of the world through the "petty" and unpredictable Belgian "mind's eye," as manifested in French comic books, is a powerful one. It builds upon a longer and deeper line of colonialist ventriloquism evident from the days of Baudelaire's *Pauvre Belgique*; this is a line where historical determinism and writerly logocentrism went hand in glove, as evidenced by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. François-Denève's accent on the recuperation of French imperial loss through a parasitical, counter-factual historiography in comic books succinctly sums up the uses of this particular *matière d'Inde* in the Gaulic unconscious.

Christopher Rollason's choice of Poe's short story, "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains," tips the balance in his favour completely, affords him the easy yet exciting task of piecing together the various suggestive strands; thus making deep incisions into the taut facade of colonial discourse theory.

The essays of the second and third sections in *India in the World* truly reflect the variety on offer at the Cordoba Conference. The essays from the literature section, however, disappoint. They break no new ground and fall into that morass called close textual analyses. The eminences they scale are the bald ones made up of biographies of texts. Some attempt a theoretical coercion of the text as an exotic practice, novel for its own sake, as exemplified in the essay adopting the Rasadhvani approach to J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*. The pendular focus in this section marks feminism and a brand of diasporic modernity enunciated by postcolonialism and postmodernism as its epistemes.

In "History and the Arts," the essays regarding Dalit women and the contemporary Indian art scene are useful and generally informative, as the contributors are seemingly willing to engage in a general survey of the field. The same applies to the essay on Indian Feminism: an essay on the depiction of in-betweenness in films in this section makes for interesting reading. Joel Kuortti's essay on Arundhati Roy's script for a television film raises the question of the spatial determinism of culture and speaks of the emergence of the "non-city" as a category that challenges the absolute positioning of spatial epistemes. Kuortti's ideas, however, seem drawn from Marc Augé's formulation of "non-spaces" that so altered topology in

the last years of the twentieth century, although he never cites him directly.

The final essay of *India in the World* sees Fernando Wulff Alonso foray into the history of ancient India in order to fathom the ways in which successive waves of “foreign” influence, whether Mughal or British, have been prejudicial to the construction of a truly Indian historiography. In order to add cogency to his argument he might well have read Romila Thapar’s brilliantly succinct *The Past and Prejudice*, where she argues her case without recourse to generalizations drawn from Greek or Bactrian historiography.

From ventriloquism to veering, *India in the World* champions a kind of critical waywardness, elucidating what can happen if a text swerves from its expected course. But, as Lucretius put it beautifully, if it were not for the swerve, everything would fall downwards like raindrops through the abyss of space.

Works Cited

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