From Canon to Covid: Transforming English Literary Studies. Essays in Honour of G.J.V. Prasad
Eds. Angelie Multani, Swati Pal, Nandini Saha, Albeena Shakil and Arjun Ghosh
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G.J.V. Prasad has retired from Jawaharlal Nehru University after a distinguished career as a creative writer and a scholar of Indian and Postcolonial writing with a special interest in translation. A collection of his students and colleagues have honoured his career with essays centering on his attention to how English literary studies in India have changed over time.

Suman Gupta writes the Foreword, noting that 'English' in India "flickers in the transactions between many languages and texts," often shuttling across the spaces of the national and the global, and never appearing as a singular topic. Accordingly, the book is organized into "Sub-Themes": Literary Studies in India; Drama; Poetry; Translation and Transcreation; and Fiction, Language and Context. Some of the changes identified have involved the inclusion of new areas of study. Mala Pandurang outlines the introduction of African literatures while K.B. Veio Pou and Achingliu Kamei give an overview of the growth of 'North East' writing and its distinctive political and environmental activism. B. Mangalam comments on the rise of Dalit writing and provides a useful commentary on plays in Marathi, Malayalam and Tamil. Radha Chakravarty highlights the inclusion of writing by women, making the point that it is through translations that we learn about the suffering of women in regional conflicts. She surveys anthologies of South Asian writing by women, noting the contribution of activist publishers.

Other contributors take a more theoretical approach: M. Asaduddin looks at literary history in India and suggests a "chain of histories" (39) of related language groups, or histories of genres that encompass all languages. He sees children's literature, "literature from below," popular literature and new digital modes of literary expression to be missing from current literary histories. Tabish Khair's "Are the Ghosts in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* Real?" reflects on classroom readings of the novella's play across seeing and not seeing. James seems to accept the reality of the ghosts but turns them into darker emanations of evil that readers imagine according to their own fears. In this, he speaks of literature: a form that "is not sufficient to talk about the world" but which is the only means by which we can talk or think about it (209). Khair advocates teaching literature as literature: it may "break the predefined, language-bound stranglehold of the 'market' or the 'nation' or the 'people' on ideas" (211).

The volume's call for papers coincided with the covid pandemic, so playwright Mahesh Dattani (interviewed by Angelie Multani) speculates that there will be more outdoor performances and technological substitutes for human interactions. He adds that Anglophone theater has turned from 'speech and text' to an exploration of forms. Keki N. Daruwalla declares that he has given up his 'tough' poetry: picking up the pandemic motif in "Poetry, Plague and Locusts: About Writing Sonnets on the Black Death," he observes that dealing with melancholic events makes one reflective and that lockdowns have allowed a retreat from both democracy and scapegoating. Meena T. Pillai examines the colonial management of the 'Spanish flu' epidemic, showing how empire promulgated myths of helping stricken peasants while leaving those peasants to fend for themselves. She makes the point that public health (like climate change) has become a global challenge overriding old binaries of race, class, and 'first' and 'third' world stereotypes, but that the pandemic tended to generate isolationism and prejudice and consolidated centers of 'big pharma' power.

It is in the nature of the festschrift that these essays range across a variety of topics. Prasad's long-time colleague, Santosh K. Sareen, reprises his interest in Australian literature with "Of Dreamtime and Dream-tracks: Revisiting Australian Indigenous Identity Construction with Reference to Select Poems by Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Kevin Gilbert." Meenakshi Bharat's "Marginalization and Dispossession in the Kashmiri Novel" reads Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* to show borders as precariously shifting lines of conflict across which two nations only succeed in solidifying a sense of unique regional identity. Young Kashmiris cross into Pakistan to train as freedom fighters only to be disillusioned, while those remaining are labeled collaborators. The only land for uncontested occupation is the 'no man's land' of dead bodies. Life in exile seems the only other option. Jisha Menon considers the different valences of mimicry (another kind of translation) and the exploitation of 'cyber coolies.' He interviews call-center operatives in Bangalore and surveys some stage and film representations of call-center workers, praising the attempts to show the human toll of a dehumanizing industry but also wanting more "thick textures" that capture the full experience of "virtual labour in late capitalism" (238).

Professor Prasad's particular interest in translation has clearly given focus to many chapters. Udaya Kumar reflects on translating the Kerala intellectual Sree Narayana Guru, struggling to convey 'the flow and force of textual sequences' in conceptual prose when the metaphysics rely on the music of similar sounding Malayalam words. The study of translated Indian texts in English departments should attend to the social practices surrounding the text. C.S. Lakshmi quotes some of her email exchanges with Prasad to credit his translation work as creating 'An Equal Music' with the writer. Theater director Anuradha Marwah writes about translating *Medea* for performance in Delhi and Rajasthan, and records post-performance discussions that swing between sympathy for Medea as a feminist icon and horror at a

murderous mother. Somdatta Mandal discusses Tagore's translations of his own work to argue that better solutions may come from people close to the author and translators who personally experience what the text talks of. Translations of Manto and Jibanananda Das show that sacrificing some cultural specificity to preserve the music of the original is a fair trade-off. Mandal also examines 'translations' from writing to film and theater (Mahasweta Devi's work and Tagore's *Home and the World*). I'd have to say he lets the film version of "Rudaali" off very lightly!

The standout contributions are those that tell me something I haven't read about elsewhere and those that offer a stimulating intellectual argument. In the first case, Dalit theater — not discussed as often as poetry and testimonio, as B. Mangalam argues — and Jisha Menon's work on call-center workers. In the second case, and appropriately placed at the start of the book, is Rukmini Bhaya Nair's essay. Ironically, given the book's interest in "transforming English literary studies," it recuperates some canonical texts to argue that literature "encodes a basic set of algorithms for species survival" and world texts, for all their shortcomings, "serve as global immunity shields against individual and social mental breakdown" (45).

One thing that I would query is the preamble that suggests that shifts away from the British canon in Indian literary studies were a post-1990 phenomenon. They may have acquired pedagogical energy in the '90s, but changes began from the mid-1960s, when proponents of Commonwealth Literature included Indian English writing and other postcolonial work. Mala Pandurang's memories of 1970s conferences points to earlier scholars like K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar and C.D. Narasimhaiah, though Prasad's interest in translation has challenged the Anglophone emphasis of their times. Prasad's own observation that departments of English have turned towards "transdisciplinary centres of cultural studies" (xix) is valid. In the Indian context, this may be a positive claim on social relevance but elsewhere the transdisciplinary turn has worked against English and the status of the humanities, generating charges that they now deal in vague abstractions and political bias. However, lively engagement with creative uses of language will not disappear and Prasad's legacy of good-humored and incisive critique is a fine example that has clearly inspired several generations of scholars.