

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Multicultural and Marginalized Voices of Postcolonial Literature* edited by Varun Gulati and Garima Dalal (Lexington Books, 2017).**

Multiculturalism is an unruly theoretical beast with deep cultural entanglements that can, at times, be put to contradictory uses. Add postcolonial theory and marginalisation to the mix, and you have a beast in real danger of fragmenting into a welter of contested ideologies and analytical confusion. Thankfully *Multicultural and Marginalized Voices of Postcolonial Literature*, focusing as it does on predominantly texts from the Indian subcontinent, avoids generalisation and presents an 'admirable introduction to subaltern voices', as Shirley R. Samuels writes in the Foreword (ix). The essays are separated into three sections covering the marginalisation of women and ethnic groups; considerations of nation-states and global community; and the status of those considered sub-class, particularly the Untouchables in Indian society. Most of the essays include close readings of postcolonial works of fiction that address the above concerns and engage with current and emerging feminist, postcolonial and multicultural theories.

Mukuta Borah's 'Displaced Denizens' considers a conflict that is not widely reported in western nations, through a close reading of the literature of displacement from the state of Assam. Borah's analysis of the representation of the state's displaced peoples reveals depressingly familiar accounts of ethnic violence and social unrest, along with the resulting exploitation and marginalisation of women. Borah's reading of Jayanta Kumar Chakravarty's short story 'Xangamat Axatoor' posits death as the 'ultimate form of displacement from all communal understanding' (42). When a young, unknown girl is pulled from a river, and a member of the community covers her with his 'blue *gamosha*' she 'suddenly becomes a complete Muslim girl' (43). The clothing used to cover her both causes confusion about her identity and demonstrates the communal need to construct identity, even when there may be no foundation for the construction.

In 'Nation-State and State of Nationlessness', Guru Charan Behera suggests Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* is primarily concerned with deconstructing grand narratives of nation and history. He cites Benedict Anderson's thesis wherein the nation is perceived as an 'imagined community' created through narrative and reinforced in cultural practice (70). Behera suggests this state of affairs means the postcolonial writer is tasked with deconstructing the grand narratives of the nation-state. He argues that Ondaatje succeeds in this task through the accommodation of several intertexts and foregrounded heterogeneity, thereby 'presenting a space where the boundaries of nations, lands, and identities are glossed over' and the boundaries of 'history and fiction, archaeology and myth, fiction and poetry' are blurred (70-1).

Overall, the essays seek to engage with postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and marginalisation without becoming part of the larger, omnipresent narratives of intertwined colonial imperialism and masculine superiority. Unfortunately, the balancing act can be hard to maintain, as the linguistic choices in Poonam Pahuja's problematically entitled 'Scrutinising the

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Dark Stature of the Second Sex in Society' reveal. While discussing the subjugation of women in a selection of Shashi Deshpande's novels, Pahuja refers to women as the 'second sex' and the 'weaker sex' in society (159). I must point out that the essay intends to highlight the way in which Deshpande attacks entrenched double standards and the lack of female empowerment in her culture. While it is understandable that phrases like 'weaker sex' are often used as shorthand for an entrenched cultural norm, it would be preferable if scholars considered the reinforcing power of such wording.

Multiculturalism and Marginalized Voices of Postcolonial Literature would have benefited from thorough line-editing, as there are enough typos to distract, but this is a minor quibble. Every essay in the volume will provide a thought-provoking read for students of Cultural Studies or Literature who have an interest in the texts, voices and cultural concerns of scholars and authors from the Indian subcontinent. For example, two essays that make for fascinating reading are Fatima Syeda's analysis of the mute fury of the Untouchables, and the persuasive argument raised by Golam Gaus Al-Quaderi and Sheikh Nahid Neazy, that Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) should be treated as a social document rather than fiction.

Overall the collection asks the reader questions, offers alternative perspectives on multiculturalism, marginalisation, and post-colonialism, and piques interest in works of fiction that many in the western tradition may not have encountered. The result is a collection that reflects the editors' reference to Graham McPhee's belief that the 'social chaos agitated by modernity has become a perennial problem' (xiii). The hopelessly marginalised in modern society are, therefore, carrying the 'burden of despotism'. This, the editors suggest, means that the 'work of or for the marginalized has to locate a place for itself in an enormous international market' because 'cross-border mobilizations and geographical dispersion' of peoples represents 'a serious challenge for the unheard voices' (xiii). In this sense, the editors have successfully curated a collection that reflects the belief that marginalised groups in the modern world are not struggling for survival so much as struggling for 'recognition and identification' (xiii).

Kathleen Steele