

Book Reviews

Smita Agarwal, ed. *Marginalized: Indian Poetry in English*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014. Pp. vii, 283. \$85.32.

Smita Agarwal's edited volume of essays is a triumphant argument for recognizing Indian poetry written in English as diverse, vibrant, and evolving. Many of the essays question previous critiques of Indian poets and assumptions about writing in English, while offering a newer and better understanding of the divergent poetics during different periods instead of lumping all poets under the postcolonial umbrella. Agarwal's volume examines poetry written in English in relation to regional languages.

Contributors to the essays disrupt the singular view of Indian poetry in English as mimicking the language of the Raj; instead, they examine the complex and inventive ways Indian poets use English to make the poetry Indian rather than derivative. This book also gives revisionary readings of poets' writing before and after Independence, restoring the status of poets who have been devalued. Neela Saxena's essay restores Sarojini Naidu's poetry to its rightful glory. By questioning critics who judge Naidu by modernist standards and find her wanting, Saxena examines Naidu's "enchanted poetry of the soul" that nativizes English to express her typical Indian experiences (82). Similarly, the essay on Sri Aurobindo is a surprise. Gautam Ghosal refuses to discard Aurobindo's work based on late twentieth-century expectations of the poet. Instead, he examines the poems and shows the frames of thought behind the lines. He claims that since Aurobindo believed that "vision was the chief characteristic of a poet" (67), he practiced his theory by recording what he saw, whether it was a mysterious vision of a woman or any of the abstract images revealed to his imagination. As Ghosal goes on to show, Aurobindo, more than any other poet, has been immortalized in the establishment of the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry and in the worship of "Mother," the muse of his poems and philosophy. It is refreshing to read essays on Tagore and Derozio, similar to Ghosal's, discussing "what we can get from a work of art, not what we cannot get from it" (61). In "The English Tagore: Restoring a Legacy," Sonjoy Dutta-Roy builds his reading of Rabindranath Tagore, which counters modernist misinterpretation, by citing *Gitanjali* as contrary to "the central and debilitating motif of alienation as the backbone of the history of Indian Poetry in English. It reinforces Gramin and Dalit roots in a very deep sense, through the Baul essence" (45).

Agarwal's book enlightens us on the deep literary tradition in India of poems written in English. Many essays question criticisms that use Euro-American frameworks to examine Indian poems written in English. Anisur Rahman's essay on Kamala Das, whose poems have been the subject of a mountain of critical studies, shows how Das' poetry cannot be confined to Euro-American poetics of confession, feminism, or sexual politics. Instead, Rahman highlights Das' imagination and her location in the crossroads of English and Malayalam, South and North India, Hindu and Muslim, and wife, lover, and woman. Rahman contends that Das needs to be seen in the tradition of the outspoken Bhakti poets such as Mahadeviakka, Janabai, and Mirabai to understand the spiritually and emotionally uninhibited approach of Das' writing and thinking.

It is heartwarming to read Niloufer Barucha on Nissim Ezekiel, since the essay is her personal account of Ezekiel, with whom she shared a longtime friendship, and thus offers a more intimate reading of his poems. Barucha shows how Ezekiel became a public figure who was open about his private life. But he was not a "confessional" poet like poets of the 1970s in the United States. He was ironic, cynical, unsentimental, and a modernist to the core who established the trend of Indian poetry in English in the 1970s and 1980s.

While in some poets we see the alienation of the individual in the urban spaces of modern India, the writers show that we cannot simply use the modernist alienation angle to understand the poems. We need to see the poets' vision of the way modernity plays out in India. In this light, Anjali Narlekar sees R. K. Ramanujan as towering on the crossroads of Indian poetry with a claim in any category: Tamil, Kannada, English, Indian, Indian-American, American. Ramanujan's oeuvre is unique, and the trajectory of his life and his creative output are marked by Indian literary tradition, modernism, and the American literary scene.

What is the texture of the English that is used by Indian poets? Vinay Dharwadker's examination of Arun Kolatkar is clearly a star essay that picks up on the poet's unique use of English. The examples from *Jejuri*, *Sarpa Satra*, and *Kala Goda* and discussion surrounding these show the spare beauty of Kolatkar's lines. Dharwadker's discussion engages with key points of Kolatkar's life to argue the poet's poetic nexus between English and Marathi, Hindu epic tradition and modern life. Sachidananda Mohanty offers a similar treatment of Jayanta Mahapatra's poems that reads them with a fresh perspective. As Tabish Khair reminds readers, "we have a long tradition of literature in largely textual and standardized elite languages: Sanskrit and Persian. To ignore this tradition is to deprive Indian poetry in English of

## Book Reviews

its heritage—and its voice” (253). Agarwal’s book firmly locates Indian poets writing in English in their rightful places by recognizing the depth of the political, social, and linguistic investments they have made, thereby adding heft to the thin skein of critical works on these poets. The English poem, “Pativrata,” by Ranjanadevi Chavan Patil, a Dalit poet, that ends the introduction captures the Indianness of modern Indian poetry and its satiric and ironic acuity. Patil satirizes *pativrata* or “devotion to husband” by stating that after all the work the wife puts into this job, finally the award “goes to the husband” (25). Since Agarwal includes a Dalit poem in English, it would seem logical for this volume to also include essays on Dalit and tribal poets writing poetry in English. Despite this lacuna, the strong essays in Agarwal’s book are testimony of a more nuanced perspective on Indian poets writing in English within the transnational poetry scene.

Pramila Venkateswaran