

crocosm of the often gender-exclusive great narratives of nationhood and freedom.

Ghosh's essay too focuses on the lone, outspoken female voice, in this case Taslima Nasrin, against Bangladesh's double standards regarding politics, religion, and gender. The old debate between art for art's sake and art as propaganda rears its head as Ghosh scathingly dismisses those critics who merely speak of Nasrin's literary shortcomings (she is supposed to have less verbal legerdemain than Rushdie, another writer under fatwa) without taking into account her political agenda or her position of powerlessness. Ghosh's essay is exemplary in its inclusion of a male feminist, the documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan, and its problematization of the writer's own stance of an Indian, Hindu writer, educated in the Third World and settled in the first.

Ghosh's co-editor Bose in her essay on Indian women's cinema sets up expectations of the Lacanian male gaze being supplanted or counteracted by a gaze of mutuality, but this does not seem to happen in any of the directors she discusses, Chadha, Nair, Parmar, and Sen. Ultimately, Sen's eponymous protagonist, Paroma, is as much a victim of Sen's camera lens as of the erotic designs of the travelling photographer—it is difficult to forget the close-up of Paroma's lips sucking on fish bones. Ultimately, to both director and lover, Paroma is an object of sexual desire.

Admirable as this collection is, an even stronger attack on hegemonic feminist discourses would have been welcome. Why should a mainly First World readership be assumed by the editors? Why should the work of Indian feminists like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, who brought out *Women Writing in India* (1993) an anthology going as far back as 600 BC, or the work of the editors Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita of the Indian feminist journal *Manushi* appear not at all or only in footnotes? This too in a collection where all the essayists exhaustively cite feminist essays and books written in the West, almost always by Western authors.

SHORMISHTHA PANJA



Octavio Paz. *In Light Of India*. Trans. Eliot Weinberger. London: Harvill Press; New York: Harcourt, 1997. Pp. 209. \$22.00, \$12.00 pb.

Octavio Paz's account of India is refreshingly different. *In Light of India*, instead of reflecting personal idiosyncrasies, as books from visitors to India are wont to do, offers a very sensitive exploration of the country, unveiling its rich, layered mosaic of ancient and modern traditions. Paz's narrative, which begins with his first posting in India in 1951, marks a shift in his life as a practising poet and attaché in Paris. His deep involvement in the political, literary, philosophical, and artis-

tic issues of his time, well articulated, are intensely influenced by his subsequent Indian experience. It marks the beginnings of a long tryst with India that continues into the present, long after the end of his second posting to India (1963-69). In journeying from the West to India, he charts a movement that is not only geographical but also philosophical and spiritual. He operates as a fulcrum allowing us to view East and West and to understand their different histories and orientations.

Anecdotal and readable, the book develops into an incredibly profound and insightful work, as Paz substantiates his own personal experience with an extensive reading and a formidable understanding and dissemination of many crucial aspects of Indian life. Paz's reading of India is sensitized by his own position as a member of another very old civilization—the Mexican, which has been subjected to similar processes of growth and disruption in its own historic development as a distinct culture. What we are offered then is not merely an ambassador's account of the years spent in a somewhat trying, fledgling democracy, but a fascinating portrait of what can only be termed an encounter with an entire civilization: Paz delves into the past of the Indian subcontinent—imaginatively internalizing its history, geography, and religious traditions to capture its ancient culture and way of life.

In this book, which has four subsections, Paz offers a very incisive and immensely readable account of many if not most things Indian. It is written for both the serious and the casual reader, and for the new middle class, Indian and Western, whom Paz sees as increasingly distanced from their cultural traditions. He depicts them as individuals caught in the tail-spin of personal, material aggrandizement, as "slaves of entertainments," spending hours "that are not devoted to cash" on "facile hedonism" (64). The earliest section offers us Paz's first impressions of Bombay through his sketches and silhouettes of its urban landscape—which are still very evocative even though a good forty years have elapsed since he penned these images. Again, in evaluating contemporary Delhi's degradation from a once beautiful historical capital, Paz reveals an astute understanding of the gradual deterioration of town planning that precipitated the urban nightmare that is Delhi today.

Section Two, which discusses the coexistence of Islam and Hinduism in India (remarkable for their philosophical incompatibility), maps the advent of Islam in India and its impact on the social and cultural life from about 712 AD. It examines also the spread of the Sufi tradition during the Delhi Sultanate and its fusion with Hindu mysticism at the end of the Sultanate. Intrigued by the two-thousand-year-old caste system, he traces the reasons for its origins and shows its incompatibility with modern democratic liberalism and nationalism. Yet he sees in a radically restructured caste system more positives for collective expression and interaction, being sharply critical of the

“evils of contemporary individualism” (64), wherein the notion of fraternity has been replaced by “perpetual struggle among individuals” (64).

In the third section, Paz examines the possibilities of grafting a relatively new concept of nationhood onto a very diverse people. He traces the political developments under British rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that eventually led to formation of the modern Indian State. He notes the development of a militant Hindu nationalism which stubbornly arrogates to Hinduism “hegemonic pretensions” (133) and replaces “its original pluralism and polytheism with the adoration of a single ideological god” (161). Disturbed by this and by the claims staked by separatists in several parts of the country, he highlights the threat these movements pose to India’s integrity and peace on a daily and permanent basis, stressing the relevance of secularism and the need for constant, proactive dialogue.

Sections Two and Three are lucid, moving encapsulations of India’s past and present, and they approach with a great deal of clarity and concern those very issues that threaten to destroy India’s many-hued national fabric, vitiating its dreams, aspirations, and ideals of sustaining itself in the best of both worlds, that is, its rich cultural past and its present and future rich in possibilities.

Section Four, in which Paz speaks animatedly of Indian philosophy, art, sculpture, and poetry and of the innumerable cross-currents that have nourished it—makes for fascinating reading as Paz offers (alongside his substantial study and understanding of the Indian tradition) several brief overviews of parallel developments and differences in both Mexican and European art, history, and philosophy. Paz’s constant references to similarities and differences in the development of these civilizations make for a very rewarding reading experience. He juxtaposes simultaneous events and corresponding concepts of different civilizations, which enables us to grasp both the variations in these civilizations and the composite story of human development. Paz is fascinated by Indian thought: *The Upanishads*, *The Gita*, “The Sermon at Sarnath,” and Gandhian philosophy in particular move him deeply. He is just as fascinated by the modern concept of linear time, which he sees as Christianity’s contribution. This concept of time as history, as profane and not sacred, resulted in the inversion of traditional notions of cyclical time and timelessness in ancient Asian and Eastern cultures. However, he considers the belief in progress, associated with linear time, to be under siege today.

Paz resigned from his post as Ambassador to India, deeply disillusioned by the bloody repression of student rebellion in Mexico in 1969. The senseless acts of violence he links to the flip side of Western progress and technology, which is evinced by the two World Wars, by totalitarian regimes, and by the destruction of natural, cultural, and spiritual environments all over the globe. Paz grimly alerts us to the

fact that the possibilities of human achievement today, which a Western notion of time celebrates, are greatly threatened. His anguished query, "In what time do we live?" (195), needs serious thought.

RATNA RAMAN



Malashri Lal. *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995. Pp. 167. Rs. 175.

Malashri Lal's *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English* is an attempt to formulate the concept of a distinct trend in Indian English writing by women, arguing that there is a distinction between feminist thought in the West and here in India. According to Lal, the Indian woman writer finds herself in a peculiar situation when she attempts to write in English: "The [Indian] English writer is perpetually poised on the threshold between the acquisition [of an] English education and the sociology of 'Indianness'" (4). She notes further that the Indian writer "cannot apply the Western feminist base of binary male female gender hostility" (28)—a view that is perhaps more convincing and charts a more realistic course. Lal observes that the Indian woman does not wish to destroy her relationship with her community; while she is in favour of the kind of change that is critical for herself, she avoids coming into the public eye. The proper choice for the critic, therefore, is to attempt interpretations of the Indian women writers' position as that of one who stands on the threshold.

Lal sees the threshold—which exists as a central theme in traditional Indian architecture—as occupying a position on the dividing line between the two spaces of private and public life. It is an effective metaphor for the Indian English woman writer's dilemma, one that constitutes a generative force for the writer, helping her create strategies of subversion. She examines the play of this central metaphor in the writings of six writers—Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Rama Mehta, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Anita Desai, and Bharati Mukherjee. The metaphor appears to work well in some cases and not so well in others.

One of the major achievements of the book is Lal's discovery and discussion of Toru Dutt's practically unknown novel, *Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden*. Lal convincingly reads feminist undertones in the narrative. She sees the feminism of the novels expressed through the plot, which revolves around the strategy of the subterfuge of the author presenting her own self through Bianca, the central character. Thus the first English novel by an Indian woman raises questions about traditional gender-based psychology: a strong woman experiences distancing from her father and her community; she is admired but not loved or cherished. Lal's account of Dutt abounds in biographical detail. This could be seen as a way of compensating for the rather indifferent literary quality of *Bianca*, and, though informative, it raises