

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

the question of the usefulness of biographical probings in literary analysis. *The Law of the Threshold* at times gets dangerously close to becoming a sociology of literature. One wonders if the events of a writer's life can be the main determinants of her writerly choices.

Of Sarojini Naidu, Lal maintains that she let her poetic talent wither in favour of her political activism. The reason Lal offers for this sacrifice is an inherent inability in Naidu to articulate her rebellious feminist ideas in her poems; as a poet she was unable to cross the threshold. However, perhaps the real reason for Naidu's poems being so barren rather than full-blooded poetic articulations is that she simply is a mediocre poet. Lal's concerns are more psycho-sociological than literary, so she does not tackle this question at all.

The novel which best illustrates Lal's threshold metaphor is Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*. The heroine of the novel, Geeta, steps back into the house; she crosses the threshold retrogressively. She carves a niche for herself inside the *haveli* by studying the subterfuges practised by women of different classes and status to make their viewpoint prevail in their restricted environment. Lal contends rightly that Mehta adopts a cautious position in favour of social change—advocating change but not at the cost of social upheaval. That the process is slow is pointed up by the ending of the novel which leaves unresolved the future of the protagonist Geeta's fifteen-year-old daughter.

Lal comments favourably on the way Ruth Jhabvala handles the double time scheme of *Heat and Dust* and the successful crossing of racial barriers by the unnamed English woman in the India of 1975. She also points to the appropriation by the unnamed narrator of the story of her ancestor Olivia. As Lal puts it, this "recasting of the past is the fascinating aspect of Jhabvala's art in *Heat and Dust* for it institutes a polemic about new rendition of personal histories" (122). Lal offers a stimulating analysis of Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* while linking it to two of her earlier novels, *In Custody* and *Clear Light of Day*. The male centring of *Baumgartner's Bombay* is interpreted as a subterfuge that demolishes the male viewpoint. Though the women are at the periphery, they seem stronger, livelier, more thoughtful, and better capable of coming to terms with life.

Lal censures Bharati Mukherjee for her too simplistic solution of the "threshold" dilemma. She queries whether one can really characterize a person by his/her passport details. She questions the credo of "maximalism" that Mukherjee favours, asking, for instance, how immigrant Indians broaden America's social horizon. Lal examines these issues as presented in *Jasmine*. The heroine of this novel is supposed to be celebrating her fluid identity, but, as Lal observes, she is shown endlessly relying on one man after another like a typical dependent Indian female. In order to counter what Mukherjee sees as the evil forces of America, all Jasmine has to do is to reincarnate Kali and murder her rapist. Though Jasmine feels relieved at having dumped the

crippled Bud Ripplemayor for Professor Taylor, she actually has just deserted a dependent man for a man she can depend on. Besides, is ignoring the minority and other related problems of America and merging with the white mainstream, the final redemption of an Indian woman from a village in Punjab?

While one does not advocate what is sometimes described as South Asian exclusionism, it is clear that there are problems with women's life and writing that are peculiar to South Asia, and in *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Malashri Lal, has made very fine choices to analyse and illustrate some of those problems. And she writes fluent prose that reads well.

BARAN REHMAN



Shashi Tharoor. *India: From Midnight to Millennium*. New Delhi: Viking, 1997. Pp. xiv, 392. Rs. 400.

The publication of *India: From Midnight to Millennium*, like this special issue of *ARIEL*, is one of the many ways in which India's 50th year of Independence is being celebrated. Its occasional nature notwithstanding, the book lays claim to be yet another though perhaps less ephemeral contribution to the ever-growing body of "writing on India," at one time—and notoriously—the exclusive preserve of "the Naipauls" (276). Each of V. S. Naipaul's three books on India was touted as indispensable for anyone who seriously wants to come to grips with the experience of India and as his definitive statement on India. And of course everything that Salman Rushdie has had to say on India in fiction or nonfiction is lapped up by the Western media as gospel truth. Sunil Khilnani—in *The Idea of India* (1997), an antidote to Raja Rao's mystical *The Meaning of India* (1996)—wonders how "Indian history writing seems to have stopped in 1947 and why most of the post-Independence history seems to have been written in the form of novels" (1). Tharoor, whose first work (aspired to be) *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), was a political satire, now seeks to remedy the situation.

As the subtitle of his book indicates, it purports to be a history of contemporary India, albeit a self-confessedly personal one, with a liberal humanist bias. Sir Isaiah Berlin, perhaps the last of the great liberal humanists of the twentieth century, has spoken forcefully against impersonal interpretation of historical change and argued in favour of a form of historiography which must not omit questions of the character, purposes, and motives of individuals. He contends that one must try to find out who was responsible for a war, a revolution, an economic collapse, a renaissance of arts and letters, a discovery or an invention (44). So in *India: From Midnight to Millennium*, we find Tharoor praising and blaming the Gandhis and Nehru and asking who was responsible for India's post-Independence—as well as recent—success-