

Aparna Basu. *Perspectives on Women: Canada and India*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1995. Pp. xix, 205. \$.270.

On first looking through *Perspectives on Women: Canada and India*, one can only agree with the editor that a "comparison between Canada and India is not easy, as obviously there are vast social, economic and cultural differences between the countries" (xi). One wonders then why she undertook an enterprise of such improbable scope? The outcome seems even more mind-boggling given the many diverse perspectives that this collection includes: sociology, law, political science, literature, economics, history, and, yes, also popular culture. Even the best of editors is likely to find it impossible to impose any coherent or cogent pattern on such an overwhelming plurality of subjects. The disclaimer from the editor that I have quoted provides only a vague adumbration of the actual amorphousness of this project. Probably the only justification for putting this heterogeneous book together is that all the essays in it were presented at a 1994 seminar called "Women and Social Change in Canada and India," organized by the Centre for Canadian Studies, University of Delhi. The articles therefore might be said to reflect the multi-disciplinary nature of that meeting. Moreover, I should point out that sections of this book are intended primarily for an Indian audience seeking introduction to wide-ranging aspects of Canadian life and thought. The collection, nevertheless, includes few pieces that are not limited in this way.

The two opening essays have somewhat overlapping subjects and seem rather repetitive when read in succession—which makes me think that the editor would have done well by not placing them consecutively as she does. The first, by Aparna Basu and Meenalochana Vats, offers a comprehensive if not exhaustive survey of the numerous women's organizations and movements in both countries. The authors make useful comparisons between the status of women with reference to social, economic, and political freedom at different historical moments such as those of British colonialism, the two World Wars, and the immediate postwar period. Much interesting data emerge from this study (and this is one of those articles that would help comparatist scholars in Canada *and* India) such as the passing of similar laws and acts in the 1870s and the 1920s in both countries to ensure women's property and marital rights, the coincidence of early women's movements in the 1880s, or the near-simultaneous wave of feminism in the 1970s. Throughout, Basu and Vats document their findings with demographic data, tables and charts, although sometimes one wishes there was more parity between the charts themselves. For example, the essay provides fairly exact numbers for female graduates from different disciplines in Canadian universities, but only gives general enrolment figures for women in Indian universities. Overall though, these surveys and comparisons are productive and reveal some buried points

of similarities as well as reemphasize some accepted differences between women's movements in the two countries. From the facts they find, the authors make a fair assessment that if women's activism in Canada has reached an appreciable mark, it must still deal with the knotty issues of race and colour, of native and immigrant women, and that in India, "poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and centuries-old prejudice" (27) have confined women's movement still at the level of "struggle" (4).

The next essay is also about women's movements, except that this one concentrates on Canada. Nearly half of it traces the growth of women's organizations such as the NAC, CWSA, R.E.A.L., and although these sections are obviously relevant, they seem repetitive when read in context with the preceding essay. The writer, Ram Rattan, has tried to side-step this problem by devoting the other half of his study to women in Canadian politics and by giving lengthy and detailed accounts of their membership in the five federal parties, supplying exact figures for their nominations within the parties as well as at the civic, provincial, and federal levels. For the Indian reader there is much information here, and a good overview of the important contributions made by Canadian women, both in political parties and in nonpolitical organizations to implement tangible changes such as affirmative action and employment equity for all members of society. Although, I felt that keeping his Indian reader in mind, Rattan might have added an appraisal of the role of immigrant or ethnic women amidst the larger context of social change in Canada.

However, another essay in this anthology, by Kavita Sharma, does attend to that topic. In "The Immigrant Indo-Canadian Woman: An Interdisciplinary View," she opens by generalizing about the "struggles" (74) of the immigrant women in Canada and then focuses on the case of Indo-Canadian women which, she feels, is complicated by patriarchal traditions and by their "need to work outside the home to enable the immigrant family . . . to achieve economic prosperity" (74). For some odd reason, Sharma sees the Indo-Canadian women's need (or opportunity) to work outside the home only as a burden forced on them rather than also as a door to economic freedom. Just as oddly, the first "case" she cites concerns the plight an Indian woman married to an immigrant in the USA—I am sure there are similar and quotable instances relating to Canada, and obviously more relevant to the topic, which Sharma did not explore. But there are other such inconsistencies, and I feel that interdisciplinarity in this essay, as mentioned in the title, has been used as a peg to hang together a jumble of things. Several sub-sections, on racism and on women's financial dependency and their employability lack reliable, research-based underpinning and depend either only on occasional newspaper reports or on poems about immigrant women as evidence and sources. While it would be quite justifiable to examine the subjects and practices of immigrant

women's poetry in studying the immigrant condition, this essay is certainly not the place for it because it also tries to examine problems with job-placement, multiculturalism, and racism all in one go. The problem here is that the author cannot seem to settle on a convincing and workable methodology.

A much more precise and convincing work is K. R. G. Nair and P. Saradamani's article, "The Regional Dimensions of Gender Bias: India and Canada." Their work covers nearly all provinces and states in both countries and is scrupulous and fortified by its many charts, tables, and indices. They consider the regional distribution of women under various headings such as their numbers, earnings, life-expectancy, literacy, and try to establish patterns of gender bias. Some of these findings seemed surprising, for example, unlike in Canada, in India low income regions (states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) are not necessarily also the "low female wage regions" (111). In spite of my rather limited understanding of the subject, I think the comparisons made here are entirely pertinent and the models useful.

Of the three essays on literature in this anthology, Radhika Chopra's work examines the construction of male and female roles in popular romances. Chopra argues that although this particular genre has always been considered as marginal, yet, because of its sheer popularity across nations and cultures, it has worked as a "transgressive" (94) force against the practices of mainstream literature. According to her, while "high"/mainstream literature (by which, I suspect, she means works mostly by male authors) have frequently placed women in subsidiary roles, romances—of the Mills and Boon variety—by contrast, have always placed women "centrestage" (99). Also, she notes, popular romances have always already circumvented the matter of the male fetishistic gaze, that is, male readership, by "constitu[ing] their audience as female" (99). Chopra's thesis, that popular romance can be read as subversive, is not entirely new, but she writes in a clever and engaging manner and her arguments are stimulating. I must mention, however, two glaring omissions in this essay, and they seem inexplicable considering the comparative nature of this anthology as a whole: there is only a rather nominal mention of anything Canadian by way of some citations from Patricia Smart's *Writing in the Father's House*; and there is no reference at all to India, leave alone popular romances in India. The reader could be left wondering about the reasons for including this article in this anthology.

Malashri Lal's reading of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* is the most impressive contribution to this volume. It begins with an overview of Canadian feminist criticism with particular reference to Barbara Godard's *Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing*, but quickly moves on to the Atwood text to make "a speculative statement on a link between Canadian and Indian feminism located in the colonial experience of [the] two countries" (183),

although she does not consider any comparable Indian text. Instead of trying to categorize or place it, she notes that "the novel suggests processes, and is filled with signs and significations of change," reflecting "a feminist *new* consciousness" (184). This is her basic premise about the novel and her discussion of the text follows from this. In the last section of her essay, Lal makes some crucial connections between the many questions of national identity that the Atwood novel raises and parallel implications of the Indian colonial/postcolonial identity, among them, "how to assert an individual voice, how to develop enabling institutions, how to overcome lingering self doubts left by the colonial experience" (189). As she sees it, for postcolonial Indian women writers who share some of these anxieties in their works, Atwood's novel can create a nexus, and provide useful grounds for comparison for "readers in the Indian academia" (189). Lal also mentions, pertinently but briefly, the correlation between the environmentalist protagonist in Atwood's novel and some recently emerging ideas of ecofeminism in Indian women's literature.

The third essay on literature is Chandra Mohan's "Native Women's Writing: Legends of My Ancestors." Mohan tries to isolate some thematic patterns that evolve specifically from the writers' cultural history, legends, and spirituality, as well as give a brief history of native writing in Canada. But most of the time the essay is too general, too much like a survey and not really directed at any specific kind of reading. He mentions a number of well-known native writers and their works but curiously enough does not consider any of them, say, Maria Campbell's *Half-breed* or Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash*. Instead, he chooses to confine his study to one anthology only, *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*; 18 of his 28 citations refer to this text. Needless to say, there is something top-heavy, or at least lopsided about this selection of material.

But there are several such incongruities or inconsistencies in *Perspectives on Women: Canada and India*, some of which I have already pointed out. All in all, the volume could have done with more thorough editing and even proofreading; names of authors and publishers are frequently misspelt, or inconsistently spelt, and therefore, misleading. A rather obvious error is the omission of P. R. Saradamani's name from the List of Contributors. On a more positive note, though, I should say that some essays in this collection are truly useful, while the rest work mostly as introductions to Canadian studies.

SUMANA SEN-BAGCHEE



Chelva Kanaganayakam. *Dark Antonyms and Paradise: The Poetry of Rienzi Crusz*. Toronto: TSAR, 1997. Pp. vi, 86. \$15.95 pb.

Dark Antonyms and Paradise: The Poetry of Rienzi Crusz is a thorough, accessible, and much-needed new reading of the poetry of a major Sri