

## Book Reviews

Makarand Paranjape, ed. *Nativism: Essays in Criticism*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi [The National Academy of Letters], 1997. Pp. xvi, 256. Rs. 100.00.

The idea of a native mode of considering and evaluating Indian cultural products has often surfaced prominently in the country's intellectual discourse. Recurrent versions of this enterprise are as inevitable as, say, incessant American projects for defining the American-ness of its culture. And this is so for good reasons: these are both major nations and they make justifiable metropolitan claims. Such, one presumes, is also the case in China and Russia. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, although no loud advocate of national assertions, has rightly pointed out, postnationalism is "Northern radical chic" (*A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* [Harvard, 1999], 375). *Nativism: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Makarand Paranjape, brings together just over two dozen articles which were initially presented, in earlier versions, at the first of two major high-level symposia in India devoted to sorting out the dimensions and features of a native Indian critical perspective and idiom. This particular gathering was convened by Sahitya Akademi — the National Academy of Letters — and the second one, more recently, by the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies. I understand that the projected volume from that later meeting is currently in press. Together, these two volumes ought to provide an overview of the complex and (to date) dialogic exploration of this important terrain.

For obvious enough reasons, "nativism" is a difficult term to explain to Western readers; it might very easily be taken to suggest a divide between the native born and the newcomer. Such a reading, however, is not likely to make much sense in the Indian context, given that racially different immigrants do not exist in that country in any significant or even statistically reportable numbers, nor is immigration any part of recent or current national policy or large-scale practice. (The case would be quite different, I imagine, in Malaysia, Singapore, or Sri Lanka.) And while Indian ethnicities may vary within what is after all a diverse subcontinent, the main issues are

likely to be vertical ones — of hierarchy and power — than horizontal ones of sharing cultural space equitably. “Nativism,” in the sense this book uses the word, has more to do with native-born ideas and arts, grounded first in the histories and cultures of the land, than with personal or ethnic identities of citizens. The word, it must be understood, is an approximate translation, and there is lively discussion within the very discourses of “Nativism” not only about the adequacy or accuracy of the English word so used — some of that debate is carried out, as is to be expected, within the covers of this book — but also about the relative merit of various words in modern Indian languages, including English, through the help of which different attributes of the notion have been historically discussed.

As I understand it, the current project of Nativism is mainly that of stocktaking and redefining, and is intended to be an ongoing and perpetually negotiated one. In its most recent form, the notions that are included in this term emerge from an influential 1983 essay on the native element in literature — “Sahitayteel Deshiyata” — written by the eminent Marathi critic and author, Balachandra Nemade. The essay itself is reproduced, in an English translation, as an appendix to the book under review. Nemade distinguishes among three forms of “native” or *Deshi* attitudes: *Deshipana* or “native-ness,” *Deshivad* or “nativism,” and *Deshiyata* for which the translator cannot find a ready or even approximate equivalent — other than a neologism such as “naticivity.” Nativism, the key term here, stands for a conscious and critically aware foregrounding of the native-ness or local signature inherent in an object of artistic or cultural value. But as debates in the book demonstrate, the enterprise can be undertaken with varying degrees of passion, theoretical insight (or lack of it) and inclusiveness. It is worth noting that Nemade, formerly Professor of English at the University of Bombay, personally vetted the translation presented in this volume; he has, however, steadfastly refused to translate the essay himself.

Much of what is good in this book comes from, and is enhanced by, Paranjape’s obviously pro-active editing: he provides a critically valuable overview, makes necessary interventions, and — in his own essay — finely blends a nativist eagerness with sound methodological scepticism and scrupulous and intelligent theorizing. Readers aware of Paranjape’s own earlier work both as a language-sensitive creative writer and a careful scholar — his edition of Sarojini Naidu’s letters is a model of meticulous archive-based research and high critical acumen — would not expect any less. This is not to say that the present volume does not at all exhibit the kind of flatfooted tendencies toward essentialism that mark many nationalistic intellectual efforts — but mercifully they are very few and far between. Nor, on the other hand, do most of the authors go in indiscriminately for trendy “inter-

national” ideas of the so-called field of “postcolonial studies” that currently holds such absurd sway in Western academe. (None of the authors presented in the collection believes, for example, that an oppositional study of the figure of *mahout* in Victorian poetry is going to unnerve the evil bosses of international capitalism, nor have they abandoned lucidity for poco-speak.) Nevertheless, an article by Debjani Ganguli argues reasonably about the value inherent in certain recent theoretical positions that focus attention on inequities based on gender, race, power, and so on. The matter is particularly relevant in India where virtually all identifiable “traditions” have their base in Brahminical patriarchal privilege.

Tradition is, of course, always a troublesome word in the Indian context, but it must be said for many of the critics who participate in this debate about nativism that they make several original and distinct observations about it. In the first place, this nativism is historically alert: it understands both colonialism and its divisive effect on India. So, the “tradition” nativism *refuses* is the imperialism/orientalism promoted elitist classical learning for which many educated Indians still feel an ill-defined romantic attachment. This classical — or *marga* — emphasis is replaced by nativism’s project to recover the more broadly-based, egalitarian, and noncanonical *deshi* artistic and religious ideas that have been expressed through the country’s many linguistic streams and continue to inform the thinking and conduct of Indians across class divisions. (The term for such vernacular literary expression is *bhasha*.) This composite of as yet undertheorized but vital tradition/s — often resident in folk customs — can, indeed, provide both a viable indigeneness to Indian critical thinking as well as a flexible and historically adaptable matrix for its further growth. One definite benefit that will accrue to us from it is that students of Indian writing in English should henceforth be spared too many further examples of over solemn but amateurish “Indological” exegetical readings of, say, *dhvani* in *Kanthapura* (a novel that certainly owes more to the contingent *deshi* than to the static *marga*), or *rasa* in the poems of Toru Dutt. At the same time, as the Sanskrit scholar Srimannarayan Murti demonstrates in his essay “Cultural Discourse: *Desi* [sic] and *Marga*,” the absorption and re-formation of the latter into the former has been a constant feature of India’s cultural dynamism. There is, Murti writes, between these two aspects of Indian culture “mutual expectancy as well as interdependency.” This shows the folly of any purist or orientalist desire to reclaim an impossibly remote and idealized originary “India” — a project that is not only silly but also divisive and exclusionary. It is worth remarking that the debates in the book focus rather closely and critically on the often reactionary ideas of the populist Indian critic G.N. Devy whose opposite notion — that *deshi* practices had become suspended or lost during the two centuries of

colonial rule — in turn take on an equally unfortunate revivalist tone. Devy's ideas were, I understand, generated while writing a Master's thesis in the English Department at Leeds. If this is true, this incident just might help in curbing our current "postcolonial" (!) practice in Western graduate schools of grandly directing and examining "Third World" students' dissertations on cultural matters about which we have scant knowledge.

I conclude this review by making a few disparate observations about the book at hand and the intellectual job it seeks to do. The main and obvious threat to academic respectability and acceptability of this version of Indian "nativism" must surely be the inherently potential bias toward parochialism and isolationism. However, in repeatedly and strenuously critiquing Devy's odd views — that, for example, an Indian literature cannot be written in English, or that all ideas that come from outside of the nation are pernicious and imperialistic (although they often are) — the authors in this debate about nativism have proven both their good faith and their intellectual honesty. (It should be understood that even when they disagree with Devy, Indian scholars of nativism do not share this reviewer's especially negative view of his critical efforts.) On the point of what art is native and what it merely imported, I draw your attention to two essays in the collection. In one of these, the astute critic Jaidev rightly faults the Hindi fiction of Krishna Baldev Vaid for its fashionable expression of ennui and its imitation of trendy "postmodern" experimentalism which are utterly inappropriate in the particular fictional contexts. But in another essay, Ajit Thakore unfolds how a nativistic turn, taking the urban Gujarati short-story writers back to the contingency-embracing (for there is no choice) realities of Dalit — or subaltern — writing, has created an Indian mode of fiction that can loosely be called "postmodern." In "The Betrayal of Polyphony: Blocked Possibilities of Criticism in India," Gurbhagat Singh not only points out that the Sikh holy book *Guru Granth Sahib* is really historically hybrid rather than canonical, but also asks for the emergence of a much needed "differential criticography" that would and must keep nativism from becoming a homogenizing nationalist project. There is much in the book that pointedly mocks the West's university-bound theorizing, its distance from history, its pomposity, and its irrepressible desire to dictate to the world from the economically privileged location in the so-called "First World." This criticism and impatience with small-mindedness is both right and just. At the same time, I worry also about the rather small evidence of nativism's concern so far with issues of gender inequity, economic injustice, identity politics, and ecological degradation. I hope that such matters will come to the forefront as this movement matures and defines its voice and calling beyond these promising early stages. There is, then, much in the book that assures a

healthy prospect for this indigenous critical effort. Although few authors in the book write with the sharpness of Paranjape, or make evident any keen interest in developing clear theoretical models, there is enough material here that can give us fresh insights and starting points.

SHYAMAL BAGCHEE

Robert Crawford, ed. *The Scottish Invention of English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. Pp. xii, 259. \$59.95.

The central argument of this provocative but uneven collection of essays on the Scottish origins of the discipline of English, edited by Robert Crawford, is embedded in its chronological structure. The collection begins with the French antecedents of eighteenth-century Scottish Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, moves on to offer reassessments of some of the major as well as lesser-known figures of this movement, and then traces the spread of the Scottish model of rhetoric to other parts of the British Empire. It is only in the penultimate chapter (just before a discussion of Australia and New Zealand) that we reach England, and that, in a sense, is Crawford's point. The study of the English language and literature, which is "invented" in Scotland during the eighteenth century, does not in fact arrive in England until the nineteenth century, when it is introduced, largely by Scottish professors, into the curriculum of the newly formed University College, London. The explanation for the Scottish genesis of the discipline is that post-Union, English Studies offered Scots a means of assimilating to English culture and thereby of obtaining a more cosmopolitan and economically viable identity.

The proposition of the collection (as well as of Crawford's earlier book *Devolving English Literature*) is thus that English Studies is a Scottish invention which is subsequently exported to other parts of the Empire. One difficulty with this thesis is that it requires Crawford to exclude from his collection the teaching of English that went on in the Dissenting Academies in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Crawford rationalizes this omission by confining his study to developments within mainstream universities. But this exclusive focus on mainstream institutions proves difficult to sustain, and some of the most interesting moments in the collection are those in which the authors move outside of university settings. In a chapter on Adam Smith, Ian Duncan relates the growth of English Studies to the rise of print, and juxtaposes Smith with Samuel Johnson, a figure of the new, more commercialized literary culture. Duncan sees Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric* as attuned to modern structures of literary production and as "insist[ing] on the social, historical and functional dynamism of literary discourse" (42). For Duncan, Smith's contribu-