

The NEHU Journal

Special Issue on Literature

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NEHU

The Writer and the Community: A Case for Literary Ambidexterity

Literary ambidexterity is essentially a discourse on the virtues of knowing two languages and writing well in both. In a vast and complex country like India, these languages would mean one's mother tongue and the language of interaction. In my case, they would mean Khasi, the language of my tribe, and English.

Heard and spoken since birth, the mother tongue is of fundamental importance to creative literature. This also relates to the nature of creative writing itself and the need for communication.

As a practitioner of poetry, I believe in a poet who is a witness, one with the seeing eye, a retentive memory and the innate instinct to catch the soul of his generation. My own poetry is deeply rooted and I see my role as a poet as that of a chronicler of subjective realities. I have talked, in my poems, of leaders lording "like the wind" and fickle "like Hindi film stars changing dresses in a song." I have talked of my impoverished land, and with sardonic humour, of real people who are at once individuals and types. I have tried to capture the changing times, aspects of my culture and issues on the fringe.

But chronicling realities is not an end in itself. Pablo Neruda believes that a poet should always live close to his people: "I have gone into practically every corner of Chile, scattering my poetry like seed among the people of my country." Neruda seems to point up the poet's need to communicate with his people. If the foundation of a poet's art rests on his people's life and character, then what

better audience is there than his own people? And if the audience is his own people, then what better language is there to communicate with them than his mother tongue?

I too wish to address my people directly. I would like to tell them of the colossal threat to our land posed by the ceaseless flood of humanity and the growing aggressiveness of migrants. I would like to speak to them of the perils of terrorism and the greater peril of lawmen turning terrorists. I would like to tell them of the absurdity of trying to deny their own roots and the anarchy that follows in forgetting their own identity. I would like to talk of our great festivals, of Weiking, and the vitality of their part in our social life:

Weiking! Weiking!

Spring is back, begin your whirling motions
and let our life live on.

.....
Whirl on, whirl on,

what if some of us
sneer at us for fools?

We are not here to pay obeisance
to the gods for a plentiful harvest
(do we ever have a harvest now?)

whirl on, whirl on to a time
when women stood by their men
and men were tigers guarding
their homes with jealous swords.

(‘Weiking’: self-composed)

But most of all I would like to remind my people, as a poet raconteur, of the virtues of their ancestors’ ways and the necessity of perpetuating them. I would like to talk of our myths and legends and let those, who will, cull lessons from them:

Faraway
from the year dot

Ren, the Nongjri fisherman,
Ren, the beloved of a river nymph
Ren, who loved so madly
 who left his mother and his home
 to live in magic depths
also left a message:

“Mother,” he had said,
“listen to the river,
as long as it roars
you will know that I live”.

(‘Ren’: self-composed)

Symbolically, Ren is asking later generations to listen to the sound of his people’s life. But the sound of a people’s life and their ways can be voiced only through the mother tongue. The mother tongue is the sound of life itself, and in this sense, writing in it would mean for me helping the sound of my people’s life grow stronger.

Czeslaw Milosz and his poem “My Faithful Mother Tongue” have only strengthened this conviction. But the shocking reality that Milosz speaks of his mother tongue as “a tongue of the debased, / of the unreasonable, hating themselves” is unfortunately true of the Khasi language as well. As Milosz again puts it, “perhaps after all it’s I who must try to save you [mother tongue].”

It is in trying to do this, that literary ambidexterity can play a critical role. It is neither desirable nor profitable to keep one’s own writings confined to one’s own language or the language of interaction.

A native author’s work with any literary merit must be brought to the notice of other literatures. As Neruda suggests, it does not matter if one’s poems have sunken their roots deep into one’s native soil; it does not matter if they are born of indigenous wind and rain or have emerged from a localized landscape. If they are worth their salt they must “come out of that landscape... to

roam, to go singing through the world....”

To do this the author must be able to translate his own work into the language of interaction. But if he is not ambidextrous in this sense, then his work must risk lurking forever in the dark recesses of his own small world.

On the other hand, if he writes only in the language of interaction, he must be able to translate his work into his own mother tongue or risk being cut off forever from the heart and mind of his own people.

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih
Associate Editor

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Metamorphosis of Monsters, *Dayans* and *Djinns*

(The Bizarre and Fantastic in *Midnight's Children*)

NANDINI BHATTACHARYA

One of the interesting features of Rushdie's novels is the predominance of fantastic and mythical creatures, beast-human hybrids, witches and djinns coexisting within the human self, multiple, conflicting selves jostling to find space within these bags of skin. Moreover, all his characters are in a constant state of change and metamorphosis, adding to the readers' confusion and a sense of moral uncertainty.

So we have Saleem who is transformed into a she-dog CUTIA, to sniff out enemies with his extraordinary nose (*Midnight's Children*, MC), the bizarre change of Sufyia Zinobia into a man eating beast (*Shame*), the mysterious metamorphosis of Saladin Chamcha into a devilish goat like beast, or for that matter the mass transformation of illegal immigrants at the Detention Centre (*The Satanic Verses*, SV).

Bizarre as these transformations may seem, they are central to the Menippean tradition, to which Rushdie clearly belongs. The carnival sense of the world according to Bakhtin¹ came into the literature of the modern world through the conduit of Menippean satire. This genre had its origins in the third century B. C. partly in parodic response to tragic and epic seriousness. The fullest development of this genre is to be found in Petronius's *Satyricon* and Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass*. While the Menippean satire abounds in the carnivalesque elements, it freely

uses the fantastic, the mythical and absurd as a deliberate defiance of “normality”, “wholeness”, “order” and sacralized absolutes of any kind. One such mode of defying normality is to effect transformation or metamorphosis of a normal human being into a fantastic human-beast hybrid. Mikhail Bakhtin notes in his *The Dialogic Imagination* (DI) that, “the folktale image of man-throughout the extraordinary variety of folkloric narratives — always orders itself around the motifs of *transformation* and *identity*” (DI, p.112). The classic work of Menippean human-animal metamorphosis, Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, is used as an intertext in *The Satanic Verses*. Muhammad Sufyian quotes from Apuleius when he sees the transformed Chamcha for the first time (SV, p. 343). That Rushdie is acutely aware of his debt to the Menippean tradition is apparent in his essay entitled “Journey with a Golden Ass,” in his collection of critical writings, entitled *Imaginary Homelands* (pp.364-367), where he registers a need to make a new journey with the ass to detect and expose the follies of modern American civilization. According to Bakhtin “Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its important moments of crisis: for showing how an individual becomes other than what he was.” (DI, p.115)². Rushdie’s predecessors in this form are Rabelais, Swift and Sterne, and his contemporaries are Thomas Pynchon and Gunter Grass. It is equally important to trace his affiliations to the modernist practitioners of this form such as Joyce, Ionesco and Kafka.

The narrator Saleem reminds the reader that his story is about a mythical land, a country which would never exist except a phenomenal collective will — except in dreams we all agreed to dream... India, the new myth — a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivalled only by two other mighty fantasies, money and god (MC, p.112).

In this fabulous land, where anything is possible, monsters, dayans, djinns abound and the distinction between the real and the

dream world is persistently blurred, forcing the reader into a position of perpetual and radical uncertainty. It is a world where an angelic little girl, begging to peep into Lifafa Das' magic-box, can, at a moment's notice, transmogrify into a terrible basilisk-like figure, indicting the dugduggee-man as a Hindu transgressing Muslim space and therefore, suitable candidate for public lynching. She is now the midget-queen, the "pony-tailed, one-eyebrowed valkyrie" (MC, p.76) inciting bloody, communal riots. The charming "dilli-dekho" man can transform, within minutes of such indictment, into a monster and rapist, and an entire community of peace-loving, normal people into, bloodthirsty hounds. It is a world where the traditional Nordic Jesus, with an aquiline nose and emaciated body can transform into the fat, balding, Falstaff-like 'Isa', in the imagination of the Kashmiri boatman Tai (MC, p.16), or into a Krishna-like blue Christ, in the imagination of a liberal priest who wants to build bridges between religions (MC, p.103).

One of the sections of Book One of *Midnight's Children*, is actually entitled "Many-headed monsters" (MC, p.78), which begins innocuously enough with Amina Sinai, embarking upon a journey to the soothsayer Ramram Seth, who has promised to make predictions about her coming son. But, the many monsters, the reader encounters is quite different from the one predicted by Ramram. The relatively sheltered Amina is unable to come to terms with the monsters created by poverty, disease and oppression in the interiors of the city of Delhi

Look my God, those beautiful children have black teeth would you believe... girl children baring their nipples... sweeper women with... collapsed spines,... and cripples everywhere, mutilated by their loving parents to ensure them a lifelong income from begging... yes, beggars in boxcars, grown men with babies' legs, in carts on wheels... (MC, p.81).

There are also beggars, who are white and therefore terrible oddities because "begging was not for white people" (MC, p.82).

At the centre of the design is, of course, the terrible monster predicted by Ramram Seth, the son that is to be born to Amina Sinai. Because the prediction has remarkable similarities with many literary predecessors such as the opaque pronouncements of the Delphic oracle in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, or the equivocating prediction's of the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it is worth quoting at... length. Ramram, who is himself an oddity, surrounded by screaming monkeys and lapsing into frequent trances, teases and belies all reader expectations. To the Indian reader, he is typical of the exotic, levitating 'sadhu', so frequent in the Westerners' readings of India. To the Western reader he is an example of India's mystic powers. Yet, he is patently a fraud, who sits on a jutting-out shelf to give the impression of levitation. His predictions are typical mumbo-jumbo and yet, uncannily correct. He predicts a son

A son Sahiba, who will never be older than his motherland—neither older nor younger... There will be two heads—but you shall see only one—there *will* be knees and a nose, a nose and knees. Newspapers praise him, two mothers raise him! Bicyclists love him — but crowds will shove him! Sisters will weep; cobra will creep. ...Washing will hide him—voices will guide him! Friends mutilate him—blood will betray *him*—Spittoons will *brain* him—doctors will drain him—jungle will claim him—wizards reclaim him! Soldiers will try him—tyrants will fry him... He will have sons without having sons! He will be old before he is old! And he will die... before he is dead.(MC, pp.87-88)

Ramram's monster prediction does come true, as Saleem with the nose is actually Shiva with the knees. Saleem is the child of the departing colonialist Methwold and the low-caste Vanita, who has been changed places at birth, by nurse Mary Pereira, with Shiva who is really the son of Amina and Ahmed Sinai. But then, Saleem is really the hydra-headed, born of multiple parents,

monster— called India, born as he is in the midnight hour and therefore never older than his country. Like the new-born nation he has multiple parents because he is also the child of a new dream.

So there were knees and a nose, a nose and knees. In fact all over the new India, the dream we all shared, children who were born were only partially the offspring of their parents — the children of midnight were also the children of the time: fathered, you must understand, by history. It can happen. Especially in a country which is itself a sort of dream (MC, p.118).

If Amina encounters as prophecy about monsters Ahmed actually goes to keep a date with one. The Ravana gang, as Mr. Kemal explains, is not the mythical many-headed demon, but “a dastardly crew”, “a band of incendiary rogues” (MC, p.71) out to intimidate and blackmail Muslim businessmen into paying protection money. Ahmed actually sees one, a grotesque, pajama-clad figure, “in the head-dress of a demon, a papier-mâché devil-top which has faces grinning on every side of it”(MC, p.85). In a comic aside the narrator notes that though there were certified monsters like the Ravana gang, there were also camouflaged ones like the excessively polite Mr. Kemal, who hoarded his rice, lentil and tea “as a form of protection against the many-headed, many-mouthed rapacious monster that is the public, which if given its heads, would force prices so low in a time of abundance that god fearing entrepreneurs would starve while the monster grew fat” (MC, p.71).

Unfortunately, the hush-money paid by Ahmed Sinai never reaches the devil (intercepted as it is, comically, by a monkey), and the Ravana gang carry out their threat of burning down his factory. The violence incited by this demonic gang can only be matched by the unnatural frenzy that grips the country on the eve of Independence. As the midnight hour approaches the many-headed monster of the masses begins to roar, and India prepares for a blood letting exercise and pre-Partition violence, that only a demon could incite.

The monster in the streets had already begun to celebrate... while trains burn in Punjab, with green flames of blistering paint and glaring saffron of fired fuel...(MC, p.115).

Saleem is a monster that *defies all definition* because of his protean ability to change shape and size. As a baby he is almost gargantuan, growing at an enormous speed, with blue alien eyes that never blink, eating and defecating in monumental amounts. His nose is alternately described as a monstrous cucumber, a wooden shikh-kebab, the trunk of an elephant. Saleem's large nose aligns him with the elephant-god Ganesh, so revered in the city of Bombay where Saleem grows up. He is further disfigured and mutilated by the sadistic teacher Zagallo. At the age of nine he is revived to life by snake poison. Still later, he is rendered impotent by the Widow. And finally, he is stuck on his head with a spittoon, which leads to schizophrenia, which literally means becoming two people at the same time. He is employed by the Pakistani army as a sniffer-dog and designated the title CUTIA (an acronym for Canine Unit for Tracking and Intelligence), which literally means a bitch, in Hindi.

In *Midnight's Children*, the fantastic, transmogrified figures define and problematise all identities, including those of gender, nationality and parenthood. Women are frequently threatening, masculine and bizarre — just as men are weak, impotent, djinn-laden. Naseem, the beautiful daughter is seen through a perforated sheet held by muscular and threatening masculine women. After marriage, Naseem soon transforms from a lissome young girl into a bloated, imposing figure, with enormous moles like witches' nipples on her face (MC, p.40) and the fearsome ability to invade her daughter's and husband's dreams (MC, p.55). With 'whatitsname' as her leitmotif, she is appropriately called the Reverend Mother. Mothers are a problematic category in Rushdie's novels and most likely to be demonised. *Midnight's Children* abounds in demonic mothers from Naseem Aziz to the Widow; who calls herself Mother India. The metamorphosis of mothers

into terrible witch-like figures must be seen in the context of the deeply schizophrenic mother image in the Indian psyche. In an essay entitled "Adorno in India; Revisiting the Psychology of Fascism", in his book *At the Edge of Psychology*, Ashis Nandy notes;

In terms of organisation of personality ...the Indian lives in his Inner world less with a feared father than with a powerful, aggressive and unreliable mother. Manifestly he idealizes her and sees her as the repository of all nurture and motherliness. Underneath this, there are deep doubts about the stability of her nurture and the way she might use her powers to aggress. Contrarily, the father is seen as non-interfering, inefficacious, distant and a co-victim of the castrating mother figure (*At the Edge of Psychology*, 107).

Naseem's absolute control over kitchen and pantry and alternately refusing to serve food, which brings Dr. Aziz to the point of death, is an example of the mother's alternately nurturing and destructive qualities. The cook Daoud, burning his feet with hot gravy, unnerved by the Reverend Mother's glare, is convinced "that the old hag had power of witchery" (MC, pp.58-59).

If Naseem is only a comic witch, *Midnight's Children* has the black and green Widow at the centre of its design, calculated to arouse fear even in the dauntless of hearts. She simultaneously occupies the dream and actual space though, one is not too sure in her case, whether nightmare is reality or reality is a nightmare. She first makes an appearance on Saleem's tenth birthday, in a feverish nightmare (pp.207-208). When she appears in reality as the Mother India with the 'gomata' (mother cow) and the calf as her election symbols, the fear she evokes can scarcely be equalled by any nightmare. She imposes the infamous Emergency, launches a programme of forcible vasectomy in the name of family planning and bulldozes slums in the name of civic beautification programme. Reality comes to resemble nightmare as Saleem is thrown into the

Widow's Hostel and forced to undergo vasectomy while his castrated genitals are fed to pie-dogs.

Yes perhaps a nightmare: green and black the Widow's hair and clutching hand and children mmff and little balls go flying green and black her hand is green her nails are black as black (p.422).

According to Sudhir Kakar, in his *Inner World; a Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*,

the sexual presence of the 'bad mother' looms large in the unconscious experience of male children in India. Certainly all societies call upon witches, vampires, ghosts and other spectres to symbolise the forbidding, negative aspect of a real mother... these are familiar figures in individual and collective fantasy across cultures, and the *dayans*, *jinns* and *bhoots* who people the Indian night... are unexceptionable (pp.95-96).

Mother India comes to resemble those fantastic figures such as "*dayans*, *jinns* and *bhoots*" (*Inner World*, p.96).

If mothers are monstrous so are fathers, as parenting is a problematised space in Rushdie's novels. As Ahmed Sinai's assets are frozen by the government, his genitals are frozen and he is possessed by djinns in the bottle. Saleem obviously refers to a defeated and frustrated man's increasing dependence on bottled, alcoholic drinks like gin. The comic narrator would, of course, like to pun on the idea that in the Arabian Nights tales, djinns frequently appeared in bottles waiting to be released from their captivity. The young Saleem, as usual blaming himself for his father's degeneration, describes the metamorphosis of a happy father into a spirit-encumbered, red-eyed monster.

And so it was my undoing that Ahmed Sinai fell, in those days after my birth, into twin fantasies which

were to be his undoing, into the unreal world of djinns and of the land beneath the sea. ...At six O' Clock every evening, Ahmed Sinai entered the 'world of djinns' and every morning, his eyes *red*, his head throbbing with the fatigue of his night-long battle, he came unshaven to the breakfast table; and with the passage of years, the good mood of the time before he shaved was replaced by the irritable exhaustion of his war with the bottled spirits (MC, pp.131-132).

Saleem's real father Methwold also undergoes a remarkable transformation. From a Samson like figure, irresistibly attractive to women, he changes into what Padma calls "a baldie" (MC, p.114). His change is undoubtedly related to the overnight transformation of the almighty British Empire on whom the sun never set, into merely another European country.

Samson-like, William Methwold's power had resided in his hair; but now, bald patch glowing in the dusk, he flings his thatch through the window of his motor-car, ...and drives away (MC, p.114).

Introduction of hybrid monsters is an oft-used technique to problematise gender identity. Both Padma, Saleem's subaltern audience and the women who hold up the perforated sheet (behind *which* Naseem hides) are muscular and threatening women, who give a lie to the stereotype of feminine frailty. Padma is also at times a beast-human hybrid under the spell of the teller of tales, Saleem.

She, my squatting glimpser, is captivated, helpless as a mongoose, frozen into immobility by the swaying, blinkless eyes of a *hooded* snake..." (MC, p.121).

Saleem's sister is a tomboy and called Brass Monkey because of her, aggressive and destructive nature. Most men, like Saleem, Ahmed Adam, and Nadir Khan are, impotent or weak and inactive. Even the most potent of them all Shiva, is ultimately killed by a so-

called weak woman.

National identity is a problematic space where the monster paradigm is frequently employed. What adds to Saleem's peculiarity are his 'alien' blue eyes. Though they are attributed to his supposed grandfather Adam Aziz, the reader knows that they are a British inheritance. Yet, this very Kashmiri heritage will also soon be considered alien as Pakistan and India embark on a disastrous war over Kashmir. As Adam Aziz worries, will he be considered an Indian or a Kashmiri? Ironically, he had been regarded as alien and monstrous by the indigenous Kashmiri, boatman Tai, because he had been educated in Germany and therefore tainted by 'abroad', in his youth. It is interesting to note that aliens, immigrants and marginals have traditionally been considered as monstrous, unnatural, and hence, the wonderfully suggestive term naturalization³ is used to describe the process of integration into the mainstream of the nation. The entire imperial exercise of the nineteenth century was sustained by the belief that non-Europeans were actually sub-humans, alien monsters who needed to be humanized. Therefore, colonization was not an exploitative exercise but a just and missionary one, bringing the fruits of human civilization to the semi or anti-human world. Racism in Hitler's Third Reich or apartheid in South Africa was sustained by a belief that the discriminated individuals were not human at all and therefore did not deserve humane treatment. Hence, Shylock is finally condemned as a bloodthirsty, monster in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (MOV) because he is perceived as an alien, plotting against the life of a citizen of Venice. As Portia notes "If it be proved against an alien! That by direct or indirect attempts! He seek the life of any citizen/The party 'gainst which he doth contrive! Shall seize one half his goods!...and the offender's life lies in mercy!Of the Duke" (MOV, p.75). In *The Satanic Verses*, all immigrants transform into mythical creatures or human-beast hybrids beast (SV, p.164). The three soldiers, Ayooba, Shaheed and Farookh, consider East-Pakistanis to be sub-humans, sort of jungle-bunnies, to be slaughtered

indiscriminately. The Sunderban episode is full of ghosts and phantoms encountered by people who consider each other's aliens.

Monster paradigm is central to Rushdie's approach to literature in general. Rushdie believes that the fantastic, the unreal and magical are far more reliable modes of storytelling, especially when one describes a country like India where reality is stranger than fiction. Like the Latin-American novelists who employ magic realism as a mode, Rushdie believes that the fantastic and the bizarre are often a more accurate mirror of truth. The magical and fantastic has a special place of honour in *Midnight's Children*. Uncle Hanif is only successful as a filmmaker when he adopts this fantastic, blatantly unrealistic mode of storytelling in his film, *Lovers in Kashmir*. His realistic attempts to tell stories of pickle-factories and lives of labourers fall flat, because it is in the fantastic that our deepest desires and innermost anxieties are captured. Hanif is of course a projection of the author himself. So is Saleem, who abandons Padma's demand for realistic 'whatnextism' for a bizarre mode of storytelling. The midnight's children are all in possession of magical qualities like the new-born land itself born in the midnight hour. As Saleem says just before independence "myths, nightmares fantasies were in the air" (MC, p.111). The magical and fantastic are symptomatic of the new hope and powers of regeneration that are granted to the midnight's children.

...during the first hour of August 15th, 1947—between midnight and one a.m.—no less than a thousand and one children were born within the frontiers of the infant sovereign state of India... What made the event noteworthy... was the nature of these children, every one of whom was, through some freak of biology, or perhaps owing to some preternatural power of the moment, or just by sheer coincidence... endowed with feature, talents or faculties which can only be described as miraculous. It was as though... history, arriving at a point of highest

significance and promise, had chosen to sow, in that instant, the seeds of a future which would *genuinely* differ from anything the world had seen up to that time (MC, p.195).

Hence there are boys who can walk through mirrors and girls who can multiply fish and children with great powers of transformation, such as turning into werewolves or becoming giants and dwarfs at will, and a child, who can change gender at the drop of a hat, or, children who can divide water and, children whose words can actually inflict cuts and wounds (a reference to Rushdie's own art as a satirist?) and some one, who has literal green fingers and can grow aubergines in deserts (MC, p.198). The fantastic is at the heart of a newborn nation, transforming it daily.

Rushdie is frequently of the opinion that it is only in dreams that we may re-mould and re-make the world. Therefore, the dictator or fascist's first task is to destroy dreams and imaginative faculties. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Khatam Shud is the Prince of Silence, the arch-enemy of dreams and expressions. In *Midnight's Children*, the Widow is the arch-enemy of the magical and the fantastic. Hence, she attacks the magicians' colony in Delhi, bulldozes them and puts them to flight. She also arrests most of the midnight's children (because they symbolize hope for change), literally castrates them and figuratively makes them impotent. In this context it is worthwhile to look at Rushdie's essay entitled "The Location of Brazil" in his *Imaginary Homelands* (IH).

This idea—the opposition of imagination to reality, which is also of course the opposition of art to politics—is of great importance, because it reminds us that we are not helpless; that to dream is to have power... the other great tradition in at {is} the one in which techniques of comedy, metaphor, heightened imagery, fantasy and so on are used to break down our conventional, habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be. Unreality is the only weapon

with which reality can be smashed, so that it may subsequently be reconstructed (IH, p.122).

The power of change and transformation is indeed a fearsome one.

The entire novel is ultimately placed in a space, which is advertised as a city of dreams. Bombay, India's premier film-city, abounding in dream-merchants, aggressively sells the nations' secret desires and fantasies (MC, p.215). Bombay's popular dream-merchandise, the popular Bombay cinema, forms the subtext of *Midnight's Children*. The novel consciously simulates the Bombay talkies' fantastic and melodramatic mode, incorporating conventions like, mistaken identities, changes at birth, doubles, fantastic coincidences, melodramatic cloak and dagger affairs, proliferation of semi-magical beasts (in the Indian consciousness) like snakes, monkeys and elephants invading the human world. Saleem rightly notes that world of *Midnight's Children* has "melodrama, piling upon melodrama: life acquiring the colouring of a Bombay talkie" (MC, p.148).

In *Midnight's Children*, the fantastic and the real ultimately cannot be distinguished as they erase each other's boundaries. Rapid transformation of identity, space and time, make *change* the only *constant* in the novel.

Finally, metamorphosis and the related concepts of the hybrid and the freakish are closely related to the novel form itself. In the opening chapter of the Dialogic Imagination entitled "Epic and "Novel", Bakhtin notes that "the generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we can foresee all its plastic possibilities" (DI, p.4). This is especially true of a novelist like Rushdie whose form incorporates all traditional literary genres like the epic, satire, tragedy and comedy, extra-literary forms like the periodical journal, the newspaper, and non-literary but audio-visual forms like cartoons, popular films, advertisements and even popular spectacles and pageants like cricket matches. Henry James' description of

the Victorian novel as a “loose, baggy monster” suits Rushdie’s novels even more accurately. Rushdie’s description of the novel genre and the artist, who creates it, in *The Imaginary Homelands*, is especially relevant in this context,

Now it is obviously true that those other freakish, hybrid, mutant, exceptional beings—novelists—those creators of the most freakish, hybrid and metamorphic of forms, the novel, have frequently been obliged to hide behind secret identities, whether for reasons of gender or terror (*Is Nothing Sacred?* p.425).

For a novelist who belongs both to the East and West, who has frequently been demonised and forced to assume a secret identity, under the threat of a *fatwa* what could be a more appropriate leitmotif than metamorphosis?

NOTES

1. Carnivalization, in Bakhtin’s usage, is the process whereby “a carnival sense of the world”—arising in the ancient and medieval worlds out of a lived mass experience of the festive, ritual pageantry of carnivals such as the Saturnalia—was transposed into the language of literature. These ideas are to be found in Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, tr. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1984, p.107).

2. The idea of Menippean satire to describe Rushdie’s novels, was first used by Ib Johansen in his essay “Flight from the Enchanter: Reflections on Salman Rushdie’s *Grimus*” and subsequently by M. Keith Booker in his essay. “Beauty and the Beast : Dualism as despotism in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie”. Both essays were printed in *Reading Rushdie: Perspectives on the Fiction of Salman Rushdie*, ed. M.D. Fletcher (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press), 1994.

3. I am indebted to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, New York: Verso, revised edition 1991, 145) for this idea.

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Book Review

Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast edited by **Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih** and **Robin S. Ngangom**, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 2003, pp.270 + xii, Rs. 230/- .

Undoubtedly it is poetry that unites us. It is the poets who will *not* keep us away from one another, who will not separate us. This is the strongest feeling one gets when one reads these poems from the very different regions of the Northeast of our country.

History and time become the subsequent strengths of these poems, although these are not immediately noticeable in the lines of many poets. It is strange that a poet from Mizoram might be speaking of the same values as a poet from Assam or Manipur; the humane intensity of the poems remains a matter of understanding and ultimate celebrations:

One by one we'll recover
the ornaments of grace.

In a number of poems one is touched by the poet's treatment of the local and the personal, that moves toward an involvement in the collective longing for renewal and the search for a better world.

I have seen several times
the sighing hand of his
among countless hands.

It was Robert Frost who said once that politics deals with grievances, poetry with grief. I do feel that it is important for us to have this anthology at this time, now when a lot of turmoil and violence has shaken the peaceful air of the Northeast. The poems help us see that devotion and anger, hunger and passion, desire and loyalty are not supportive of each other, but lift our minds.

for managing to love
an object of scorn,

although

they place around my neck
a garland of threats.

These poems have a universal appeal that cannot be denied. Their reach is more to sympathy than to rightness, and more to compassion than to belief. But from the poetry of these peoples, of different cultures, the miseries of contemporary dilemmas are apparent. I felt both pleasure and pain in reading the poems; they pointed out to me what all good poetry in the world is about, irrespective of where they are written, in their insistence that to expect justice out of a long history is impossible to attain. They certainly convey, in spite of our differences, our commonality and mutuality.

This is a remarkable anthology; there is much hope, and considerable faith in these seemingly simple lines that come from places where

the haunting *madhavi* escapes the rustle of spring,
acid with the smell of gunpowder.

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Translating Nations, edited by **Prem Poddar**, Aarhus University Press, Aarhus, 2000, 269p.

The notions of nation and nationalism have engaged the minds of social scientists for over two centuries now and yet they seem as elusive as they were in the beginning. Scholars from various

disciplines have come together to come to grips with these notions at different times but more vigorously during the last fifty years or so. No other notions have perhaps sustained the academic interest for so long and across the disciplinary boundaries. There are lull periods in the history of these notions but there never has been a total cease. With the publication of the book under review it is clear that young scholars in the field of literature have taken these notions in a big way though there is no dearth of senior, and indeed very influential, writers from literature in this field. Further some of the most exciting theories and debates related to these notions have been seen in the post-colonial literature. One of them is about their future, which has been a matter of much speculation by both anthropologists and literateurs.

Translating Nations is one of the latest works in this field. It includes ten articles, including the introductory one by the editor. The book is a collection of different voices on the nation but spoken in similar language, or made similar by the editor's translating! The vocabulary of the nation that has been built up over the years is abundantly distributed over the various chapters; often making the authors appear interchangeable. This is a serious problem in any translation of culture, whether it is a cultural idiom or a cultural symbol. This well justifies the focus of this book which deals with the problems of representing nations by translated texts for they are not only translated but are often transformed.

One of the current themes in social sciences in many parts of the world is violence. The study of violence is intimately connected with the field of human rights studies, which is also a growing field today. This theme has not escaped the attention of the contributors to this volume and they have been able to touch areas that a social scientist normally cannot reach due to her/his obsession with facts and evidences. In fact, the violent aspect of the nation is one of the most important, if not the most important, themes of this book, as evident from the introductory chapter itself.

There is no dearth of dilemmas in the book, often lurking behind innocuous concepts. The authors, including most prominently the editor himself, show a strain between nationalism and trans-nationalism. While they articulate various identities, they show their own ambivalence about it. Nationalism seems to indicate personal security but intellectual insecurity whereas trans-nationalism gives intellectual security but personal insecurity. There is some kind of craving in this book for both, for one can easily blend both, harbouring one inside and the other outside. In short, this book depicts what most of us intellectuals truly are. It is a naked form of ours that many of us might not have seen. It is certainly worth seeing in black and white for our own benefit.

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Humanities and Pedagogy : Teaching of Humanities Today edited by **K.C. Baral**, Pencraft International; New Delhi, 2002 price Rs.100/-; PP 159.

Humanities and Pedagogy Teaching of Humanities Today attempts at a constructionist's viewpoint on the teaching of humanities today, particularly in the Indian context with its association of inter-disciplinary (post modern?) concepts. The essays holistically brought together are part of an international seminar held in Shillong under the auspices of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages.

The essays are structured on two largely defined points or categories, one is the need for modern or post-modern dialectics cutting across disciplinary barriers and the other attacks the very need and basis of such a *diktat*. For example J.C. Mahanti's essay: "Literature as a Discipline of Thought: the Why of Literary

Pedagogy” demythicises the need for “the new critical, structuralist, post-structuralist, post-colonial nationalist, post-modern Marxist and Feminist...” modes of pedagogy pleading on the other hand for the innate good sense of literature with “teachers who proceed from their experience of life and literature...”

Similarly S. Nagarajan’s critique restores the Keatsian sense of ‘negative capability’, which is the intrinsic logic of a text. He contends that this is the spirit or ‘approach’ to the study of literature. However Nigel Joseph’s “The Idea of ‘Truth’ in the Humanities” is a radicalisation of the teaching of humanities; “A greater openness, within each humanities’ discipline, to developments in the other humanities as well as to those in the social and natural sciences”. The cornerstone of today’s pedagogy as one might put it is the “opening out of disciplines”. Nigel Joseph’s exegesis refreshingly avoids jargon and clichés to speak for a humanistic yet inter-disciplinary approach to the study of humanities. Cross-cultural some might call it yet Joseph’s metabolism is shorn of any jargon-hype or the present polemics of post modernism.

This then evinces that the essays hinge on an internal dialectic of ‘truth’ on the one hand and the sophism of modern thinking and intellectual trends on the other. By highlighting an inter-disciplinary yet pragmatic rationale Joseph does not deliberate any idiom or an arid Waste Land. His is “a plea for cultural rapprochement ...a genuine eclecticism.” The cross-cultural hypothesis is indeed very much present in the essays, the ‘Indian’, reading of an American or English text. That is why perhaps as A.V. Ashok in “English in India Today: Discipline, Post-discipline and Indiscipline” asseverates (almost triumphantly one senses) there is today the prevalence of English Literature “deconstructors”. So we have the departments of English Studies and not necessarily that of English Literature. The pedagogy borders on this kind of subversivism. This also is perhaps a heresy: a decolonising of literature (i.e. English Literature) and thought. English studies in India today remain largely disturbed as a result of such a refrain: a post-modern clique has attempted some kind of an iconoclasm, or a transcendence of certain verities.

The language literature / epistemological connection is Mohan Ramanan's answer to literary problematics. On the one hand there are the advocators of the *bhasa* primacy as the dominant cultural synergy and on the other there are at times the effete-ness of English teaching. What should the teachers of English do in such a crisis caught as they are in troubled tunes or in that of a post-modern indiscipline, its wave of antipathy attacking the very citadels of a cherished tradition? Mohan Ramanan's "English Agonistes, Reflection on English in India" debates with fortitude on the middle path, 'the humanist centric vision of teaching and learning. Once again this to my thinking is an invitation to cross-culturalism to invade the territories of our higher education in the humanities disciplines.

There is thus "modernism's epistemological failure" as Glenn Bowman argues in the last essay of the book: "Constituting the Space of Identification in Anthropological Discourse". The epistemic or knowledge processes are caught in this tangle between theoretic devices and the need to synergise, the need to synthesize. This is the basic problematic, which the book articulates in attempting to revisit dichotomously the epistemic domains of literature, philosophy and culture. M. M. Agrawal's "Education as a Cultural Process" speaks critically of a "cultural alienation of education". Has education served its purpose of cultural assimilation or has it led to the growth of more alienation? This is the ontological question here. The essay is a nostalgic reflection on getting 'education back to where it belongs'. K.C. Baral's "Critical Theory and Pedagogy" applies certain critical precepts to the author/text/reader polemics. Literature is applied criticism, which seems to go against the Arnoldian standpoint of criticism.

The essays/papers are interrogative in nature asking some very fundamental questions as to the need of addressing the teaching of the humanities with discourses or subtexts. However pedagogy is some kind of a given assumption, most of the essays fail to take into account the cognisable reality or the 'why' of pedagogy: the teaching methodologies as it were.

Today the scenario has witnessed a virtual expansion of the classroom; such ramifications have been due to the influence of the media and technology. In this cultural context the essays of D. Venkat Rao and Bernard Sharrat capture this new technological revolution and ambience; applying it to the practices of teaching / learning. D. Venkat Rao in his "Critical Pedagogy and Global Networks, Re-turning English Today" argues that "Digitalacy is literacy...in digital media;" a seminal statement. Sharrat in his essay "Teaching, Multimedia and the Internet" delightfully countenances the argument for a virtual classroom. On-line learning is self-learning. The essay borders on Distance Education aspects of pedagogy.

The book collectively provides not only ample food for thought on dialogic discourses but is a daunting intellectual exercise in the need for a re-defined pedagogy mostly shorn of exhibitionism or vapid writing which is clichéd. The articles are insightful, evolving cultural contexts or broad frameworks to take us into the embattled areas of knowledge /information dichotomies.

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NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

1. All contributions should be sent in electronic form as well as hard copy printed on A4 size paper in double space and with adequate margin on the left side. Notes and references should be numbered in Arabic numerals, with details provided as endnotes. The title of the paper, the author's name and address should be typed on a separate cover-sheet. Telephone & fax numbers, e-mail ID's and **a brief biographical sketch** should be provided.
2. Non-English words should be italicised or underlined. Spelling should be British. Quotations should be reduced to a minimum and where used should be put under double inverted commas or if necessary indented. Quotations of more than 50 words from published or copyright sources should have the permission of the author/publisher enclosed with the manuscript.
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